

Refugee Project Report

Over 2020 the Abigail Housing Refugee Project in Leeds provided temporary supported housing to 89 adult refugees (28 women and 61 men) from 10 different countries. We managed 18 houses and flats which can offer housing to up to 67 adults at any one time, mostly to single people in shared houses. The Refugee Project also has a small amount of housing suitable for families and so we were also able to accommodate 6 children with their families in the year. We prevented 24,388 nights of homelessness over the year.

Refugees are people who make successful applications for asylum in the UK and have been granted the right to work and claim benefits but must leave their accommodation provided by the Home Office 28 days after they have been granted leave to remain. Inevitably people in this situation face homelessness and destitution. Universal Credit, the main welfare benefit people receive, takes at least 5 weeks before the first payment is made. Social housing (council and housing association tenancies) will not be available to most people for at least 2 years after they are first able to apply. Private landlords often require rent in advance and deposits, which means people need hundreds of pounds to access accommodation in the private sector. Our Refugee Project exists to tackle these problems.

As well as providing accommodation, we work with people to apply for social housing, claim benefits and access a wide range of other projects and services supported by our volunteering scheme. This includes English language classes, access to healthcare and the employment and training support needed to aid integration into the community and move on with their lives. Providing people can abide by our licence agreement they do not have to leave Abigail Housing until they have alternative, more secure accommodation, which can often mean people are living with us for several years. Before the COVID-19 pandemic staff from Leeds City Council Housing Options attended a weekly drop-in at our offices to support our residents with housing applications and issues around 'bidding' for properties. We have bridged this gap by maintaining regular contact with council officers over the phone and by email. Leeds City Council Housing Option are also one of the main sources of referrals to the project.

When people successfully bid for a social housing tenancy or other longer term accommodation option, we accompany them to view the property and provide support to set up bills, obtain furniture and apply to Leeds Welfare Fund (administered by Leeds City Council) for cookers, fridges and other essential items.

Of those who left Abigail Housing accommodation over 2020 to move on to alternative accommodation:

- 8 moved to council or housing association tenancies.
- 4 to a private tenancy
- 4 to other supported housing
- 1 person left Leeds – for work.
- 1 person started university.
- 1 family reunion – joined by their families from abroad.

Other achievements over 2020

- We are active members of a range of networks - for example nationally NACCOM (<https://naccomm.org.uk/>), the umbrella organisation for refugee and asylum seeker housing projects)

and Leeds Migration Partnership. Each works to improve services for refugees. We also take part in and influence campaigns that affect the people we work with.

- Service User Involvement – we now regularly have residents or recent ex-residents attending the sub-group that oversees the management of the Refugee Project.
- Improving standards of our accommodation – additional resources on refurbishment of the properties we manage
- A grant from the Lloyds Bank Foundation has enabled us to look at the development of the charity as a whole, there will be some significant changes to how the charity is managed over the next year.
- Provided Wi-Fi in all the houses we manage where it was possible to do this
- In December 2020 we took over a new family house increasing to 19 the properties we manage, this house will be offered to a refugee family in early 2021. We are also planning to take on at least one additional house over the next year, this is currently being renovated.

COVID-19 Response

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 required the project to make essential changes to the way our services are provided and managed:

- Staff working from home, keeping contact between people to an absolute minimum. But essential repairs and maintenance has been ongoing. We would like to thank all contractors who are providing a service
- Staff are available for residents to contact by telephone everyday
- Staff and volunteers ensuring that all residents are contacted by telephone at least once a week to check on their well-being
- Information provided in community languages to all residents – also available on our website. Key information also regularly texted to residents.
- Staff and volunteers carrying out essential shopping for residents when this has been needed
- Taking part in video conferencing (zoom!) for internal meetings and external networks

We have been successful with a number of applications for additional grant funding from Barrow Cadbury Trust & National Lottery, Lloyds Bank Foundation and NACCOM. This has enabled us to provide PPE, deep cleaning of houses and purchasing of tech equipment (phones, tablets and laptops) to lend to refugees. We have recruited 13 new volunteers to help refugees improve their English via Zoom meetings and have held house and project meetings online, as well as organising Bingo sessions over Zoom too.

A big thank to you to all our funders, volunteers, contractors, landlords, partner agencies and staff for all pulling together to enable us to continue to deliver services over the continuing course of the pandemic. We must also thank the refugees who live with us for bearing with us and often providing support to each other during this most difficult of times. Whilst it has been a challenging year in a number of ways, we are emerging in a strong position with many opportunities to build on to continue to improve the services the organisation can offer to Refugees.

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