

Learning from 7 initiatives exploring models of immigration advice for rough sleepers in London

Briefing Paper

About

Homeless Link grant manage the Immigration Advice for Rough Sleepers Fund, funded by the Greater London Authority. Through interviews and working alongside grantees, we have compiled these insights and recommendations. This briefing is primarily aimed at those exploring how to deliver immigration advice for rough sleepers, be this from the perspective of local or central government, immigration advice services or homelessness sector service providers.

Briefing Paper: Learning from 7 initiatives exploring models of immigration advice for rough sleepers in London

1. Introduction

Launched in April 2021 and now closed for applications, Homeless Link is managing the [Immigration Advice for Rough Sleepers Fund \(IARSF\)](#) on the [GLA's](#) behalf. The IARSF aims to support non-UK nationals sleeping rough in London to prove or obtain secure immigration status and enable a positive move-on from the streets, or from emergency accommodation. The Fund sought to achieve this by increasing the immigration advice and support available to migrant rough sleepers and more effectively using the resources that currently exist within the system.

The Fund aims to embed immigration advice within homelessness services, and vice versa; projects are either led by homelessness charities, or by immigration & asylum charities with homelessness partners as referring organisations.

This briefing paper is about the initial learning from Homeless Link's work with the 7 grantees funded to deliver immigration advice services for non-UK national rough sleepers. This work was carried out by [an independent consultant](#), who interviewed grantees and their partner organisations. Here we discuss the effective practice and challenges identified so far, and share recommendations for commissioners or homelessness organisations looking to deliver similar programmes.

The 7 grantees are:

- [Depaul UK](#) partnering with Cardinal Hume Centre, New Horizon
- [Lewisham Refugee and Migrant Network](#) partnering with Bench Outreach
- [Micro Rainbow](#) partnering with Wesley Gryk Solicitors
- [NEWway Project](#) partnering with Caritas Anchor House, Renewal Project
- [South London Refugee Association](#) partnering with Ace of Clubs, Thames Reach Croydon, Crisis Croydon, Glassdoor
- [St Mungo's](#) partnering with Praxis
- [Thames Reach](#) partnering with Tower Hamlets Law Centre, Hammersmith and Fulham Law Centre

2. Delivery models

The IARSF has funded a range of delivery models. These do not represent all potential delivery methods, and at this stage of learning no single model is considered

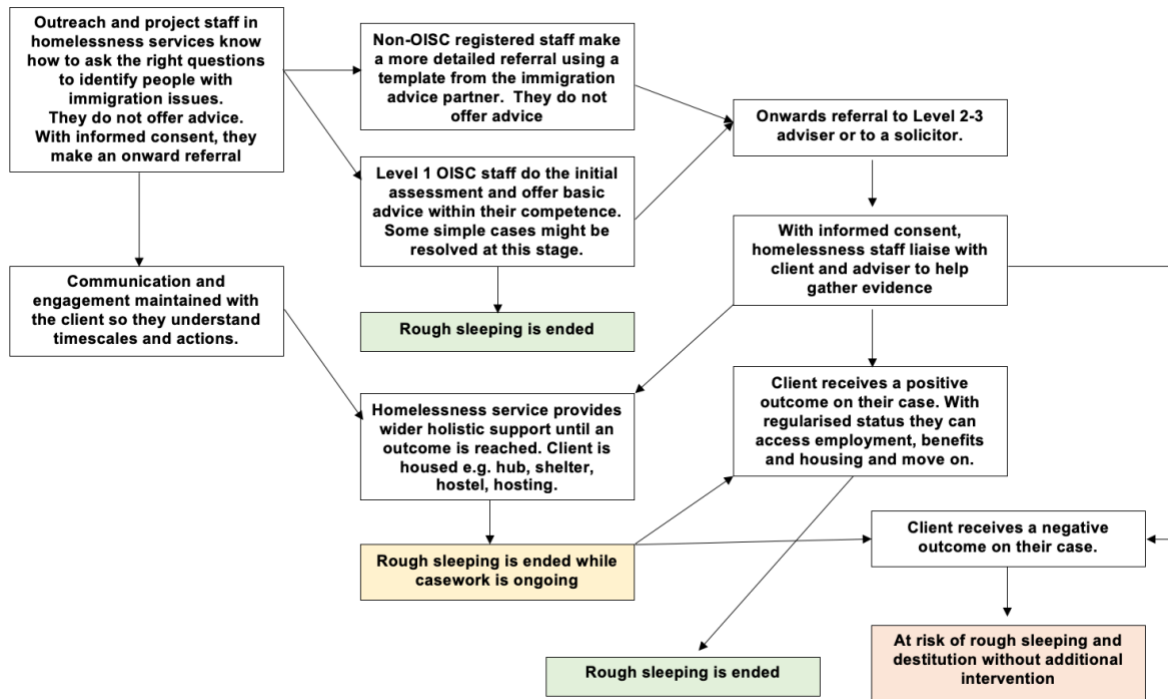
preferable to the others. These models are exploratory for grantees, enabling potential future development where most appropriate. Each delivery model aligns with the broad objectives of the fund. For example, homelessness staff acting as Link Workers and/or providing initial advice at OISC Level 1 increases coordination, admin support and quality of referrals in the homelessness service, which in turn releases the funded capacity of immigration partners to focus on regulated legal matters. Streamlining access to, and communication between, homelessness services and immigration advice staff at OISC Levels 2 and 3 or solicitors (in-house or external) improves collaboration between migration and homelessness work, enabling people to maintain engagement with immigration advice over an extended period while also receiving support for other priority needs such as housing and health. The benefits of some of these approaches to service delivery have been highlighted in research and strategy reports by [Justice Together](#) and [London Funders](#).

IARSF models include:

- Homelessness staff acting as immigration link workers (non-OISC)
- Homelessness staff providing initial advice (OISC Level 1)
- Immigration advice staff, in-house or external partners supporting homelessness organisations (OISC Levels 2-3, solicitors)
- In-house homelessness staff providing coordination and admin support to release the funded capacity of immigration partners to focus on regulated legal matters

The process map on the next page illustrates the flow between partner agencies and different approaches to support. The map shows the journey a client will go on, from identification point to initial assessment, to comprehensive assessment, to outcome. Depending on the complexity of the case, the client will be referred on accordingly.

Process map illustrating pathways across the funded organisations

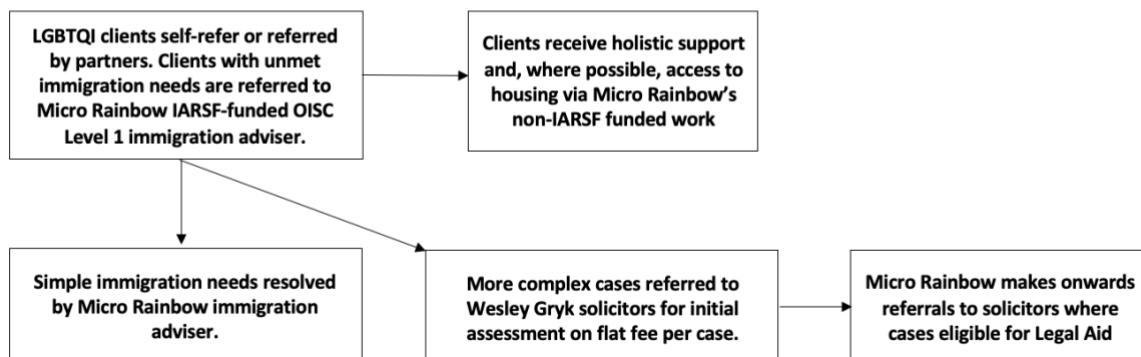


The next process map, below, is an individual example of funded organisation Micro Rainbow. It shows the routes a client's case might follow, depending on the nature and complexity of the case presented e.g. their needs might be met by an in-house advisor, or their case is complex and referred to a specialist immigration advisor, in this case Wesley Gryk Solicitors as Micro Rainbow's project partner. In either case, the client receives holistic wraparound support to enable retention and engagement in the immigration advice process.

Micro Rainbow IARSF process map

Grant: £57,932

Target number of people receiving immigration advice: 34 over 14 months



To see all grantee process maps, please see the links below:

- [Depaul](#)
- [Lewisham Refugee and Migrant Network](#)
- [NEWway Project](#)
- [South London Refugee Association](#)
- [St Mungo's](#)
- [Thames Reach](#)

The learning emerging from the IARSF comes at a critical and opportune point with Rough Sleeping Initiative (RSI) bids due imminently. Independent immigration advice needs to become an integral part of every local multi-agency homelessness response. This has been acknowledged by DLUHC in recent guidance for RSI 2022-25, which makes clear that local authorities should consider using RSI funds to commission “immigration and legal services to support regularisation of status.”

3. Key Learning identified by funded organisations and their partners

a. Advantages of homelessness sector involvement

Grantees have identified a number of advantages where the homelessness sector is funded to coordinate access to in-house or external immigration advice:

- Bridging and holding role: homelessness services have the skills, relationships and flexibility of contact via outreach or day services to maintain communication between the individual and their immigration advisor. This better enables appointments to be kept and timely action to ensure the individual is informed of, and understands, their case progress.
- Holistic support: organisations provide a range of additional support, which is essential alongside immigration advice e.g. help with housing, mental and physical health, employment and education support.
- Efficiency: organisations report that it is difficult for an individual to track progress of their case while homeless, as they often approach multiple services for advice and this creates significant inefficiencies, which are overcome by the bridging and holding role providing a consistent point of contact between the individual and their casework.
- Accommodation – not all grantees have access to accommodation alongside advice, as this depends on other funding streams. A mix of assessment beds, hosting, night shelters and shared houses are used. Where housing is not an option, the ‘bridging and holding’ role becomes more of a challenge as people

may drop out of contact while on the streets or in informal/unsafe housing situations.

b. Approaches to accessing OISC (Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner) registered advice and capacity

Projects using OISC-registered staff took various approaches:

- **In-house OISC Level 1 training**, which provides participants with a basis of knowledge in Immigration and Asylum Law, or with a specific EU Level 1 qualification.

Some of those interviewed have found that OISC registration is good practice, both having that additional resource in-house and also that person's effect on enhancing understanding and knowledge of non-specialist staff. This improves the assessment and referral processes, helping to maintain a flow of appropriate and high-quality referrals.

However, some people interviewed were of the view that it was not worth the time and resource required to achieve registration (both for the individual and for the organisation to be OISC registered). There was concern that Level 1 registration would increase frustration for staff due to its limits, and that it might lead them to overstep and offer inappropriate advice beyond their Level 1 remit (although this wasn't something reported as happening in practice).

There is a crucial issue with the overall availability of Level 2-3 OISC representation and solicitors, both in London and nationally (as detailed in research by [Justice Together](#)). Without resolution of this systemic issue around capacity, support and advice at Level 1 is unlikely to have a significant impact on the resolution of cases, especially as grantees have found that the immigration cases of many people sleeping rough are complex and require casework at Level 2 and above.

- **Some organisations have non-OISC posts** who act as a bridge with immigration advice and as a single point of contact, helping ensure a higher quality of referrals. Workers do not provide immigration advice, and some organisations prefer the clarity that these roles create in the clear separation between non-OISC support and regulated advice.

Recommendation: Level 1 training is good practice to enhance understanding and knowledge of non-specialist staff. It should not be undertaken lightly, with staff members needing adequate capacity (e.g. study skills) and organisational support (e.g. study leave, supervision), to complete the training. Free training and advice on OISC registration is offered by [Refugee Action](#).

IARSF projects are led by a mix of homelessness and immigration & asylum organisations. For all funded organisations, referral pathways for complex immigration cases were key. A range of routes were used:

- Referral to OISC Level 2-3 and solicitors at external partners
- A mix of fixed fee and pro bono partnerships with legal firms for initial assessment and referral on to Legal Aid solicitors
- In-house OISC Level 2-3 (in immigration & asylum charities)
- Solicitor providing in-reach to homelessness service

To improve the quality of referrals made and efficiency in progressing cases, grantees identified the importance of:

- Building relationships with firms offering good quality representation
- Close partnership working between immigration and homelessness services to share progress and work to gather evidence
- Access to specialist advice e.g. solicitors with experience of representing LGBTIQI asylum seekers

Recommendation: Strong partnerships are key and provide the essential opportunity to access more specialist advice. Improving the literacy of homelessness staff on immigration matters improves the quality of referrals and therefore the ability to progress cases.

c. Managing Demand

The June 2021 EU Settlement Scheme deadline created a temporary peak in demand. However, demand for services also fluctuates across areas and seasonally, particularly as a greater number of people sleeping rough are able to access accommodation during the winter period and are therefore more likely to be referred for immigration advice. Smaller homelessness charities operating in one area can find it harder to make the case for funding, due to fluctuating local demand e.g. when a group of people requiring immigration advice begin to sleep rough in an area, creating a small but significant peak in demand.

People sleeping rough are often mobile across borough boundaries and might not have an established local connection, therefore access to advice and support should not be limited by local connection (note that some boroughs have no immigration advice available above Level 1, and onward referral to solicitors will be wherever there is capacity).

Some projects have found that pan-London or sub-regional delivery enables greater flexibility in managing demand across seasons and locations.

Recommendation: Learning from IARSF projects indicates that services working across local authority boundaries, coupled with partnership approaches (both formal and informal) involving a range of immigration and homelessness related services, help to mitigate the issues of fluctuating demand and create a more efficient service.

d. Distorted perceptions of case duration due to EU Settlement Scheme applications

There are concerns that the swift progress of EUSS cases has created unrealistic expectations of what is typical in immigration decision-making. EUSS cases were often processed more quickly by the Home Office than other types of immigration applications. With the original June 2021 EUSS deadline having passed, and many EU cases resolved rapidly during this period (often helped by OISC Level 1 EU advisors), services are now finding that most cases are more complex, with people frequently having unclear or limited entitlements (e.g. to public funds) and requiring higher level representation. Long waiting times are the norm to resolve complex cases. This is extremely problematic for the individual involved, for example in terms of their mental health and their access to basic shelter and income while their case is ongoing. These cases also present an additional challenge as they require funding for longer term case management support.

Recommendation: There is wider learning here on the value of speedier Home Office processing times. For services, using all routes available to escalate delayed cases with Home Office decision-makers, via immigration advisors, is essential. When planning for sustainability, organisations and commissioners must consider the long-term need for services due to complex and long-term casework. The experience of EUSS case resolution in 2021 should not be seen as the norm when planning services.

e. Accommodation

All organisations agree that, wherever possible, people should be safely housed with access to wider services (e.g. health) while receiving immigration advice. Organisations accessed housing through a variety of routes: No Second Night Out hubs, shared houses, night shelters, hostels and hosting schemes.

Accommodation enables closer working to build trust with an individual, makes it easier to maintain regular communication and for workers to gather case-related evidence. There is a higher risk that, without accommodation, an individual will disengage from the process without an outcome. Delays and uncertainty can also have severe impacts on mental health and well-being, which can be mitigated through safe housing and support.

Recommendation: Individuals need safe housing and support to enable better outcomes and mitigate the risks of disengagement from their immigration case and associated pressures on mental health and well-being.

f. Data Sharing

At the start of the funded work there were fears that the history of data being shared by outreach teams with the Home Office would be a barrier to engagement between people sleeping rough and immigration advice projects. This is a legitimate concern

which requires work in advance of project initiation to establish data sharing protocols between partners, underpinned by clients' fully informed consent.

Organisations have overcome this potential barrier with clear confidentiality policies in-house and checking that partners have robust policies too. Conversations have taken place with partners about data sharing so they understand each other's positions and where these might differ. Clear communication with clients about what data is shared when, with appropriate informed consent that is specific to the immigration advice process, resolves most concerns from individuals.

Overall, funded organisations found that the principal barrier to engagement was not data sharing concerns specific to homelessness services, but general concerns around trusting staff and services associated with wider mental health issues.

Recommendation: Data sharing is a legitimate concern but one that can be addressed by putting in place comprehensive data sharing agreements between partners before the service begins. Charities being commissioned by local authorities need to be able to negotiate contracts that preserve their independence and exclude any risk of immigration enforcement for people seeking advice. For individuals, the chance to build trust through clear communication, plain English documents and support alongside advice can help to overcome barriers to engagement.

4. Next steps

Immigration advice is essential to end rough sleeping and immigration advice providers should be considered as a core part of most local areas' mainstream homelessness partnerships. To explore further work, read Homeless Link's briefing, ['Facing up to homelessness among non-UK nationals: the challenge and opportunity since 'Everyone In'](#), which makes the case for the inclusion of people with immigration-based eligibility restrictions in mainstream homelessness systems.

You can find out more about these plans and support offered by Homeless Link in this [blog](#). We have also launched a series of five case studies describing local responses to non-UK national homelessness since COVID-19. Additional information can be found on [our website](#), which is also updated regularly with new resources.

What We Do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for frontline homelessness services. We work to improve services through research, guidance and learning, and campaign for policy change that will ensure everyone has a place to call home and the support they need to keep it.

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**Let's End Homelessness
Together**

