

# COVID The First Six Months



MANCHESTER CITY OF SANCTUARY



**Manchester**  
**City of Sanctuary**  
Charity No: 1168839



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# INTRODUCTION

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Manchester City of Sanctuary (MCoS) is a non-religious organisation that works to create a more inclusive and welcoming city to those seeking sanctuary, whilst supporting the development of positive mental health and wellbeing practices. We recognise the challenges, barriers and trauma that our beneficiaries have experienced and continue to do so as they seek asylum in the UK. We seek to make Manchester a more welcoming place for asylum seekers and refugees by providing opportunities for connection, understanding and acceptance. Over the past 4 years, we've done this through the delivery of Conversation Clubs, Community Meals and countless workshops and sessions around creativity. These have increased integration in local communities, decreased social isolation and increased confidence and self-esteem for those we work with.

In March 2020, the 2019 Novel Coronavirus (henceforth COVID-19) led to the shutting down of the UK, plunging the country into 'lockdown'. The following restriction of movement was unlike anything since World War II, changing everything from how we work to popping to the shops. As such, this also meant that at MCoS we have had to change our approach to our Conversation Clubs and the services we can provide generally.

This report will outline the approaches we have taken during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the results of our interventions, and how we will move forward into the uncertain future. Further restrictions to movement due to COVID-19 are unclear; however, this report will outline how we are pivoting our operations to account for this possibility and be the most useful to the Sanctuary Seekers we support.

# AIMS OF REPORT

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The aim of this report is to capture the impact and effectiveness of the interventions we implemented during the first six months of the Covid-19 pandemic. Whilst this is inline with monitoring and evaluation requirements from some external funders, we appreciate the opportunity to employ best practice around reflection and assessment of our services. This report can also be used as an internal progress report, demonstrating activities and results from March to August 2020. With this in mind, this report will focus on;

- Referrals to food banks during the COVID-19 'lockdown'
- The digitisation of social sessions
- Our 'Check in and Chat' programme
- The results of the COVID-19 survey undertaken in June-August 2020
- Outcomes of all of the above

*'Amy is wonderful – the yoga classes are the best thing ever, I can't thank you enough. Honestly, it's better than medicine'*

*–Marie*

# WHAT WE DID

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Our response to the COVID-19 pandemic and how it changed our activity has been multi-faceted, utilising both volunteer and staff resources. The main areas of innovation and change are outlined in this section; this is not, however, an exhaustive list of day-to-day activities.

## REFERRALS TO FOOD BANKS

One of the first courses of action taken by MCoS was to refer users to food banks where they could not make it to the shops themselves or were financially struggling. This initiative began early into the COVID-19 pandemic, with the first referral made on the 14th April 2020. Over the subsequent three months, 42 referrals were made to 2 organisations in the Greater Manchester area (Mustard Tree and Bury Council). Of these referrals, 37 were repeat referrals. Four of the referrals requested food for multiple people, demonstrating a positive knock-on effect to family members or cohabitators.

Whilst we do occasionally refer people to food bank services, it was quick clear that the increase in need was in direct response to the lockdown. As many of our clients are from the BAME community, they were much more vulnerable to the virus. Adding to this were regular instances of people having underlying health issues, as well as poor mental health as a result of lack of clarity around the Home Office's decision on their case. It was also evident that any other interventions or services we hoped to offer, would have reduced positive impact until people's basic needs and concerns around accessing food were met.

# SOCIAL SESSIONS

The COVID-19 related lockdown meant that our usual social sessions had to go online to continue. We have been using Zoom to facilitate these, as a widely accessible and safe platform that easily facilitates conversation and interaction. Social sessions have ranged from the long-standing Ladies Coffee Morning to a series of online yoga sessions facilitated by Amy Merone, a professional yoga instructor. The table below outlines the frequency and average attendance of the range of social sessions provided from May to August 2020.

Name Of Social Session	Number of Social Sessions	Average Amount of Attendees	Number of Attendees at Most Recent Session	Date of Best Attended Session	Number of Attendees at Best Attended Session
Ladies Coffee Morning	14	3	3	15th June 2020 and 13th June 2020	5
Art With MMU	2	5.5	5	19th June 2020	6
Music With OMF	3	4.6	5	14th July 2020	5
Yoga With Amy	4	3.75	4	5th August 2020	6
Self Defence	2	5.5	5	5th August 2020	6
Social Session	13	4.2	6	2nd July 2020	9

Table 1 - online social sessions figures

The total amount of attendees for sessions from May to August was 146. As demonstrated above, the attendee figures for most social sessions have improved over time, with the number of attendees at the most recent session being the same as or higher than the average. The exceptions to these are the Self Defence class and Art With MMU, which were both self-contained sessions delivered in partnership with another organisation. Yoga with Amy and Art With MMU were also externally facilitated with a limited run on sessions, explaining the lower number of social sessions for these activities. The best attended session overall was the Social Session, perhaps due to its all-encompassing nature and slightly later time slot of 4pm.

*'The meeting was so interesting - we didn't event want to stop it'*

*-Cyrille*

*(Music session)*

All of the social sessions have been beneficial in terms of attracting repeat attendees, helping to reduce loneliness and establish a sense of routine. These benefits are compounded when users attend more than one type of social session- which 32% of users did in this period. The average user engaged with 1.8 types of sessions.

The most popular dates for each social session demonstrate that sessions are more popular when Greater Manchester is subject to stricter lockdown measures. Most of the social sessions with the highest attendance are from before the original lockdown lifted on the 23rd of June 2020, or after stricter lockdown measures were re-introduced, on the 31st of July 2020. This demonstrates higher engagement with on-line activities when face-to-face activities are limited.

## COVID-19 SURVEY AND DATA ASSISTANCE

In response to the challenges of providing social support during a time period where in-person meetings were banned, MCoS received funding to provide data top-ups to sanctuary seekers who were socially isolated, so that they could access and attend one of the on-line social sessions described above. This funding also allowed MCoS to provide IT hardware, primarily phones, to users who needed one, on the same condition of attending the social sessions. In order to understand which of our sanctuary seekers could benefit from this, we conducted a phone survey from June to August 2020, enquiring about struggles with data but also general wellbeing and the struggles of being in lockdown. While serving as a good way to generally check in with our sanctuary seekers, this also allowed us to understand common issues sanctuary seekers were facing and how we could potentially help.

# GENERAL SURVEY RESPONSES

Of the 142 people contacted, we had 60 conversations. Of these respondents 42 said that lockdown had made them feel more stressed than usual, which is an overwhelming 70%.

Compounding this, 40 respondents said that they had felt more lonely than usual, which is 66%.

We also asked respondents what some of the particular challenges they had been facing during lockdown were. Some of the most common challenges users reported during this time were boredom and isolation due to staying exclusively in the house, being scared of the unknown and the future of COVID-19, and access to food and amenities, usually provided through charities. Several respondents also mentioned that childcare and family requirements had been exacerbated due to the extra demands of living in lockdown.

14 respondents said that more social activities and social interaction would have made the lockdown period easier, showing a clear need for the on-line social sessions MCoS have been providing. Another thing respondents said would have made lockdown easier was having English lessons, as several respondents said the isolation was causing their English skills to deteriorate. Several respondents also reported that their normal channels for receiving food parcels and other practical support had been negatively impacted, and the lockdown period would have been easier if these had not been disrupted.

We also asked for some ways that MCoS had helped users over the lockdown period. One respondent said that they had loved keeping in contact with MCoS both on the phone and through Zoom sessions, and that it meant a lot to them that we had remembered them. Another respondent said that through the Zoom social sessions they had found comfort in talking to other people that were facing similar problems. These are two examples from the 15 respondents that said either phone or Zoom contact with others through MCoS have helped them during lockdown.

*'Wow – that was  
awesome – I'm  
really enjoying  
this'*

*–Shamim  
(yoga session)*

# DATA AND PHONE DISPERSAL

9 of the respondents to the phone survey were helped with data, after being identified as in need and willing to attend Zoom social sessions, understanding it as a requirement necessary for receiving the data. Of these users, 5 had multiple top-ups, with the most common amount of top-ups being 3 (the average amount was 2.6). This allowed users who received data to attend 40 on-line social sessions overall, with the average attended per person being 4.4. These numbers demonstrate the positive effect of distributing phone data on levels of social interaction, with most users helped with data attending multiple sessions over several weeks and months.

8 people received phones, allowing them to keep in contact with MCoS and reduce social isolation. All phones distributed were smartphones, allowing the sanctuary seeker to access the internet both for practical reasons and to access Zoom.

# CHECK-IN AND CHAT

As well as the Zoom socials, another way we have been helping to reduce isolation amongst our sanctuary seekers during the COVID-19 lockdown is Check In and Chat. This initiative has some of our established volunteers phoning beneficiaries once a week to have a general catch-up and talk through any issues they may be having, with volunteers signposting users to services or organisations that can help them. These conversations have been led by sanctuary seekers; some only wanted a brief check-in, others a more in-depth catch-up.

Over the lockdown period we had 8 volunteers carrying out weekly chats with 26 sanctuary seekers. As discussed in section 3.3.1, respondents to the survey provided feedback that this interaction was helpful to them over the course of lockdown and made the lockdown easier.

# OUTCOMES AND CONCLUSIONS OF COVID-19 SUPPORT

As displayed by the results of the phone survey outlined in this report, there is no question that COVID-19 and the associated lockdown posed significant and varied challenges to our sanctuary seekers. In order to fulfil our aims of creating a more inclusive and welcoming city and increasing social cohesion, it was clear that we would have to pivot our activities quickly and effectively.

Based on the feedback and statistics outlined in this report, it has been demonstrated over the course of lockdown that our programme of activities has helped to achieve our core aims during this period. Various statistics outlined in this report demonstrate the need from our sanctuary seekers to maintain social contact while being isolated within their household; the 146 total number of attendees for our Zoom social sessions show that we have helped fulfil that need. Positive feedback from users about the Check In and Chat also demonstrates how we have helped sanctuary seekers feel less isolated during a very isolating time.

A key conclusion to draw from this feedback is the need to be flexible going forward in terms of platforms for delivering social sessions. With the possibility of a second wave and further restrictions on in-person interaction in place in Greater Manchester likely to continue into September 2020 and potentially beyond, being able to quickly adapt to various restrictions will be key to carrying out our activities and fulfilling our goals as a charity.

Signposting sanctuary seekers to organisations that can help them with various issues is another of our key activities. The food bank referrals outlined in this report demonstrate that we have continued to signpost sanctuary seekers to key services. The feedback we received in the COVID-19 survey around the need for food parcels showed that sanctuary seekers were struggling more than ever to access food, with some being unable to travel to the shops due to shielding and others experiencing disruption to their normal interactions with organisations providing food.

*'Yes, it was so much fun!  
It reminded me of my childhood'*

*-Zahida  
(Dolls House Project)*

Another key conclusion to draw from the food bank referrals we have undertaken is the increased need for signposting and referring for essentials due to COVID-19 and the associated restrictions. Going forward, we will need to be mindful of this and expect an increase in need and time spent on food bank referrals in the case of a second wave or further lockdown.

Overall, the past 6 months of COVID-19 response has demonstrated the need to be flexible with our services and the particular needs of our sanctuary seekers in a more isolated environment. This period of experimentation has given us a good basis to provide flexible services in an uncertain future.

## LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

### Future Funding

Going forward, we are seeking funding which will allow us to carry on the programmes mentioned in this report surrounding providing phones and data, as well as diversifying Zoom or other on-line social sessions. We plan to offer a weekly schedule of up to 4 sessions that are linked to the NHS's '5 steps to mental wellbeing'. This will be co-delivered by external facilitators and MCoS volunteers.

### Consolidating relevant and meaningful offer of sessions

Recognising the need for a clear and consistent routine of support has led us to develop a robust and wide ranging offer of sessions. These will focus on physical activity, social connection and the learning of new skills. By linking these to the NHS 5 steps to wellbeing, these will operate within an established framework as to how and why we are offering these sessions. It will also help to refine the purpose and meaning of future social sessions. It provides an umbrella (?) around how and why we are offering this.

### People with Lived-Experience taking on a great decision-making role

In September we are looking to re-start our refugee and asylum seeker-led advisory group. This will ensure that we are putting sanctuary seekers in a central and influential role to our activities, in turn making sure that our activities are more user-led. This will allow us to be as effective as possible in fulfilling our central aims as a charity.

## Continue to develop partnerships and links with other organisations

So much of our work is relational, and as our USP within the refugee sector in Greater Manchester, we're really proud of the range and diversity of our partners. Having partnered with artists, musicians, yogis and librarians, amongst others, we feel that we really foster positive links between many different communities. This is powerful and ensures that greater understanding and connection takes place, between people and groups.

We continue to nourish our existing relationships and are keen to work on new ones. We have established some very robust ones that we continue to work with, to provide excellent workshops promoting an understanding of self, identity and belonging, as well as embarking on new ones where we have been exploring music as a form of expression.

Whatever we do, and whoever we work with, we consistently work to welcome those who receive a hostile reception from elsewhere.

## A NOTE OF THANKS

Firstly, a note of thanks to our wonderful volunteers, without whom the positive outcomes outlined in this report would not have been possible. From weekly Check In and Chat calls and signposting sanctuary seekers to food banks, to surveying over 140 of our sanctuary seekers, we could not have carried out our crucial activities in the past six months without you.

To all our partners and donors, a huge thank you for providing the foundation and making all the work undertaken in the past six months possible. We hope this report demonstrates just how impactful your help has been in this difficult and isolating time.

### Our Partners:

- Manchester Libraries
- Journeys Festival International
- Laurence Payot
- OddArts
- Laura Pickerill
- Amy Merone
- Rainbow Haven
- Tayyaba - Oxford Kickboxing Club
- Olympias Music Foundation
- Infinity Initiatives

### Our Donors:

- The National Lottery
- Community Support Fund
- Migration Exchange
- Forever Manchester
- Pennington Charitable Fund
- Magic Little Grants
- Groundworks - Comic Relief Community Fund

*'It was fantastic thanks. Another one will be good!'*

*-Andy  
(Self Defence)*