

“WHO IS GOING TO HEAR YOU?”: COMMUNITY CONSULTATION WITH MANCHESTER-BASED FAMILIES FACING MIGRANT DESTITUTION

Summary

In July 2025, the Greater Manchester Migrant Destitution Fund held a community consultation with families experiencing destitution because of their immigration status, to understand barriers to accessing statutory support.

Key findings were:

- Barriers to accessing social services support include **unawareness, fear, and gatekeeping**
- People face **barriers regularising status**, including difficulty accessing legal advice, delays in decisions, high visa fees, and fear of the asylum system in particular.
- People also face **barriers accessing healthcare** because of their status

Participants wanted to see:

- **Engagement from social services** to raise awareness and dispel fears
- Being given the **right to work** by the Home Office while waiting for a decision on an application for leave to remain
- Continuation of MDF's **grants programme**
- **Information** about the immigration system

Introduction

The GM Migrant Destitution Fund exists to offer dignity and hope to those forced into destitution by their immigration status. We shouldn't have to exist – everyone in our communities should have the right to support themselves and access a basic safety net.

Those accessing our grants programme include families with children who are not accessing any form of statutory support. In 2024-5, 54 families with children applied to the fund. Therefore, in July 2025, we asked a group of

Manchester-based families what barriers there were to accessing statutory support, especially support from social services under section 17 of the Children Act 1989 – which would be more adequate and sustainable than our grants. Participants currently had no leave to remain in the UK after their visa had expired.

The consultation was held at Equal Education Chances, one of MDF's referral partners, based in North Manchester, which supports children with disabilities, as well as doing wider work in the community. The trust people placed in EEC, and the support they had received from it, was crucial to making the event happen. We are enormously grateful to attendees for sharing their difficult experiences and putting time and thought into what needs to change. One key takeaway from the event was that these **voices have not been heard** – and we are committed to helping change that.

Our consultation built on a previous craftivism workshop we did on the impacts of destitution, also in partnership with Equal Education Chances. Experiences shared at that workshop included:

Helpless as a mum, I feel broken at times, and stigmatised.

The pain of being destitute. The kids don't understand what it means, they cry and throw tantrums. I have to bear the pain alone.

Our July 2025 community consultation aimed to take the next step towards working out what we can do about the issue. Although the question of barriers formed the starting point, the discussion proved more wide-ranging, with people sharing difficult experiences and emotions on a range of issues connected to their immigration status – with fear being an over-arching theme.

Barriers to accessing social services support

- People are unaware that section 17 support may be available

People expected that social services were there to take children away – there was no awareness of a positive support role. Indeed, participants reported that they are less afraid of the police than of social services.

- People are afraid that approaching social services will put them at risk from the Home Office

People fear that – being undocumented – they will be put at risk by social services information-sharing with the Home Office.

Participant 1: Social services say they will consult with the Home Office. That makes people afraid. When you read the letter and see Home Office, you cancel that letter.

Participant 2: It's a no-go area.

Participants were also aware that they had 'no recourse to public funds', so were concerned that accepting support from the local authority could bring trouble with the Home Office further down the line.

If you're undocumented, you're not entitled to public funds. You going to get those funds will get you trouble from the Home Office. People are fearing.

These fears confirm what we have heard from MDF referral partners. Our partners report that even people with pending applications with the Home Office may fear that accepting public funds could lead to a refusal of that application.

- Gatekeeping from social services

Only one person had experience of approaching social services. She had been referred by her child's school. Social services told her that they could not offer any support, as she had no recourse to public funds. She reported that they advised her to claim asylum. She did not do so, as she said she was afraid of the asylum system: *"I've heard a lot of stories about asylum."* Although this happened a few years ago, she has not tried approaching social services again since then, because she believes the NRPF label remains a block on receiving any support.

Other participants said that they would not even try to approach social services because they expected similar gatekeeping.

Social services will ask, Are you illegal? If you are, then they won't help you.

Barriers to regularising status

You have a problem and you can't get out of it.

Participants spoke of how easy it is to fall into destitution, and how hard it is to climb out of it.

As one participant put it, even if you come to the UK legally, “*you can be cut off by circumstances beyond your control*”. He had come on a visa and, for health reasons, been unable to meet the requirements of the visa. He had tried to seek advice to regularise his status but many solicitors he had approached demanded a fee.

Who's going to hear you? Who is going to hear your voice? No one is ready to listen to you.

In addition to the difficulty accessing legal advice, people also shared the impact of unresponsive or poor-quality solicitors.

The solicitor doesn't answer the phone, he tells me 'your case is useless', he's telling me you need more evidence. My daughter tells me to stop crying – she says, Mum, you're going through a lot of stress.

Participants talked about the cost of visas, which one person described as outrageous. This makes it harder to renew visas, and so easier to fall out of status and into destitution. It also makes it harder to put in an application to regularise status. Participants were not aware of the possibility of applying for a fee waiver, or how to do so.

Participants also talked about the delays in the Home Office making decisions. If an application has been made to regularise status, people still have no right to work or access benefits while waiting for a decision.

You can be a year pending, not hearing from anyone – no feedback. So you are afraid. Day and night you are crying. It would be easier to know you have been rejected.

Participants were aware that claiming asylum was one pathway out of destitution. But there was widespread fear in the room about the asylum system. Participants knew people who had claimed asylum, been placed in a hotel, and then been refused – and either evicted back into destitution or

deported. Participants said that they did not understand the asylum process and asked where they could find information about it.

They might clamp you.

One participant had spent time in the asylum system, which she described as a “free gaol”. In response to her story, the lady who had been advised by social services to claim asylum stated: “All those stories will make you want to stay back.”

Is there any hope for us?

Challenges of living in destitution

- Participants spoke about the effects of destitution on their children

As children do not understand the situation, they blame their parents. People expressed concern that their children could end up in gangs because of their difficult childhoods.

What future do these children have?

- With no statutory support, people are forced into dependency on others

Participants shared difficult experiences of sofa surfing, including situations where they were only allowed to stay in the house at night and were expected to leave in the daytime. People also talked about the expectation from host families that they should pay rent, even though they are destitute.

They started collecting money from me – and I said no one is helping me. People are suffering in silence.

- We also heard about the care within communities

With barriers to accessing statutory support, the burden of supporting people forced into destitution is often carried by people in the community, who may themselves be facing financial hardship.

One lady shared a story of how she encountered a man in the city-centre who

was very upset, as he could not afford his medication. He was working for just £5 per hour in security, but had not been paid. Although she herself was destitute, she had just received her MDF money for the month, so gave a portion to him.

How can you subject someone to that?

- **People face barriers accessing healthcare**

One lady had had surgery after a medical emergency and was billed £6000. She could only pay £300, and promised to pay £20 per month after that. However, the Home Office kept calling her saying that she owed money. Experiences like this make people afraid of accessing healthcare when they need it.

We are scaring to ask for help.

Others said that they could not get free prescriptions for themselves or their children because they had no recourse to public funds. They were not aware that they could apply for a HC2 certificate.

We can't explain how much we're struggling.

What needs to be done

Participants had strong ideas about what needs to be done. Above all, there was a sense that participants' voices need to be heard. Specific demands voiced were:

- **Social services** should **engage with the community** to provide **transparency** about support available, referral pathways and any risks attached. This needs to be in **a trusted space** such as Equal Education Chances. People spoke of the work the police has done to engage communities as a positive model.

They need to come out and explain what they are meant for, that they're not here to take your children away!

- The **Home Office** should **allow people to work** while they are waiting for a decision on an application. Participants were well aware of the labour shortages, especially in the health and social care sector, and there was a sense of frustration that they are blocked from filling these vacancies.

Participant 1: If they would let me work, I wouldn't need money! Allow them to work, and then they will pay taxes.

Participant 2: If you're working, you wouldn't need MDF!

Participant 3: I would donate to MDF!

- The **Migrant Destitution Fund** should continue to support people and increase the amount available. It was a particularly difficult time to be doing the consultation, as MDF's grants programme was paused for the summer. While many participants expressed gratitude for the fund, there was a strong sense also that it should operate all year round.
- **Information** needs to be actively disseminated within the community – including information about the asylum and immigration system, about social services support, and about rights to healthcare.