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**SDCAS**

Southwark Day Centre  
for Asylum Seekers

**Stories from lockdown: the impact of the Covid19  
pandemic on the well-being of clients at  
Southwark Day Centre for Asylum Seekers (SDCAS)**

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## Introduction

This research grew from our desire to understand how the past year (March 2020-March 2021) has affected clients at the Southwark Day Centre for Asylum Seekers (SDCAS). We were particularly interested in how the 'lockdowns' had impacted on the well-being of clients. It was clearly not realistic to interview all the clients, so we chose to interview a small number of clients in depth to attempt to get at their experiences of the lockdown and to hear their voices directly. Thus, the research takes the form of stories of life during the pandemic from 5 clients interviewed in February and March 2021. We also interviewed the Director of SDCAS who provided information about the services provided by SDCAS during the lockdowns and gave us a sense of the changing situations across the year and some of the challenges faced by staff and volunteers during this period. Interviews were conducted remotely, recorded, and analysed and the interview data was then categorised around the following areas: housing, finances, food, social contact, mental and physical health, and the role of SDCAS in supporting clients. Although we asked clients for their experiences of SDCAS during the different lockdowns it was difficult for some of them to distinguish between first, second and third lockdowns – as it is for all of us - so we have not separated the different phases when quoting their experiences. Thus, the comments from the clients cover the period from March 2020 to March 2021 and details of their changing situations during this time.

## Well-being

In our previous research (Inman and Rogers (2015), Cogo, Inman, Mc Cormack and Rogers (2017 and 2019) we have explored the well-being of clients and had focussed particularly on the role of SDCAS in contributing to the clients well-being. In this current work we use the same notion of well-being in understanding the experience of clients during the lockdown. Briefly we see well-being as being like a see saw where one end has the psychological, physical and social resources balanced against the psychological, physical and social challenges at the other end (Dodge et al 2012: 230) We combined this with the work on well-being from the New Economics Foundation (NEF) which expresses well-being as:

*“How people feel and how they function, both on a personal and a social level, and how they evaluate their lives as a whole. To break this down, how people feel refers to emotions such as happiness or anxiety. How people function refers to things such as their sense of competence or their sense of being connected to those around them. How people evaluate their life as a whole is captured in their satisfaction with their lives, or how they rate their lives in comparison with the best possible life.” (Michaelson et al 2012 p.6).*

The lockdowns have been hard for everyone but clients of SDCAS face particular challenges because of their situation.

As one of the clients puts it:

*I'm just worried about my well-being, like...in terms of my accommodation, work and doing things for myself. I want to achieve certain things that affect me, so my future become bright. Client E*

## **The interviewees**

### Client A

Home country: Guinea West Africa  
Gender: Female  
Time in UK: Since 2002 - 19 years

### Client B

Home country: Iran  
Gender: Male  
Time in UK: 2003

### Client C

Home country: Algeria  
Gender: Male  
Time in UK: Ten years

### Client D

Home country: Angola  
Gender: Female  
Time in UK: Arrived before 2019

### Client E

Home country: Sierra Leone West Africa  
Gender: Male  
Time in UK: Arrived 2012

## **Practical challenges**

The interviews show constant difficulties and worries with housing and money. Clients comment on receiving very small amounts of money and struggling with basic needs like accommodation and food:

*I only survived through people I met and made friends with. Some of them help me with food, you know this country of course, for people to give you money you know it is very difficult. I only get like help with food...so money is...maybe once in a while they give you £10.00 you understand. That's the way I was coping with my life at that time, to be honest. Client E*

Even clients with accommodation and a small income expressed their difficulties with money. For instance, Client C, who has a small job and income, cannot get enough money to support himself and his family:

*When it started you know everything was closed then I felt without nothing, because I don't have no benefit no nothing, and then I did apply for it, it took about four or five months to get the answer from them, yeah. Client C*

## Accommodation

Clients have had different experiences with housing. A client describes his lack of accommodation and living in the street before getting help from SDCAS and another explains his experience of living in overcrowded accommodation:

*There was a time when I was without any support I was sleeping in the street ...before I came to SDCAS...oh it's very hard I can't describe yeah sometimes I didn't eat anything. Client B*

*So some days anyway we are like in the room, one small living room so they used to sleeping together in that small room and me and my wife in the other one it was like. Client C*

It is also very typical for clients to have changing housing situations, from living with friends to government housing and other places. This is also perceived as a problem and affecting clients' well-being:

*Well before I was living with one of my friends....I was sleeping on his floor. But unfortunately my friend asked me to move out, so I was struggling, struggling by then. So unfortunately I think they made contact with Migrant Help, then since then, after some time they help me out with accommodation, move me to a hotel, which I've been in the hotel for almost six months, then from the hotel they take me to another place where I am living now at the moment. Client E*

*At that time I was struggling from one place to another...live from one place to another. Client E*

*In the first lockdown I had somewhere to stay, accommodation from the council but the gangs attacked the house 6 times, frightening me with horrible language. I told council, I told the GP I told the therapist and they write letter to the council said they would rehouse me but still waiting that now. Client A*

*I call this friend I say please accept me and I can come and stay with you and he say, oh no I have only a 2-bedroom flat I say I can stay on the sofa no problem because I can find myself safe, but they ask them all the time oh you must find a place where to go. I am still begging them please accept me let me stay until I find a place I don't know when getting a place where is safe. Client A*

Another one describes the experience of the camp and then hotel accommodation:

*Now I'm staying in the hotel. For ten months I'm in a hotel. I thank God for all the wonder work they are doing for me. They help with care, so many people, some are sick and they have mental health problem ... I think, last month, until last year, December something, they put asylum in Kent, like a camp, a military camp, you know, so many the tent were so tiny and so many, many issues in this lockdown. Make everyone stressed, depressed, anxiety. Because if we didn't have ... I don't know what the Government are doing because they need to look, to acknowledge it, to look at the issues. Client D*

*Listen because I thank God because the Southwark Charity. They put me in a safe place, I'm very safe now. The place they have security on the door, someone clean your room... Client D*

For some clients, hotel accommodation can be a problem because of the family situation:

*Well actually my main priority if they can help me with accommodation because just as I was saying accommodation and some substance, some financial substance, as you know for me to get my daughter, I don't even play a part in her life you understand so for like a bit of help, you know it's not easy to raise kids in this town. Sometimes I wanted my daughter to come and spend time with me, but there was no convenient accommodation where I can ask her mum to bring her to me and spend some time. Client E*

*Interviewer: So presumably at the hotel it's just you that can go in and out, you can't have visitors?*

*Exactly that's my main concern that it was really stressing me because for you not to see your daughter, not spend time with your daughter. Client E*

## **Food**

SDCAS provided food as a food bank service throughout the pandemic. Help received from SDCAS is mentioned by clients as emergency support during this difficult time:

*So I used to go to the SDCAS, she give me some food some stuff like this, she used to help me like every week and then with the friends so I survived for five months like this. Client C*

*Interviewer: I think you said a little bit about some of the support you got from the SDCAS. You got some food, you go there for food. Was there any other sort of support they gave you?*

*They give me sometime £30, a week...again that was from the SDCAS, yeah. Client C*

Friends and acquaintances are also sources of help for food and accommodation. One client mentions friends as sources of food and cooking:

*Sometimes I get things for example get food it comes by delivery yes to me ... my friend come in cooking for me an sometime. Client B*

SDCAS also prepares food in parcels and delivers it. For some clients access to warm food is a problem especially if they live in hotels and for others the problem is collecting food and SDCAS helps with delivery:

*They don't cook here. They bring the packed food, and they warm it in a microwave. Southwark Charity, they still contact me, you know, like at Christmas I went to there and I collect my Christmas thing you know. So, so very helpful. Client D*

## **Health**

We asked clients how the lockdown affected their social interaction with others. They described feeling isolated and lonely, often made worse by their living conditions. Social interaction for everyone is difficult during the lockdown as our contact with many friends and family is limited to phone calls, Zoom etc. For the client's life is

even more difficult due to their financial situations, limited access to digital communication, isolation etc. Most of the clients we interviewed described SDCAS as central to their lives, the most important place where they can make and sustain friendships so not being able to go there except to collect food or to seek advice has had a severe impact on their lives. For clients SDCAS represents a place where they feel safe and welcome, can socialise with others and get support staff and from other clients in similar conditions:

*When it is open (SDCAS) I go there, I socialise with other people I get lunch there and come back. I go SDCAS in Peckham and sometimes when I go there...I see there people from different background, black people, white people. We all communicate, sometimes we chat and have lunch and it takes my mind off little thinking. Client A*

*I have a lot of friends. At the Charity, everywhere I have got my friends. I remember one of the ladies. But I didn't know the lady who died. When I started. I didn't know the lady. When I went to the funeral. We decorate the church and do everything. That was like my second day to go to that Charity you know. Everyone good there "Oh, you are the only one to come" ... all day I stayed there and did everything, all the decorating. Amazing people. They care. And friends at the church. Before I used to go to, I liked to go to voluntary work. But since lockdown everything, you know, you cannot go. I used to go to help the little children. Everything you see. If someone doesn't come you have to cover everything you know. Because it relaxed my mind to let a new thing, make a new friend. I'm looking forward to receive my stay and go back to work and to contribute to the society. To give back to the Charity. Yes. Client D*

*I went (to SDCAS) before the lockdown it's like get help from them sometimes we eat there socialising and meet people yeah now it's not, everything is messed up everything is mixed, yeah we like to see the people Yep everyone together yeah be different, different people yeah. Client B*

*When this lockdown is open again I will be able have someone to talk to sometimes I feel so lonely. I feel so so low, the doctor is someone I can share...after lockdown sometimes I can take the bus to different places and when I'm ok then come back home. But the lockdown is very hard. when I do the yoga with the therapist that makes me relax and take my mind out of the thinking and sometimes talk to B (SDCAS staff member) I have one friend she has a son I can't go up to the house because of lockdown I used to go to the house and we sit and we talk and sometimes we have lunch there and sometimes she comes to mine but because I am no longer live in my flat it is very difficult. Client A*

Clients described the mental health problems they suffered during the lockdown:

*The lockdown do affect me a lot before I used to go the day SDCAS and used to go my therapist, B (SDCAS staff) arrange for working and sometimes I go and do some exercise lockdown affect me in lots of things and have no outside here and I lost appetite and sometimes I get headache, sometimes panic disorder. It's very difficult. It get worse, its worse never seen something like this before. I used to be worry all the time but this give me more worry*

*about ....can't go out, you have to stay indoors not much you can do and sometimes I do cry a lot, I cry a lot if you are in the middle of the family or you have a partner you have someone to share it with but by yourself and its very very difficult...I feel very sad. Client A*

Client A goes on to describe how the lockdown has made the paranoia she often feels much worse:

*Everything time I try to feel better something comes back that I never expect and that makes me even more paranoid even more anywhere go in a shop I have to wash my hands more than 10 times a day if everywhere I wash my hands if I dirty a cup I have to wash my hands and the lockdown it drags my mental health more and more and more and more and more and more get paranoid... don't go outside enough don't doing enough exercise you can't eat properly sometimes I only eat once a day and that I have to force have to force I have toast, half a piece of toast to eat I say if I don't eat maybe I will collapse and I eat a little bit and drink water lots of water and take sometimes some medication and that keeps me a little bit I hope someday it will change for me because it's been going too long. And sometimes you are scared to tell someone you have mental health because once you've said that they start judging you and they don't know who you are and that's why you have to keep everything inside you and keeping everything inside you is killer- you have to go and talk with someone even just one hour about what is thinking in your head. Client A*

*Well actually it was not easy for me...at that time I was really stressed up, I'm a strong person, I'm a person that sometimes personally my situation, my circumstances, but it was not really easy for me, to be honest. Client E*

*It was very difficult I was always at home, until now cause I have voices playing my head and I have my back problem, I'm on lot of medication: everything is very difficult for me too today I have back pain, I'm struggling my mind is cracked, always tired out, do nothing my head is banging, I hear lots of voices really living alone I think 100 people come into my house banging the door like that's horrible. Client B*

## **Support from Southwark Day Centre for Asylum Seekers (SDCAS)**

The services provided by SDCAS during the lockdowns were very often the only support clients could obtain. The clients we interviewed talked at length about the range of support offered to them during these very difficult times and how SDCAS became a lifeline for some of them. SDCAS provided food, money, clothes and household goods, advice including help with housing and immigration problems, and most important of all a 'place', even though not always physical, which gave clients a sense of hope, care and love. One of the clients described SDCAS as a family which keeps them safe and protects them as much as possible from the harsh realities of life for asylum seekers and refugees during the pandemic.

For the clients one of the main areas of support has been the concrete material day to day support in terms of food, money, clothes, household necessities etc.:



*Yeah you can't go out, you can't do nothing, you can't work, you can't do like whatever...so I used to go to B, she give me some food some stuff like this, she used to help me like every week and then with the friends so I survived for five months like this, four months I think or almost five months. So like support from the SDCAS...basically at the moment they give me, I get a lot of things from them them, from the SDCAS. It was very helpful to me. Client B*

*Even when I start going to B they're actually the only support I get is from them, to be honest with you I didn't get any support from anybody, unless what they give to me that is what I manage my life and survive through. I don't get any support from anybody at that time...no financial support for me to be honest. Client C*

*Listen because I thank God because the Southwark Charity ....., they still contact me, you know, like at Christmas I went to there and I collect my Christmas thing you know. So, so very helpful. Thank you, thank you, thank you. Client D*

SDCAS has been a major form of support for clients who are lonely, depressed and/or have mental health difficulties, all of which have been deepened by the lockdowns:

*SDCAS means a lot like your family you know when you go there you know you're thinking, you are enjoying the people if you have problems you can tell them, its like family they don't expose you. And sometimes you are scared to tell someone you have mental health because once you've said that they start judging you and they don't know who you are and that's why you have to keep everything inside you and keeping everything inside you is killer- you have to go and talk with someone even just one hour about what is thinking in your head. They do a lot they are like family I think without them I don't know where I would be at the moment. they help me in everything, they support me they save me cos one moment I was thinking of ending it but they always there saying everything will be alright it's just a matter of time and when I come I believe in them sorry (crying) yes very important to me they like a family. Client A*

The clients also described the range of different support they have received from SDCAS during this period:

*They are covering everything to be honest. I don't know which things you didn't cover so far. It's true. If you go for immigration there are people for immigration. If you go for counselling they give you counselling. Any problem. I saw people there they come in to talk about electricity bills and something like this they call the company and help them. Even with like writing letters or something. They give you direction for everything. Hopefully it will keep like this. Fingers crossed. Client C*

*They do a lot they are like family I think without them I don't know where I would be at the moment. When I lost my job I have no house I have no money I have nowhere to stay I have not my papers, I have nothing but when I go there they tell me everything will be ok. Client A*

*To be honest they help me with many things - advice and anything I need like contacting. B she applies for me things or like make for me appointments with the people like the solicitors or something like this. Client C*

*Thank you, thank you, thank you. Southwark who protect us, who protect many lives you know. From everything we need. They look after everyone of us properly. You know, they call you, you know, they email you, they text you. I thank God for the work that they are doing. It is super, super wonderful work. They call me, they text me, like now, they came delivering me a bike you know. This morning you know. Very good. During this time I think the charity have done a lot. They are still doing for me. To help us this charity I'm thankful for this charity, this Southwark charity. I think because I know this charity, like the food bank, it helps a lot if someone is seeking refugee because if we didn't have this charity I think it's supposed to be more, more problems. Through the charity like they fight back... the Government, what are they doing you know. I thank for all the support and help, to help us you know to be settled in this country. Client D*

Whilst the provision of food, money, advice etc was clearly vital support for the clients. It is more than this. The clients we interviewed talked about the manner in which these services were given-. In earlier research reports we have described the importance of the ethos of SDCAS for clients. The sense of welcome, safety and equality they experienced. In our conclusions to this report we said the following

*Perhaps the most important finding of the research is the overriding importance of the manner in which SDCAS operates in providing advice and advocacy. The holistic approach to support derives from a strong culture and ethos which involves a welcoming atmosphere; empathy and sensitivity; opportunities for clients to gain confidence and self-esteem; provision of a place of safety and friendship; a lived commitment to equality and inclusion; care and responsiveness; enabling engagement and ownership; and a sense of purpose. It is these things which together give SDCAS a unique identity for clients and maybe distinguishes it from what might appear to be similar provision elsewhere. (Inman and Rogers 2015)*

The same culture and ethos have been at SDCAS through the support SDCAS has given to clients during the lockdowns:

*During this time I think the charity have done a lot. They are still doing it for me. The genuine love that come from inside their hearts. They are giving us amazing ... I appreciate everything really. I want the Charity to move forward, because if this country have no charity, hmm, too much problem but through the charity everything working, working fast, fast. Thank you, thank you for everything. Client D*

*They do a lot they are like family I think without them I don't know where I would be at the moment. Client A*

## **The role of SDCAS**

Pauline Nandoo, Director of the SDCAS, was interviewed in February 2021 before any of the client interviews took place. The purpose of the interview was to enable us

to get a picture of how SDCAS operated during the lockdowns so as to provide a context for the client interviews.

### **Clients visiting SDCAS**

Pauline reported that the flow of clients visiting SDCAS was steady throughout the restrictions:

*When we opened in April we were seeing 90 at the door each week roughly, actually supporting about 250 altogether with deliveries and the children involved. That seemed to have remained stable between 90 and 100 each week. Then in the second lockdown that seemed to increase by about 30% ... it could just be that more people know about the service, but throughout the whole period we have probably given out about 3,500 food parcels / emergency packs.*

Although there wasn't a marked difference in numbers of clients throughout the different stages of restrictions there were probably at least 10% new clients at every weekly session. And when, in addition to regular clients, EU nationals turned up SDCAS had to adapt to a new situation:

*We also had to kind of revisit our aims, who are we here to support, and make sure we support those that fit the criteria, being asylum seekers, refugees, destitute or not on benefits and so on ... like many agencies that are doing this kind of service, we put more resources into managing the queues outside, a bit like the banks where you find out what their needs are and you fill in between so we were doing that. I think that the majority of EU nationals we would have as a one off and then refer them on, so not necessarily turning them away that day, but also trying to pick up on those EU nationals that have irregular employment and because of Covid those kinds of contracts have gone and they were turning up. So, it's about making those difficult decisions. In the early stages of lockdown there were more services, so you could refer out, you could say go to that food bank or the other, and that changed throughout the various stages of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> tier, lots of services were only open temporarily.*

### **Changes in client needs and safety**

Pauline told us that SDCAS had to temporarily stop providing advice because they were not set up to work remotely at that time. They provided food, toiletries etc. and cash; ran a food bank; and delivered some food parcels to those who were not able to collect them including those who found themselves placed out of borough. They were able to link these clients with support locally such as the mutual aid groups that were popping up and to provide emergency packs (funded) including food deliveries, money, Oyster cards nappies and toiletries for children and also PPE and sanitisers.

As the pandemic continued the needs of the clients changed:

*There was confusion with the guidelines what we could and couldn't do, we were conscious that we had clients that weren't able to meet their deadlines in terms of immigration and then everything slowed down in terms of legal funds,*

*as everything came to a halt, there was no communication with the home office and we were concerned that there were advice needs that we needed to address.*

*It's still the same kind of issues that we are addressing but everything is slower. You can't refer people on as easily as you could before. The whole purpose of the charity. As the whole purpose of the charity is to integrate people and now this is a set-back, people have to isolate and they can't do that very well either.*

SDCAS was required to meet a complex set of changing needs and issues including exploitation of clients and serious mental health issues:

*There was definitely an increase of exploitation for this (particular) client group, in terms of exploiting people illegally in terms of work, trafficking and the rest of it. In the period when services closed down it left people more vulnerable to this kind of exploitation. So all sorts of needs that were not picked up on ... we know there is a high level of mental issues again, suicide is coming up again and people are crying a lot when our advisers ring them ... because the schools were closed in the beginning and parents were looking after children in these horrible shelters and that was really difficult for the parents especially if they already had additional health issues. is coming up again and people are crying a lot when our advisers ring them. Suicide Also, schools were closed in the beginning and parents were looking after children in these horrible shelters and that was really difficult for the parents especially if they already had additional health issues.*

### **Advice and advocacy**

In 'normal' times over 100 people per month would be seen at SDCAS for advice supported by other agencies. During the pandemic SDCAS was working with 80 people per month with a backlog of people needing immigration advice:

*Immigration advisers are doing legal aid work for asylum cases but finding solicitors is very difficult. Legal aid is what covers asylum, so on our list of 80 people that need advice a high proportion of them, say 70%, are immigration, so there is nothing we can really offer at the moment because it's all just slowed down.... even if they did find the solicitors then they'd have to produce all the documents via email and many people who live in these hostels do not have Wi-Fi, it's very messy. So across the sector it's become a big challenge of how we protect people digitally.*

Staff found themselves having to deal with advice issues on their own instead of discussing the issues and working together although SDCAS has been striving to put clinical supervision for staff in for all staff during the past few months. In addition, new advice issues arose for working with clients living in hotels:

*We are still dealing with homeless clients and we were relying heavily on hosting schemes for the past few years and with Covid they decided they*

*were not going to accept any new people. We are linked into GLA meetings, the council and they put people in this Covid hotels, but that's created a new advice problem because they are not actually great. There are still other issues there, they are in the hotels but some can't wash their clothes or they are not being fed properly, so we are supplementing that. In 'normal' times 50 people per month would be seen at SDCAS for advice, supported by other agencies. During the pandemic SDCAS was working with 80 people per month with a backlog of 80 people:*

*Immigration advisers are doing legal aid work. Legal aid is what covers asylum, so on our list of 80 people that need advice a high proportion of them, say 70%, are immigration, so there is nothing we can really offer at the moment because it's all just slowed down.... even if they did find the solicitors then they'd have to produce all the documents via email and many people who live in these hostels do not have Wi-Fi, it's very messy. So across the sector it's become a big challenge of how we protect people digitally.*

Staff found themselves having to deal with advice issues on their own instead of discussing the issues and working together although SDCAS has been able to put clinical supervision for staff in place during the past few months. In addition, new advice issues arose for working with clients living in hotels:

*We are still dealing with homeless clients and we were relying heavily on hosting schemes for the past few year and with Covid they decided they were not going to accept any new people. We have had help from the GLA the council and everyone they put people in these Covid hotels, but that's created a new advice problem because they are not actually great. There are still other issues there, they are in the hotels but they can't wash their clothes or they are not being fed properly, so we are supplementing that.*

### **Impact on staff and volunteers**

In addition to the mental and physical impact on the clients SDCAS staff found working to support clients within the restrictions extremely hard:

*I think you kind of just got this huge cloud of Covid just hanging over you and feeling unsafe, not sure if you are doing the right thing sometimes. Everyone is motivated and bringing a lot of commitment to the job and volunteers wanted to help and so on, but we were learning to adapt and reshape the service so that was a challenge and feeling you couldn't help people properly, so there were lots of questions and not many answers.*

The staff were having to come to terms with a new way of working, not knowing how long this would be for:

*There is a sense of anxiety that I didn't anticipate, because the virus is still out there and we are working with the group which is high risk in terms of health and BAME and constantly looking at how well we could deliver services every week and it kept changing every week. But it's still rewarding and clients gave*

*positive feedback, messages were coming in, thanking us for our support during this time and this helped us really.*

## **Community and social contact**

A big part of what SDCAS offered before the pandemic was lost, the sense of community and social contact with people eating together. Even before SDCAS closed clients started to be cautious about coming to the day SDCAS because of Covid and numbers attending reduced. When contacted the clients started coming to the food bank but they missed the social contact:

*There were a couple of people coming to pick up food and their appearance had deteriorated, staff couldn't recognise them they had changed so much, it's really difficult because you think what's going on out there, we don't really have the capacity to do that kind of work.*

Before the pandemic SDCAS was open three days each week with each day at a different centre in the Borough. After the first lockdown was announced, only one SDCAS centre was open and initially only for food parcels. Later in October 2020, SDCAS opened a second centre<sup>1</sup>, the Copleston Centre:

*Just to do a bit of face to face advice work, then with the second lockdown we decided to keep those centres open but draw back on having lots of volunteers around, so we really had to manage who was in the centre and the whole safety thing. So that way, we could give some face to face advice, but two days a week there is telephone advice, and just recently, which seems to be working out, staff members worked out a way so that you could still provide telephone advice and bring in new volunteers that are shadowing and helping with that service remotely and this is probably about three weeks on and it seems to be going well.*

## **Support given by outside agencies**

In terms of staff there was a steady stream of new volunteers. Southwark Law Centre provided immigration training. Pre-Covid, the Citizen Advice bureau provided welfare and immigration advice then, when Covid hit, they continued to accept referrals:

*It was a smooth process, we had a person that we contacted and that person continued taking cases ...the immigration advisor who is excellent and has been involved with our organisation for such a long time, finds it difficult to travel into London, so he found a job locally and moved to the coast, so that's a big loss, he was a big asset and very committed ... Southwark Law Centre provide the training and did some joint bidding for the immigration project, and are taking on complex cases over the next six months.*

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<sup>1</sup> SDCAS has three centres in Southwark – Copleston Centre, Peckham Park Road Baptist Church and St Marys Church, Newington

Support came from other agencies including mutual aid groups, individuals donating and bringing in, “*things like eggs, masks and home-made sanitizers*”. Groups like the Southwark Refugee Response Group, set up to raise awareness and provide support for SDCAS and other refugee groups, “*were very good in just asking us what we need, and we’d let them know and they would put a call out and that was nice.*” The book stall continued to fund-raise for SDCAS despite not being able to meet.

### **Sustaining support in the future**

With several agencies in the partnership returning Pauline is hoping that SDCAS can work with them, “*in line with migrants getting vaccinated*”. Community Southwark, the local infrastructure groups, are pulling together:

*The food banks and the council emergency services and there were these forum meetings and that was just kind of good to all share ideas and just think strategically and to make sure nobody was left off the radar.*

*They are looking at different ways to support us. A Peckham group set up a scheme. They have obviously raised funding, they are trying to work with Peckham asylum seekers so that they can give grants.*

### **The political/social climate for clients**

Pauline suggested that during the pandemic the whole system (including local and central government) for refugees and asylum seekers slowed down, and felt more hostile:

*The other side of that is that they decided to put everyone in hotels, so that was a policy decision by the government to put people in hotels and keep them in hotels ... makes it easier to find people and then to call people and to round people up. There is some concern that this is what underlies this, particularly when a hotel is then opened near the airport for example, the curfew, you know and then the policy where people are put in hotels, but they are not really supported in those hotels*

Gathering clients in hotels seems to have created increased racism and exploitation:

*People became a target of racism by the far right and people in hotels became targets of drug pushers as well ... because everyone is off the streets ... drug dealers were outside the hotels trying to recruit people to help. It’s all well documented ... this period has created this whole this new thing. So little is known ... from people in accommodation needing accommodation and being exploited ... but you hear one or two cases and you wonder how much.*

### **Conclusions**

The pandemic has been difficult for everyone and many people have suffered financial and other hardships. Loneliness and isolation have been experienced by many of the population and there has been an increase in mental health issues. Many of the clients of SDCAS had a precarious existence before Covid19 with

problems of money, housing, immigration status etc. The lockdowns made their lives even more precarious, and many were extremely vulnerable in a variety of ways. The clients we interviewed were strong and able people but people who were already battered by their past experiences and current situations. For them, the lockdowns were extremely difficult to bear. SDCAS became a lifeline for these and other clients- providing food, support, and advice. The staff and many volunteers worked tirelessly to do everything they could to support people and adapted the ways they worked to meet the changing needs of clients. However, most important of all was the way the support was given. We have elsewhere described the ethos of SDCAS as one in which clients are welcomed, treated with dignity and respect and shown care and love. This ethos underpinned the support offered during the lockdowns. As one of the clients put it:

*During this time I think the charity have done a lot. They are still doing it for me. The genuine love that come from inside their hearts. Client D*

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