

Submission from Medaille Caseworker

The below information was provided in an email thread between The Human Trafficking Foundation and a caseworker at Medaille. These represent the views and opinions of a caseworker at one of Medaille's services, and do not necessarily reflect the views or experiences of the organisation, or those clients it supports across the UK

Observations from safe-house during covid19 pandemic:

- Clients have reported increased anxiety and depression and many have been struggling more than usual with their mental health. Some clients have been having symptoms similar to when they first arrived at the house. Clients have reported that this is due to not being able to keep busy and partake in usual activities which are a key part of their recovery, not being able to see friends, anxiety around the virus in general and in particular anxiety around HO decisions and the affect the virus will have. Client have reported feelings of hopelessness around the immigration process and fears that the current crisis will slow things down even more
- Some clients have expressed feelings of being trapped or stuck more than usual.
- For those who have been accessing higher education or voluntary work, being unable to do this has been extremely difficult especially when this had been playing a key role in their recovery. These clients have expressed feelings of demotivation and increased uncertainty about their future. It has been difficult for some client's to keep up with university/college work from home which is causing further stress and anxiety.
- Many hospital appointments have been cancelled which has caused anxiety for some clients as they are worried about other health conditions or have been waiting for procedures for a long time.
- For staff, it has been difficult to balance precautions against covid19 with supporting client's with their mental health, in terms of deciding how much contact staff should have with clients, whether we can do activities etc.
- I would reiterate that the most prominent thing affecting our clients' mental health is anxiety and hopelessness related to the immigration process. This comes up in conversation every day and many of our clients are reaching breaking point as they have been waiting for so long, and being in isolation, separated from friends and normal activities, leaves more time to think and worry about the future.

a) Has extra support been required in [lockdown period]? If so, what has this looked like?

We haven't needed to get any extra staff in, but it is has felt very busy despite the fact that we don't have the normal appointments to go to. I can only speak for my clients, but I feel that this is because clients are needing more emotional support and I'm spending much more time talking with them. Also trying to do activities with clients, help with college/uni work etc so they're not just in their rooms all day. Have also needed to work on accessing (virtual) mental health support for those who didn't yet have anything in place when the pandemic hit.

b) What specific challenges are being faced around immigration status? E.g. if length of time waiting, how long are waits you are seeing? If it's sourcing immigration advice, is it issues around quality of advice, availability generally, etc.?

I have a few clients who have been in the UK for a long time, some since they were children, and still have not resolved their immigration status. These clients have been waiting between 5 and 13 years since the first asylum application. These clients are now waiting on the decision of fresh claims, and it's almost impossible to suggest a timeframe for these and it's pretty impossible to get any kind of update.

Most of them have good immigration advice now although they have not necessarily in the past (before being referred in to the NRM). Other clients have difficulty gathering evidence to make their case due to having no links in their country of origin or no way to contact people, some have difficulty with memory due to trauma which makes the whole process of claiming asylum very challenging. There are all kinds of challenges.

I have been working here for two years and have only seen one client get a decision on their immigration. Again, I can only speak for the women I have worked with, but it seems to me that the pain of having to wait for immigration decisions and put the future on hold begins to affect client's mental even more than the trauma they have faced in the past, and trauma therapists that we work with have reported that it's very difficult to do trauma work with clients when they do not still do not feel safe at all, as they still fear having to return to their countries.

c) Re anxiety around HO decisions – does this relate specifically to their CG decision?

No, for our client's this relates predominantly to their immigration decision as without leave to remain the CG has no real meaning for them. We have clients with positive CG decisions too that are still waiting on immigration decisions.