

LIVING IN HACKNEY

LOCAL VOICES ON DIVERSITY
& COMMUNITY SOLIDARITY

ABNEY
PARK

CLISSOLD
PARK

○ HACKNEY MIGRANT
CENTRE /
ST MARYS CHURCH

STOKE
NEWINGTON
COMMON

○ NORTH LONDON ACTION
FOR THE HOMELESS
/ ST PAUL'S CHURCH
WEST HACKNEY

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INTRODUCTION

This booklet contains the findings of the research conducted by Hackney Migrant Centre. This work was one of several pieces of community insight on growth, change and cohesion in Hackney grant funded by Hackney CVS on behalf of the Team Hackney Community Insight Group. The aim of this project was to encourage community dialogue on growth, change and cohesion in Hackney and to gather a wider range of perspectives from the local community.

Hackney Migrant Centre (HMC) opened in April 2008 to meet a need for advice and support for migrants in the local area. Since then HMC has run a weekly drop-in for refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants.

Using specialist advisors from different partner agencies supported by trained volunteer advocates, HMC has become a leading advice service in Hackney to migrants of all nationalities. We see a range of migrants who are new to the borough, as well as some who have been settled for a long time. HMC works in partnership with a wide range of other local organisations working with other marginalised

groups including homeless and vulnerably housed people, and groups and individuals from ethnic minorities. Our network includes, amongst others, North London Action for Homeless (NLAH), the Hackney Winter Night Shelter, Hackney Community Law Centre, the Greenhouse Walk In Centre, Hackney Refugee and Migrant Support Group (HRMSG) and St. Mary's Church in Stoke Newington as well as other church groups.

NLAH, which took part in the research, is a drop-in centre that is open to all who are homeless or in need, providing a healthy meal in a welcoming and friendly environment, warm clothes, advice and other services according to need. The NLAH drop-in operates within an ethos of service, respect and acceptance and believes that there are many people in our society who through poverty, homelessness and other difficulties suffer exclusion and are deprived of their basic rights and needs.

HMC and NLAH had several reasons for participating in this research. Firstly, we wanted to show how effective local partnerships can be used to support individuals. Secondly, we wanted to document the difficulties some

of the most vulnerable and marginalised people are facing daily to raise awareness of their needs. Many individuals we see have great difficulty accessing other services and often report feelings of disempowerment when it comes to decisions being made on their behalf. The aim was to involve people from all the groups HMC works with to contribute to a productive community dialogue and share diverse perspectives about their views about living in Hackney.

The case studies we conducted for this booklet give best practice examples of collaborations between HMC, NLAH and partner organisations and illustrate the disadvantages suffered by individuals and the effect of being excluded from services, employment and the life of the borough. Through our network we were able to reach individuals who are usually difficult to approach by local authorities.

The questionnaire was designed with reference to the Community Insight Group's requirements. We focused on the following topics:

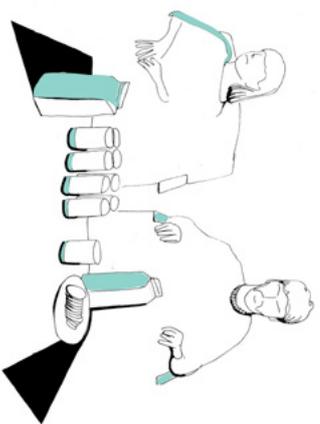
- What kind of benefits have you seen in relation to changes and

what kind of concerns do you have?
• What kind of opportunities would you like to see in future for yourself and your family in their local neighborhood?
• Do you have any suggestions or ideas about how the local authorities could make everyone feel more part of their local neighborhood?

The booklet draws on a six weeks qualitative research in the borough of Hackney. The fieldwork was conducted by Myrto Kougevetopoulos using focus groups and in-depth interviews with professional, local people from different ethnic and social backgrounds, including long-term residents as well as newcomers. The four focus groups were carried out with HMC's volunteers, professionals, refugee women and NLAH service users. The purpose of the focus group discussions was to develop and collect ideas for improvements. The in-depth interviews were to present a detailed picture of different situations. The professionals involved in the project have worked in Hackney for many years with marginalised groups and are aware of the difficulties those people face. The fieldwork also included participant obser-

vation at North London Action for Homeless, in public spaces and active involvement as a volunteer

at HMC. The outcome of the research is summarised in this booklet.



diversity on a daily basis. This is how diversity becomes normality or as Susanne Wessendorf (2014) calls it 'commonplace diversity'.

'At the end of every street there is a housing estate which is unusual for London. I can't think of any street in Hackney where it doesn't occur.'

Hackney's diversity is also revealed in the council services, where sometimes the majority of the front-line staff is of ethnic minority background. Although you can find a wide range of people with different backgrounds, most of the refugees and recent migrants interviewed experienced discrimination and felt badly treated by the local and public services. Dealing with Hackney social services was mentioned as one of their main issues by many different people.

ter maintained public spaces and cycling paths were mentioned as positive changes.

1. IMPORTANCE OF DIVERSITY

Diversity is what characterises Hackney and what gives the borough its identity. Most of the people interviewed mentioned diversity and multiculturalism as something positive and expressed their appreciation of living in a diverse area. Some even stressed that diversity was a reason for moving to the borough. The borough was described by most of the interviewees as open, tolerant and multicultural. In the context of repeated everyday interactions, people are dealing with

'In Hackney you can walk around with a pineapple on your head and no one will comment it or turn around and look surprised...it's great.'

Hackney's diversity is not only visible in the multi-ethnic mix of people when you walk along Kingsland Road, or a local street-market. It is also evident in the increasing number of middle-class people from various national backgrounds who can afford to invest in the maintenance of Hackney's old Victorian buildings. You can find a mix of Victorian and Georgian houses next to social estates, which reflects the socio-economic mix of the borough.

Although the local authorities welcome migrants as an essential and valued part of Hackney's population and emphasise diversity, openness and tolerance in their borough, there are only very few legal advice and general services for refugees and migrants. In addition, as a result of welfare and other cuts (e.g. legal aid) most migrants now face further risks of social and economic exclusion. Even though many of the issues refugees and migrants are facing are related to decisions made at a national level, local and public

KEY FINDINGS

The findings showed unanimity about participants' positive feelings about diversity and a strong community feeling. However, the discussions and the interviews revealed both enthusiasm and criticisms. The views of the people interviewed varied according to their social, financial and ethnic backgrounds as well as their immigration status. In general long term residents were more satisfied with recent developments in the borough. The improvement of schools, parks, leisure centres and libraries as well as public transport, cleaner streets and bet-

services could support some of the most vulnerable and marginalised people by providing better advice services or facilitating organisations that are working in this field.

During the focus group meeting with refugee women another issue relating to the lack of support services was raised; all the women who were attending the group had difficulties understanding the school system and how to access services or to apply for benefits. A support worker, who works in schools with families from ethnic minorities, explained that there is a serious lack of support in schools especially for those parents. This leads to frustration as many parents cannot support their children in the way they would like to. There are often language barriers which make the situation even more difficult.

'When you first come to a new country you are not aware of the services that exist...It is very difficult. Parents are often not familiar with the school system. Signposting is important for those people as they don't know how to access services and where to go. If you are isolated and new you don't come and ask.'

2. PRIDE IN THE COMMUNITY

A further characteristic of Hackney is the strength of community feeling and solidarity in the borough. There is a strong sense of community, pride and tolerance and most local people interviewed are passionate about the area. The Hackney Place Survey 2008/2009 also shows that a large percentage of residents are actively involved in local community groups and there is a vital community and voluntary sector. The strong community feeling, the connection to the local area and the contribution to the local community is a great benefit for the borough of Hackney and should be used to its full capacity by the local authorities.

'When I moved to Hackney it was definitely a bit of a decision to move to a borough that had a lot of stuff going on. Definitely this was one of the reasons.'

Most people feel that the cohesion between different ethnic groups is good; 'they get on well together'. This understanding is also strengthened by many local community groups because they support diversity. However, they need more public space where people can meet, socialise or carry out projects.

Some of the aspects that people feel have worsened over time, are expensive housing as well as prices in general (food, cafés, shops). The closure of old corner shops and the opening of fancy cafés, the replacement of local shops by supermarket chains are both seen as negative developments. Some of the interviewees mentioned their concerns that Ridley Road Market will become the new Broadway Market in a couple of years. Most changes are happening too fast and the local community often feels as though they are not taking part in the decision making.

'I moved here because there were lots of different people, rich and poor people with different backgrounds and now...I mean walk down Stoke Newington Church Street, you could be in Hampstead. A friend of mine said, Hackney council's only idea of regeneration is retail.'

A profound concern expressed during the focus group meeting with professionals, relates to these ongoing demographic changes. The following statement emphasises the anxiety of losing the community feeling and cohesion which characterizes Hackney.

'It's not just that people are being moved out whilst people are being moved in, it's more that people don't actually care about the local area...there is the transition. Once the area is not cool anymore they just move on. They don't think about it they don't even bother to find out where the local shop is. It's not even a new community moving in. The identity of Hackney is strongly connected to the local activism and local community. This is in danger of being lost.'

3. RELATIONS WITH LOCAL AUTHORITIES

On the one hand, trust in local authorities has been growing the last couple of years (see Ipsos MORI reports 2008/2009 and 2013). On the other hand, satisfaction about the way the council is running things has decreased. Whilst British white middle-class residents are more satisfied, marginalised groups such as recent migrants, people on benefits, and those relying on the support of local services, expressed their concerns.

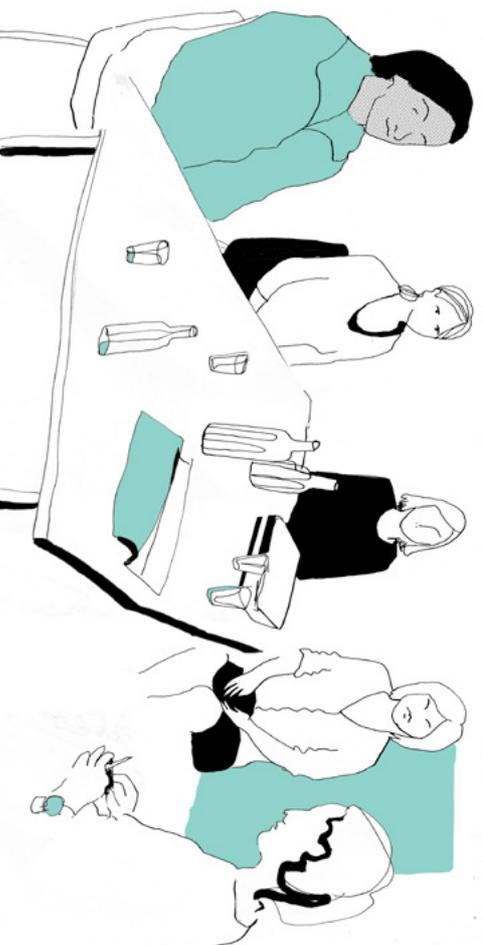
Most of those people expressed distrust and anxiety in relation to local and public services. People from other ethnic backgrounds, especially, don't feel welcome

and supported. Most are in vulnerable situations and cannot defend themselves.

'Hackney council is not approaching the local community. The communication with the local people is not good. They need to improve their communication...If you go there to get an information they treat you so negative, they are very rude and not friendly at all.'

'On the surface they are quite supportive but you see they are supportive because it's their image [...]. Instead of thinking who are our demographic and let's provide for our demographic, they wanted to be something that they aren't. Dalston Lane is one example but it is predominantly working class. It's got the creative community everybody knows about that...we have got the artists and brewers but you've also got 200,000 people who are essentially British working class and they are the people who are not getting served.'

Besides discrimination, poor services and little support by social services, interviewees felt less involved in decisions by the council and/or have a negative working relationship with the council as expressed in the following statements:



'Even though the council is doing consultations at the end they do what they want to.'

'The Council does not listen to the view of residents. They should listen more to what the residents want and need.'

4. OPPORTUNITIES

The opportunities and the chances people want to see for themselves vary depending on their situation, their status and their level of integration, participation and involvement in local activities. Nonetheless they all want to be actively involved in the decision making process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our findings show that diversity and a strong sense of community characterise people in Hackney and these factors have a strong influence on the borough's identity. However, diversity does not necessarily mean inclusion and many of the people who represent the 'diverse' face of Hackney often feel excluded from its services and unable to participate fully in local life.

The voluntary and community sector plays an important role in challenging inequality, poverty and disadvantage and also exclusion and racism and residents' strong engagement is a great strength of the borough.

Our recommendations come both from people we talked to in the focus groups and individual interviews, and from our analysis of the data we collected.

1. ENCOURAGE DIVERSITY ACTIVELY

Because diversity brings positive benefits the council should encourage diversity more actively instead of just using it as a label for the borough. Every policy and decision at a local level should be considered properly with a view to encouraging and embracing diversity and this should be evidenced openly and transparently.

2. CLOSER COUNCIL WORKING WITH COMMUNITY GROUPS

AND THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR

The council should see ethnic community groups and the voluntary sector as experts in their field and liaise with them to build up better relationships with specific groups and marginalised people who are often difficult to reach and whose voices are seldom heard. There should be more regular meetings between council officers and representatives of these groups.

3. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Local and public services need to explore more effective ways of engaging and involving the local community in making changes to their services in order to provide a good quality service, for example, by inviting residents and organisations (e.g. ethnic minorities, local community and voluntary groups) to engage in the decisions that affect them. Local residents can be actively involved through regular neighbourhood meetings or open days, but this is a slow process that requires ongoing commitment in order to build trust.

4. PROVISION OF INFORMATION FOR COMMUNITY

AND VOLUNTARY GROUPS

Information, for example, about support and advice services in the borough, needs to be made more accessible for community and voluntary organisations. The council could develop a mechanism (e.g. dedicated support worker, an online platform, and outreach support worker) to collate and publicise information about services and organisations to support links between different community and voluntary groups.

5. ACCESSIBILITY OF INFORMATION AFFECTING VULNERABLE GROUPS

The council and the public sector (incl. job centre) need to ensure that information reaches marginalised people such as refugees, elderly people and people who are precariously housed, e.g. through organisations that provide services to these groups. Regular meetings between council officers and representatives of these groups could help building up partnerships and make sure that upcoming changes are fully understood by the support services.

6. ACCESSIBILITY OF INFORMATION FOR NEW ARRIVALS

TO THE UK AND TO THE BOROUGH

The council and the public sector need to ensure that new arrivals and recent migrants understand the systems of service provision and what is available. A greater effort needs to be made to ensure that information reaches newcomers, e.g. through ethnic communities. Regular meetings between council officers and representatives of these groups could help building up partnerships (see point above).

7. IDENTIFY A COUNCIL OFFICER RESPONSIBLE FOR

MARGINALISED INDIVIDUALS

There should be a council officer for whom there is the responsibility for ensuring the needs of marginalised individuals (e.g. refugees, migrants and homeless people) are met in the borough. At the very least, the council should have a named person that voluntary and community groups can have direct contact with when they have concerns or specific issues they need to discuss. Through trained outreach support worker the council could ensure that marginalised and vulnerable groups who have difficulties to access services receive the needed support and information.

8. IMPROVEMENTS TO SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SECTOR STAFF

There is a need for better trained front-line staff in the council and the public sector (incl. job centre) and for staff to be trained to meet the special needs of refugees and recent migrants and to clarify their rights and possibilities to certain kinds of services (e.g. healthcare, benefits). Training should not only focus on cultural awareness but also on a wider range of specific issues and needs refugees, asylum seekers and other recent migrant are facing. Furthermore, there should be more interpreters available to ensure the clarity of information and the quality of services.

9. PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT FOR MIGRANT PARENTS OF CHILDREN AT SCHOOL

More social workers and teaching assistants from ethnic minorities are needed in schools who can support parents of the same background. Schools also need to work more closely with minority ethnic community groups, for example, by setting up mentoring projects in schools where parents can help each other.

10. INCREASE THE AMOUNT OF FREE ADVICE FOR REFUGEES, ASYLUM SEEKERS AND MIGRANTS

Since the legal aid cuts there is a dramatic rise in the demand for immigration and welfare advice. This includes a lot of families and single parents who have an unresolved immigration status and who have no recourse to public funds. The council should increase the amount of free advice to refugees and migrants who no longer qualify for legal aid and are therefore unable to sort out their immigration problems but are dependent on local services e.g. social services. This would lead to less money being spent on social services as more migrants and their families would be able to regularise their status and find work etc.

11. PROVISION OF PUBLIC SPACE

Most local community and voluntary organisations are renting their facilities from the church. Many drop-in services take place in church halls that are often not really suitable. The council should provide more

affordable public space where people can meet, socialise and organisations can carry out projects. Additionally, there should be information about the availability of space, for example, through a booking system or a platform with all existing community halls which is managed by the local authorities.

12. SUPPORT FOR GROUPS WORKING WITH REFUGEES, ASYLUM SEEKERS AND MIGRANTS

There is a need for more financial and general support for groups who work with refugees, asylum seekers and migrants as there are only very few advice services or other support for these individuals.

13. INCREASE OUTREACH WORK FOR HOMELESS PEOPLE

Homeless people usually find it hard to access public and local services for example the CAB. The council should ensure that there is adequate outreach advice for those individuals who are in precarious and chaotic situations.

14. INCREASE THE AMOUNT OF HOSTELS

The local authorities should provide more hostels and support night shelters. Changes to welfare benefits have led to a rise in the number of people who are becoming homeless, either because of the housing benefit cap, illegal evictions or benefit sanctions meaning that they have fallen into rent arrears. It has become harder especially for single people to find hostels as the demand has increased. Also, the demand for shelters has increased, and so there are longer waiting lists.



LEGEND:

-  HACKNEY WINTER NIGHT SHELTER CHURCHES
-  LOCAL BUSINESSES THAT DONATE FOOD TO NLAH / HMC

HACKNEY MIGRANT CENTRE / ST MARY'S CHURCH

NORTH LONDON ACTION FOR THE HOMELESS / ST PAUL'S CHURCH WEST HACKNEY

SUNDAY URBAN TABLE / THE ROUND CHAPEL

HACKNEY COMMUNITY LAW CENTRE

THE GREENHOUSE / THE WALK IN

CLISSOLD PARK

Church St

Northwold Rd

Lea Bridge Rd

Chatsworth Rd

Lower Clapton Rd

Fembury Rd

Amhurst Rd

Graham Rd

Morning Ln

Mare St

LONDON FIELDS

Queensbridge Rd

Dalston Ln

Kingsland Rd

Balls Pond Rd

Green Lanes

Albion Rd

Homerston High St

FIVE STORIES



HAMID AND PARICHEHR first came to HMC in February 2013, after the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) had sent the couple to seek help with Parichehr's documents and their difficult housing situation. They had been struggling for a while when they approached HMC and seemed exhausted.

'The CAB advised us to go to HMC for general advice because of the problems we have with the house, with Parichehr's health and her medical situation and the difficulties we have with dealing with Hackney council. The CAB said, go to HMC the people there are very friendly and may be able to help you.'

During their first visit at HMC both were silent and introverted as they spoke almost no English. Fortunately one of our volunteers had studied Persian at university and was able to interpret. Because of that we were able to give Hamid and Parichehr a whole afternoon's individual attention in their own language to find out how complex their issues are. It emerged that Hamid was a well-known cameraman in Iran. After being involved in making a film critical of the regime he was imprisoned and tortured. He fled to the UK in 2000 and after a couple of months was granted refugee status. Parichehr came to the UK in 2006. She claimed asylum but

was immediately refused by the Home Office. In May 2013 she was finally awarded discretionary leave to remain on the basis of her private life with her husband and main carer Hamid.

'First the Home Office gave me my mother's name instead of my own name and then the Home Office lost Hamid's file. In addition, we didn't trust the solicitor representing us. After we realised that this solicitor was not acting in our interest we hired another solicitor who tried to make a complaint against the first solicitor - we lost all our money on that.'

Finally they did find a person who helped Parichehr to get her leave to remain, but they had borrowed £550 from a friend to pay for it.

However, their problems did not end here. After Parichehr was granted leave to remain she was not allowed any benefits and couldn't understand why. A Red Cross case worker spotted that her leave to remain was issued and on her ID card it stated 'No Recourse to Public Funds' (NRPf). This means that the person concerned is not entitled to most state benefits. This was when the couple started to come to HMC regularly.

'When I first came to the UK in 2006 I was not that ill - we didn't have all these problems. It is now two years that I am in a wheelchair. My diabetes became worse, I got arthritis in my knees and I am suffering from depression.'

Since 2007 the couple have been living in a third floor council flat which is totally unsuitable for their needs as Parichehr is wheelchair-bound and the building has no lift. To leave or return to the flat she needs to go up and down 28 stairs on her bottom, or Hamid and friends physically lift her on the 3 flights of stairs. Furthermore, although the flat has been painted four times since they moved in, the whole place is full of mould which has a severe effect on Parichehr's asthma. Although their housing is completely inappropriate, their housing is defined according to Hamid, as Parichehr's leave condition of 'NRPf' means that her medical condition was not taken into account. The only way to persuade Hackney council to rehouse them was to get this condition on her leave to remain removed.

In November 2013 HMC's welfare specialist from Hackney Community Law Centre and the immigra-

tion solicitor from Islington Law Centre, agreed to cooperate on the case, with one lawyer addressing their housing problem while the other is trying to lift the 'NRPF' condition on Parichehr's leave. This collaboration was possible as HMC and Islington Law Centre have set up a new project to help destitute migrants who need legal representation for immigration but who cannot afford a private solicitor and can no longer get legal aid.

'We wouldn't have got as far as we are at the moment without the help of HMC. HMC is great, you get there and you feel calm, you feel at home. There is a positive energy that makes you forget about the problems you have. There are people who go with you through letters, getting access to a solicitor. We have had a lot of support.'

Recently Hackney council recognised Parichehr's medical conditions and placed the couple in 'Category A' which means top priority for re-housing. However, until the intervention of the HCLC welfare specialist the council did not take her needs into account, nor did the couple understand how the bidding process worked. Currently the special needs coordinator for re-housing at Hackney council is bidding on their behalf. Recently they viewed a flat on the ground floor with a small garden but did not get an offer. Unfortunately our immigration solicitor's application to lift the 'NRPF' condition on Parichehr's leave to remain was unsuccessful. The next step will to apply for legal aid for a judicial review to challenge this decision.

MARIAMA, a young woman from Guinea, first came to the UK in 2006 when she was only 16 years old. She left her country as she was in danger of having FGM and flew to London from Freetown in Sierra Leone, the country neighbouring Guinea. When she arrived in London, a man she never had seen before, picked her up from the airport and the next day he dropped her off in front of the Home Office where she claimed asylum.

A couple of weeks later, by chance, Mariama met A., a member of Hackney Refugee and Migrant Support Group at the social services office in Hackney. The Home Office had sent Mariama there to get support but she didn't speak any English and was not able to understand what was going on.



When Mariama heard that A. was translating for another woman into French she approached her and asked for help. A. was able to find Mariama a solicitor as she had no advocate until that time.

Mariama had applied for asylum but the Home Office didn't believe her age or her country of origin. After a few weeks the Home Office wrote to Hackney social services claiming that she was really a 22 year old woman from Sierra Leone called Mariam. Even though Mariama was from Guinea

a francophone country The Home Office used a visa application written in English as 'proof' of her Sierra Leonean identity. Instead of challenging the Home Office, social services immediately refused to support her any longer as a minor, evicted her from her social services accommodation in Hackney, and sent her to the Refugee Council to place her in adult accommodation. She was placed in a hostel in Croydon.

'The social service let me down they didn't support me ... and the lady who use to be my social worker didn't want to help me.'

Meanwhile A. had gone with Mariama to the Learning Trust (which ran Hackney's Education service at the time) and one of their staff found her a place at BSix, a 6th form college in Hackney which accepted her. While she was in Croydon, she received £5 a day from the hostel and travelled from Croydon to Hackney every morning by bus, getting up at 5.30 to arrive on time. With the help of her solicitor and her mother in Guinea, Mariama was able to prove her identity, and in June 2007 social services agreed to support her again and provided a room in a shared house in Hackney.

Mariama managed to study English and did GCSE's and A levels at BSix College in Hackney. Her goal was always to go to university to study nursing, but although she passed all the exams the University could not accept her due to her unresolved immigration status.

'When I came with a paper from the University my social worker didn't want to sign it. People who provide social services should be there for the people. If you want to provide social care you have to be there for the people.'

Luckily, Mariama also had a place to study Biomedical Sciences at Westminster University, and received a letter granting her Indefinite Leave to Remain just in time to accept it. The Home Office never refused Mariama's application but it took over four years until she was granted Indefinite Leave to Remain. In 2013 Mariama graduated from Westminster University and was also granted British citizenship. Since then she has been working as a care worker and is still living in a shared flat in Hackney. She is now thinking about further studies.

'Hackney has been the first area for me in London though sometimes it is a bit dangerous especially during the night I feel insecure. When you get off the bus and you have to walk a bit.'

C. is the son of Jamaican immigrant from a middle class background. His father owned a dental laboratory and he grew up in a small house in Hackney. C. trained in his late teens as a dental technician and spent a couple of years on the American east coast, first during high school, and then again in his twenties. Despite his trans-continental sensibility, he thinks of himself as a life-long Hackney local.

C. has a very serene disposition and, despite living with a severe mental illness and taking very high doses of medication, he says he is 'at peace.' His choice to remain anonymous is a good reminder that, while places like NLAH may be a positive support in many people's lives, that doesn't necessarily mean everyone wants to advertise they go to this place.



That was why he started coming to NLAH. In the meantime, he found a flat, but up to now he has still not been able to work because the medication he is taking makes him constantly tired. In addition, after he was diagnosed as bipolar he also had cancer and had half his jaw removed and replaced with bone from his leg. Since C. became ill, he is on benefits and still relies on services like NLAH.

'Every drop-in centre has the same sort of feel to it. Those with mental illness generally have the same sort of disposition because they're on the same drugs and the drugs affect your behaviour more than you as an individual. It has a very strong effect on your behaviour to the point where you do sort of have to withdraw from society and find your own little niche. Which is the mental health community. It's either that or semi insanity.'

When he was in the U.S., he was not able to work for quite a long time, due to his bipolar disorder. He couldn't hold down a job for long and eventually his insurance ran out so he had to come back to the UK.

'I was having trouble sleeping, I would become very manic, I was hallucinating. I couldn't manage. I was manic and hallucinating and I had a warped sense of what's going on around me. Everything was inaccurate in that state.'

Even though he spent a long time in the US and, as he says, 'probably the happiest time of my life' he always preferred the UK.

'I think I'm a bit of a socialist. And I found Americans to be—at least the ones I came into contact with—if they weren't somewhat prejudiced being white middle class, they were somewhat superficial being black. I

After he came back to the UK, he was sleeping rough for a while.

found them to be very materialistic. Racially I was very much accepted, because I was from England but every now and again someone would say "those n...s".

I think here, it probably does happen outside of London, in rural settings. But in Hackney, no and in London, basically no. Because it's cosmopolitan and mixed and different races. Hackney is very diverse now. It's very en vogue for the whole of Europe? Dalston is like the new Ibiza of today. There are racial undertones in every society but I think in Hackney, it's probably one of the most tolerant boroughs on the face of the earth. You have people from every corner of the earth just in Hackney. Within a square mile here, you can have a mosque a church and a synagogue.'

An average day in C.'s life consists of going to a drop-in centre, going to one of the churches that serve food or going to a friend's house and listen to music. But most of his day he is following the media and the news and he spends many hours walking around in Hackney, talking to people on the streets. He witnessed many changes in the borough, especially in the last couple of years in Dalston and he would say that he likes the gentrification of Hackney.

'I go for strolls. I stroll here, I stroll there, I stroll up to Dalston. I meet people at random and we'll have a conversation and you meet people from all different parts of the world with all different interests and it's very mentally stimulating. I think anything that's good for the economy within reason is brilliant. And plus we're getting so much more with it. We're getting a middle class and that can only improve the environment in general because middle class people are very protective of their environment. It can only be good.'

C.'s hardest challenge is to overcome his medication. He is on the maximum dose of Olanzapine. If he does not take it, he cannot sleep and relapses. He becomes manic, loses sleep, gets depressed, and cannot keep things in order. Once they gave him a depo injection but it made him try to commit suicide.

'I just couldn't sleep, my arm was shaking, I was shaking, and when I slashed my wrists to try and kill myself they took me off it and put me on Olanzapine.'

His bright spot is taking in the media and the news. Because of his situation, he hasn't really got a lot

of people to talk to about news. Sometimes he goes for a walk up to Dalston and sits in the square; here and there he meets like-minded people he can talk to.

Before our conversation C. asked me to publish this poem.

Upon the street corner there lived an old man,
a dark immigrant from the land of Sudan.
He used to tell stories to the children in the building,
but didn't have a penny to keep his pockets filled in.

He told them of the science of deuteronomy and astronomy
but didn't understand the basic principle was economy.
I said old wise man, Don't play the role of a fool,
the first thing a man must attain is twelve jewels.

Wisdom, knowledge and understanding,
Freedom, justice and equality,
Food clothing and shelter,
After this, love, peace and happiness.

He had a knot on his brain, I told him:
Total satisfaction in life was to achieve one goal
in the scheme of things,
He who works like a slave, eats like a king.

FUNMI is a 45-year-old woman of Nigerian origin who came to the UK in 2004 to claim asylum but was refused. She had to flee her country after she was threatened and someone burned her shop down. Funmi left her three daughters with her mother and has not seen them since.



In August 2013, she was evicted. She had been renting a room but when she came home one day, the landlord had changed the lock, so she couldn't get back in. After her eviction she and her son were sleeping in a church hall for a while. During this time the teacher noticed that Funmi's son was very upset and was not wearing school uniform. The teacher then approached the school social worker

Although she had a court order in her favour, the landlord continued to deny her access to the house, not even to pick up her possessions. A week after her first visit to HMC, Funmi was granted limited leave to remain for 30 months but with the condition of 'No Recourse to Public Funds' (NRPF). Due to this restriction she came back to HMC to seek, in addition to housing advice, support to lift the 'NRPF' condition. HMC's general advisor from Praxis explained

to her that she is entitled to be housed by Hackney social services as she has a 9 year old son.

'The school introduced me to the HMC, and when I came here the people did really a lot for me. Then they introduced me to Children's Society. HMC started to represent me at the Home Office.'

At the end of August 2013 she was finally granted leave to remain. During this time Hackney Children's Social Care placed Funmi and her son in a temporary accommodation in a double room in a hotel with no kitchen while they continued searching for an alternative. As she was not eligible for

any benefit and not able to work, she was struggling to pay for food and to provide her son with what he needed to attend school. Funmi also owed £450 to her previous solicitor who made her Article 8 application base on her child being in the UK 7 years in October 2012. Although she was eligible for legal aid she had to pay the solicitor privately. Because of her debts the solicitors withheld her biometric residence permit and only after she paid £150 they agreed to give back her biometric card but not her other documents.

'It was great, HMC introduced me to the Children's Society who represented me at the Home Office and supported me with social services.'

Because of Funmi's desperate financial and housing situation, HMC referred her to the New Londoners Programme run by the Children's Society. They agreed to take on her case and work in partnership with HMC to support Funmi as much as possible. The Children's Society helped her to find a new solicitor to get her 'NRPF' lifted and continued to write letters to the Home Office, while HMC's welfare solicitor from HCLC started to represent her in order to find her an accommodation and to arrange an appointment to pick up her possessions.

'I really thank HMC and the Children's Society. They did a lot for me and my son.'



sed to go straight to the landlord, Hackney council was not paying his rent. He only realised that because the landlord took him to court 6 times in 9 months. Eventually the court made him homeless. Since then he has been temporarily housed in a St. Mungo's hostel.

'Technically I have been deemed homeless by the government's definition for 7-8 years...and that because Hackney council didn't pay my rent.'

GRANT is a long-term Hackney resident, a NLAH service user as well as a current board member and, above all, a writer. He has been living in Hackney for almost 20 years. In 1994, after he lost his flat, a friend told him about a nice and affordable flat in Hackney.

'Back then Hackney had a bad reputation, it had a lot of crime and it was poor, it was scruffy. Anyway, I moved to Hackney because it was there, it came up and I had this offer that was cheap enough for me to take it.'

After five years, he was allocated social housing where he lived for another five years. Apparently, although the money was suppo-

When Grant started to go to NLAH he was attending a compulsory training course for the unemployed. He 'had to report every day and then sit in a room from 9.30am to 4.30pm pretending to look for a job. It was not of any help whatsoever to anyone who was unemployed.'

'I have a background in social care but I didn't want to go back into that. But I'd been out of work for some time, so I perhaps didn't see myself as very employable anyway. I was knocking out the odd application here and there but frankly I didn't give a stuff — I'd got used to living on benefits. I felt didn't have any agency—and that's essentially how these people expect you to feel. I'm not trying to make a politi-

cal point here, but you've got however many millions of people on the dole who are out of work, that's an utter and complete waste.'

He says his career trajectory—from unemployed and computer illiterate to a front page by-line in the Hackney Citizen in less than two years—is a testament to the community support he's received from places like NLAH and the East London social enterprise business where he works, Poached Creative.

'I can probably get the opportunities I need through my own network and I am lucky, I am incredibly lucky about that and the reason why I have been able to get this opportunities in part is down to NLAH. It was them who got me studying at City Lit and I got a couple of NVQs at City Lit. I haven't been near a class room for 25 years. I have done work for Shelter through them, it was them who got me involved with Poached Creative, it was them who got me doing public addresses in St. Paul's church and I haven't got a religious bone in my body. And that comes in part of who I am but also in part of what NLAH was able to allow me access to. I regard myself as really lucky.'

Grant's story of success is a great example of how supportive local networks and community projects can be, how these local organisations liaise and the importance of their existence in the borough.

'Because I was really fed up, Bill Rashleigh [chair of NLAH] told me about Jess Smith—they had been colleagues years before at Shelter. He knew that Jess was running Poached Creative and that she offered training for people who were unemployed. I saw it as a way of getting out of doing the government thing because that was sending me up the wall.'

One day Jess came up with the idea to set up a blog about being unemployed and Grant's reaction was *'What's the point, who gives a shit?'* After more than three years the blog with the appellative name *'In My Shoes'* is still ongoing. Thanks to his blog Grant drew the attention of the publisher of the Hackney Citizen who asked Grant to start writing for them too.

'So...there I was front page on the local paper. That just wouldn't have come about without Jess' support. I was [once] just languishing on benefits and not leading a useful life in any way, shape or form. And

I think that's probably true of an awful lot of people. Because these people find themselves out of work and they don't get access to training and they're kind of cast aside by the state. And you've got thousands of people just languishing on the side lines of society and that to me is unacceptable.'

Grant's experience of homelessness was a 'forlorn individual sat in the underpass that leads to the tube with cardboard signs asking for money, written on the sign in marker pen. Then there was the embarrassment - I couldn't for the life of me think of a time I'd asked for charity.'

When he first went to NLAH it was busy and welcoming, friendly even, everyone seemed relaxed. It was a little bit like a restaurant. Tables laid, people sat down and a meal was brought, course by course.

A few years ago Alistair Murray [member of the board] put forward the idea of having user representatives on the management committee. The idea was that they are more likely to be aware of issues that are users of NLAH are facing but also grievances and dissatisfaction with NLAH in ge-

neral. Grant is well liked among the service users and his opinion is valued, so it seemed to be reasonable that he became a board member.

'Due to the fact that I liked this place I continued to go even though I couldn't claim to be in desperate need. NLAH is used by a surprisingly large number of people from all manner of backgrounds and age groups. Each person who goes along has their own reasons. There are dozens of stories I could tell you about his place, there's all manner of weird and wonderful people who go there.'

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