



Visitor Experiences: Immigration Advice Services



October 2021

Research undertaken and written
by Emerald Rose

Table of Contents

1	Introduction and Methodology
2	HMSC's Immigration Advice Service
3	Waiting and Limbo
4	Empathy, Listening and Being Available
5	Access to Immigration Advice and Support
6	Impact of COVID-19
7	Conclusion and Next Steps
8	Acknowledgements

Introduction

To know if our services are working, we need to speak to our visitors to find out how their experience of using the service has been. Through having lived experience, they are the experts. In October 2021 we met with five of our visitors, who have diverse situations and are at different points in the progression of their cases. We spoke about HMSC's immigration advice service, but we also asked about their experiences of accessing immigration advice UK wide. We discussed what has worked well, what has not, and how the service can be improved. The objective of this report is to gain feedback and insight from our visitors. We will then use this learning to address how we can improve our service to work better for the people it is for. This report is not representative of all our visitors' views, but it provides invaluable insights from five of them.

Methodology

Because of COVID-19, we had this feedback session through a group Zoom video call with our five visitors, our researcher Emerald, and Amreet, our Development Coordinator. It lasted two hours, including a 25 minute break where Emerald and Amreet left the conversation. This was so our visitors could talk among themselves and share anything they did not feel comfortable saying in front of HMSC representatives, with each other. We limited the number of HMSC staff attending and anonymised what was said, because we want participants to feel comfortable to talk freely and share feedback about HMSC. We also shared the questions beforehand and consulted with our visitors, to see if there was anything that would make each person feel more comfortable during the conversation, for example having someone of their choice there for support.

There was the option of a translator, but all of our participants speak English. There was also the option of coming to the centre if someone could not access Zoom, but technical assistance with Zoom was given, and everyone was able to attend this way. HMSC found the participants for this session by staff recommending who should attend. Staff were repeatedly encouraged to provide a diverse range of people who have had different experiences with HMSC and would give diverse, positive and negative feedback. Emerald also evaluated all participants suggested to ensure this was the case. However, sourcing participants this way can lead to bias, and this is an area that should be improved for next time. Negative feedback was encouraged before and throughout the conversation, but it is not surprising that this was limited, given that our visitors were speaking to an organisation that is supporting them. It is important to continually look for ways to enable people to feel comfortable to give negative feedback, and this is something to be explored further for next time as well.

Our participants include a Jamaican woman in her 70s, who has lived in the UK since the 1980s with work visas, but has now been classified as an 'overstayer' by the Home Office because she could not renew her work visa because of the COVID-19 crisis. A Jamaican woman in her 30s who has lived in the UK for nearly 20 years since she was a child, and has limited leave to remain (LLR) but is entitled to settled status. A Nigerian man in his 40s who is an asylum seeker. A man in his 20s who is an asylum seeker from the Ivory Coast. Finally, a Nigerian man in his 30s who was born and attended primary school and university in the UK, but does not have status since his student visa expired. One identifies as gay, whilst the other sexualities are heterosexual or unknown. The woman with LLR is also the only person legally allowed to work or access public funds. This group is fairly representative of our visitors. Our visitors' top five countries of origin include Nigeria (17.7%) and Jamaica (5.5%), whilst 0.4% of our visitors are from the Ivory Coast. There are three men and two women, whilst 62% of our visitors are female and 36% are male. Their ages are diverse and representative, apart from not having someone who is 0-24, or 45-64. Meanwhile, the sexuality of all of our visitors is unknown.

Please note everyone's names have been changed to protect their anonymity.

HMSC Immigration Advice Service

Haringey Migrant Support Centre has been supporting migrants since 2012. HMSC's mission is to identify and improve the legal position and personal well-being of migrants – irrespective of their status – especially those living in Haringey and other London boroughs. HMSC welcomes people from all migrant groups unless they have naturalized as British citizens, with a particular focus on migrants who are facing multiple disadvantages. HMSC works towards its mission by providing free, professional advice on immigration, housing and welfare issues, as well as signposting, casework and practical support. Up to March 2020, this was in the form of a physical drop-in triage and appointment system. Due to the Coronavirus pandemic, we have now moved our service online to continue providing much needed advice and support.

Cuts to legal aid and statutory bodies have meant that it is increasingly difficult for migrants to access basic services. At the same time, immigration rules in the UK are strict with time limits on many applications, leaving people vulnerable to extortionate fees for poor quality advice, putting their applications in jeopardy. Most visitors who are triaged by HMSC lack the financial means to access immigration advice that they are in desperate need of. These are individuals who, due to their lack of status, are excluded from taking any employment, and are thus left in a state of semi or complete destitution. We have had to find a creative way of facilitating a way forward for as many people as possible.

HMSC's approach has been carefully developed, reviewed and amended since the charity's opening to best reflect the needs of visitors and the legal environment. Initially, HMSC was a more social and community space but, following the legal aid cuts, access to advice became paramount for visitors to be able to secure a long-term improvement in their circumstances. HMSC now has an in-house immigration advisor (who is a barrister) and is fortunate to additionally have another barrister working with us one day per week. However, our model relies on outreach and partnership with legal organisations to support as many visitors as possible to access immigration advice. We can only offer very limited casework, usually only to secure a visitor's position in the short term, and we would never be able to formally represent clients in the same way as a solicitor would. HMSC works closely in partnership with local community organisations, services and lawyers. We also have strong connections with other community partners where we refer visitors for wider support.

We triage our visitors and provide immigration advice on a weekly basis through appointments with our in-house immigration adviser, an external immigration adviser, solicitors from Islington Law Centre, and earlier this year, Coram Children's Legal Centre. We then try to find our visitors

HMSC Immigration Advice Service

a solicitor to represent them and work on their case. The majority of our visitors cannot afford private solicitors and there is a severe shortage of legal aid and *pro bono* (without charge) solicitors, so this can be a lengthy process of making referrals.

Exceptional Case Funding (ECF) applications are another key part of HMSC's immigration service. We have a cohort of Legal Support Volunteers who make ECF applications for our visitors, which are applications to qualify for funding for a legal aid lawyer when your case is not in the scope of legal aid; which many are not. Only asylum cases and specific immigration cases are eligible for legal aid in England and Wales. This service underpins the wider way in which HMSC works, as there is a significant group of people with complex immigration cases who face extreme hardship, and yet cannot access legal aid. Without this type of casework, there would be nowhere for them to go and no route to resolve their issues.

HMSC resources are hard-pressed and the centre needs to be able to access specialist immigration lawyers in order to be able to help some of the most disadvantaged people in the local community. There is always a struggle to generate enough capacity to meet the ever-increasing demand. The team at HMSC aim to ensure that the triage is worthwhile, by then linking people with an appropriate service for their needs. Overall, HMSC takes a flexible approach to working, regularly reviewing and amending our services in response to emergencies or changes to the sector.

Waiting and Limbo

One of the key points discussed in this feedback group was the issue of waiting and limbo. All five of our visitors said, despite being happy with the service, they are still in the same situation now as they were when they first came to see us. Four are waiting for their case to be moved forward, and one was told we could not see a legal route for his case and so we could not assist him any further. At the time of the feedback group, HMSC had found legal representatives for two out of five of the cases. Thankfully, as of November 2021, this is now four out of five. However, Adeo still does not have a legal representative, as HMSC could see no legal route for his case.

Waiting has become a fact of life for our visitors. Chevelle explained to us she is “positively waiting to see what is going to come of it”, with Gabriel reiterating this saying: “Yes, it’s just that. It’s just that I’ve got to wait a bit longer, because I haven’t got a choice. There’s nothing I can do but just wait patiently. And I mean if I waited this long, I guess I could wait some more. Because there’s nothing else I can do, so you just have to be patient you know, and go through what I’m going through until the best result comes out”.

Despite being in really challenging situations, Chevelle and Gabriel took this positive approach to having to wait. This demonstrates their personal resilience and motivation, but this is not an option for everyone. Moreover, despite this, waiting and limbo still takes its toll.

"Waiting makes me a bit anxious sometimes, which is not good for me. But I think I’m anxious because of good reasons. I want to move on with my life"

Chevelle explained some of the impact of this waiting: “Waiting makes me a bit anxious sometimes, which is not good for me. But I think I’m anxious because of good reasons. I want to move on with my life and having a passport helps to become stable”. “It’s not easy being here [in the UK] and not able to have access to stuff. Or to basically be struggling a little bit more than what you would like to be struggling. It just puts a hold in general on your ability to accomplish things. That’s a bit annoying”.

Chevelle has lived in the UK for nearly 20 years since she was a child, and she first came to HMSC in March 2021. In November 2021, 8 months later, we found a legal aid solicitor to make an application for her. However, there will still be more waiting. It costs £2,389 to make an application for settled status (indefinite leave to remain [ILR]) with the Home Office, and there are no fee waivers for this application. Without money for this application, it means the solicitor will be making another application for temporary status (limited leave to remain [LLR]) for Chevelle lasting only 2 and a half years, where there is a fee waiver. They will then need to try and challenge this application to push for settled status without the fee. Chevelle has

Waiting and Limbo

"After getting in touch with the centre I'm more relaxed in a sense, because I'm getting somewhere. I'm not as stuck as before"

already had to make four LLR applications since 2010. So, despite being here for 20 years since she was a child, and having the right to permanent status (and thereafter British citizenship); more waiting and limbo lays ahead trying to fight for her case to be here.

Gabriel explained to us that, although she is still waiting, she feels better now because at least something is happening to move her case forward: "After getting in touch with the centre I'm more relaxed in a sense because I'm getting somewhere. I'm not as stuck as before. And to put it this way, at least there's a light at the end of the tunnel after all of this... So with HMSC, so far, so good. I've been trying for a long time and then the day we called HMSC I think we had an appointment for the following day and that started the process to where we are at the moment".

Gabriel's case benefitted from HMSC's contracted partnership with Islington Law Centre (ILC), which provides two solicitors to give advice sessions to our visitors each week and also takes on a small number of cases to legally represent them. Gabriel's case was taken on by ILC and this meant she had a legal representative within one week of coming to see HMSC. This really exemplifies the

importance of partnerships and collaborative working.

Emmanuel's case also benefitted from one of our partnerships, but this took a really long time. At the focus group he told us his "situation is still the same, it's still pending. The last time I spoke with one of the immigration advisers it was really, really okay. But the situation is still pending. They said they would look for a legal aid solicitor for me. But ever since then they said it's difficult to get legal aid, so I'm still on the waiting list. So I'm still waiting since then until this time, so the situation is just the same. But I just hope things will turn around for good".

Emmanuel first came to see us in January 2021, and at the point of the feedback group (October 2021), we still had not been able to find a legal aid solicitor to take on him on. We referred his case to 24 legal aid solicitors during this time, where 13 declined and 11 did not get back to us. This exemplifies the crisis and shortage the UK is currently facing in terms of legal aid, because of government cuts and low pay for legal aid lawyers.

Thankfully, on October 2021 we joined another partnership with the Refugee Law Clinic, which specialises in fresh asylum claims like

"[HMSC] said it's difficult to get legal aid, so I'm still on the waiting list... But I just hope things will turn around for good"

Waiting and Limbo

Emmanuel's. Our Casework Coordinator referred him to them straight away and they are now legally representing him and working on his case.

The Refugee Law Clinic has been launched by the University of London to provide crucially needed *pro bono* (without charge) legal work. Volunteer law students are supervised by volunteer lawyers to undertake this work. This means that urgent cases cannot be referred here, because it takes longer than usual because students are learning and work one half day per week. Referrals are also now closed until January 2022, because they are so inundated with cases. Thankfully Emmanuel now has somewhere working on his case, but there is again more waiting and limbo ahead.

"I was still just as much in limbo as I was, you know, prior to getting the advice. So I didn't know what to do next, basically"

Like Gabriel, Chevelle and Emmanuel, Abeo has also been waiting a long time, but his case is not moving forward. He told us that after his advice session "personally, I did not know what to do next. I mean I understood what we discussed and the person that spoke to me was very, very clear. It was very easy to understand. But at the end of the session I was still just as much in limbo as I was, you know, prior to getting the advice. So I didn't know what to do next, basically. The advice I got was basically saying that there's no point in actually going any further with my case, that's what I got. So based on that I was like OK, yeah?".

Abeo was born and raised in the UK, attending primary school here. However, during his childhood his father took him to Nigeria. He returned to the UK to complete his university degree on a student visa, and be with his mother who has been in the UK the whole time. However, since his student visa expired he has not had status to be here. He has seen numerous immigration advisers, but he is still in limbo because each one says they cannot see a legal route for his case.

This research reaffirms the bottleneck between advice and complex casework addressed by Justice Together's report *A Huge Gulf: demand and supply for immigration legal advice in London*. By which we mean, there is immigration advice available, but there are not enough immigration caseworkers to work on the case and move it forward thereafter. This is true for HMSC – four out of five of the visitors were seen within a week for immigration advice. But we do not have an inhouse immigration caseworker, so it can take a long time for a person's case to be moved forward after receiving advice, because we have to find another organisation to start working on it. Thankfully for Gabriel it was within one week, and for Adbu's asylum case we found someone at Harrow Law Centre within three weeks. However, for Chevelle it was 8 months, for Emmanuel's asylum case this took 9 months, and Abeo was not referred.

Empathy, listening and being available

It was great to hear that our visitors have a positive view of HMSC staff, saying they are empathetic, actively listen, and are there when you need them. This is crucial for trauma informed care. At Mental Health and Immigration training arranged by Migrants Organise in November 2021, Prof Cornelius Katona (Medical Director at the Helen Bamber Association) discussed trauma informed care and the importance of giving the impression of time. Time is something that staff at refugee and migrant centres often do not have – there is more work to do than capacity. But in order to build trust and confidence with visitors and facilitate a positive experience when someone is experiencing a crisis, staff need to give people time to talk and show they are actively listening to them with understanding and empathy (Carl Rogers, psychologist, 1902-1987).

“I've come across a lot of support workers and the thing that I like about HMSC is that they give you the time that you need to be listened to”

According to Chevelle, this has been her experience with HMSC staff. However, this has not always been the case with other organisations. We asked what had the biggest impact for our visitors from using the immigration advice service. She told us “I like the fact that the support workers are always available. I appreciate that a lot. If I miss a call or I call them or something they will always try to get back to me. So I kind of appreciate that. And I think I've been to other services where people don't really understand the stress that you feel when you go through things like

this, and for me personally, I don't know for the others, but I've found it to be quite empathetic with people that are there. That kind of helps when someone understands what you're going through”.

She discussed this further later in the conversation, saying “yes so the struggle is real, I'm not going to lie. And I've been fighting my case for like 19 years, so it's quite a long time for me personally. I've come across a lot of support workers and the thing that I like about HMSC is that they give you the time that you need to be listened to. And even if there's instances that they can't support you, usually they refer you to someone else that might be able to do something for you”. “I think this support – the support workers – are good. I've lived in Harringay for quite some time and people can be like, aggressive, or not understanding and stuff, so I kind of found them to be quite gentle which I appreciate. The ones I've spoken to so far”.

Empathy, listening and being available

"[At other organisations] they don't listen... I find it like they fail to realise that this is the whole person's life... when the office is closed, this is my life, I have to live this life"

At other organisations "they don't listen. Or sometimes I find it like they fail to realise that this is the whole person's life. It's not just between working hours - 9 and 5 o'clock - like it ends like after 5 o'clock, it continues. It doesn't just end there. When the office is closed, this is my life, I have to live this life".

This highlights an issue of how organisation staff can behave towards people, and especially people in vulnerable situations. It again raises the importance of trauma informed care, where it is crucial to give empathy, actively listen, and make people feel like they have the time to say what they need to. It was also interesting to hear Chevelle call HMSC staff support workers, because HMSC does not have support workers, but she sees the people she has worked with (Immigration Advisors, the Casework Coordinator, volunteers) as this support role.

Gabriel and Abdu reiterated some of what Chevelle said, with Gabriel telling us "It's just getting the information you need and speaking to people who really understand the situation. The support was great. Because right now, my mind is more settled. There's always someone there that you can refer to, and they come. You know, offer their support and where they can help. So far so good". Abdu agreed, saying: "yes the good thing is that they are always available. And then secondly, I think when you are in confusion, they give you some kind of solution".

"The support was great. Because right now, my mind is more settled. There's always someone there that you can always refer to, and they come."

It was great to hear that despite HMSC's capacity being very restricted, our staff are still making sure visitors are communicated with, supported and able to get hold of us when they need to. It should not be any other way and this is something that we need to ensure continues.

Access to immigration advice and support

Previously in the report, in *Waiting and Limbo*, the difficulty of accessing immigration caseworkers and legal representatives has already been addressed. Here we look at access to immigration advice and support further. Throughout the conversation, our visitors discussed their experiences with HMSC as well as with other organisations. We then specifically asked them about their experiences accessing immigration advice UK wide. Abeo and Abdu demonstrated the differences you can experience when trying to access immigration advice in the first place. Meanwhile, Gabriel discussed her difficulty even getting hold of an organisation for the first time.

"I find that you can actually really get access to a lot of advice... But... it's just still saying... there is nothing that can be done about your situation"

Abeo said that he has found immigration advice to be easily available; he has seen a number of immigration advisers. However, the support stopped at advice, because, as explained earlier, each adviser said they could not see a legal route for his case and he was left in the same situation: "In my own case, I find that you can actually really get access to a lot of advice you know, but what I found is that when you get the advice it's just still saying, on this ground or on that ground, there is nothing that can be done about your situation. You know what I mean. Then you feel like, you know. So that's where the real struggle is. That's that's how I feel about it".

In contrast, Abdu discussed the absence of immigration advice for him. He arrived in the UK and registered as an asylum seeker in 2018, but it took a year before he accessed any advice at all. Abdu told us: "when I came to the UK I spent nearly one year without any information... and knowing what to do. It was very difficult". We asked more about this and he said "first of all it took too long before I met the first organisation. And I met that organisation two years ago, but I've just got a solicitor through working with HMSC this year. You see, I mean, it was not easy". So Abdu spent 3 years in the UK since registering as an asylum seeker before he even accessed a legal representative to work on his case.

"When I came to the UK I spent nearly one year without any information... and knowing what to do. It was very difficult"

Access to immigration advice and support

This demonstrates the diverse experiences of our visitors and how their individual circumstances affect the support they receive. Abeo was born in the UK and has lived here for years, including for primary school and university education. Whereas Abdu is an asylum seeker who arrived in 2018 for the first time. So it is unsurprising that Abeo would be able to navigate the UK system and find advice more easily than Abdu.

This also highlights the issue that when asylum seekers register with the Home Office, they are not always signposted to or connected with UK organisations for legal advice and support. There is information on the gov.uk website, but when people register in person upon entry - as the Home Office tells you to and many people do - it appears that, like in Abdu's case, this information is not provided. This is unsurprising given the government's aggressive agenda to deter people from coming to and staying in the UK, with the 'Hostile Environment' policy (now referred to as 'Compliant Environment' policy). As well as the recent overhaul of the immigration system by Home Secretary Priti Patel with her Immigration Bill 2021, which violates international and domestic law.

Gabriel explained the difficulty of even getting hold of an organisation in the first place. HMSC was a "last resort", having tried and failed to get in touch with other organisations. For her, each time she called somewhere there was no answer or response, or she got hold of someone but was sent in circles, being told she

"You can't get through to anyone. And if and when you do get through, it's a message. No one responds. No call back, nothing, so you're not sure where you are"

had to call another number, but then when she called that number there was no response, or she was given another number to call again: "You call these solicitors and organisations, and when you call them they put you to someone else, but it's the same process. You get back to where you started, so. You know?" "It's been tough, especially because of Covid. This time it was difficult, really difficult, because I mean, you can't get through to anyone. And if and when you do get through, it's a message. No one responds. No call back, nothing, so you're not sure where you are." "HMSC was like a last resort because I didn't know anything about it. But I was referred to an advocate with the council, and we had a list of numbers to go through. We were lucky the first number we dialled was HMSC, and luckily we then had the appointment for the next day. So it was really good". "Sometimes the calls [to HMSC] don't go through. But with other places you never get through to anyone. And sometimes when you do get through, there's no response. So after all the negative responses I got, and then I

Access to immigration advice and support

"We were lucky the first number we dialled was HMSC, and luckily we then had the appointment for the next day. So it was really good"

ended up here, I think this was the best thing. So far so good"

As explained in the previous section of the report on Empathy, Listening and Being Available, we were really glad to hear from our visitors that despite our over-stretched capacity our visitors can get hold of us, and if we miss their call or they miss ours, we call back. But these findings highlight a serious issue in the sector, that people are not able to get through, or even get a first point of contact for immigration advice and support.

Abdu and Chevelle also said that compared to other organisations we are doing a good job, which is both positive and negative to hear. Chevelle talks about this extensively in the previous section of the report just mentioned. Meanwhile Abdu told us: "I did try another centre but nothing changed. Then another organisation sent me to HMSC; It's called Deptford Reach, they're also good. But I think HMSC did well for me compared to all of those other centres I met before".



Impact of COVID-19

Unsurprisingly, COVID-19 was a discussion in this feedback group. Before the pandemic in March 2020, HMSC's immigration advice service operated through a weekly face-to-face drop-in and triage session, offering appointments with specialist advisers and dealing with ongoing casework. This included a social space in the church hall, where visitors could register for the service, socialise and eat a free hot meal. However, the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic in March 2020 meant HMSC's in-person drop-in had to close. It was quickly established that the regular drop-in service involved a lot of contact between people in an enclosed space, all sharing facilities and utensils. Visitors may have been potentially travelling from highly affected areas, have underlying health conditions or be living in overcrowded accommodation where the virus could quickly spread. Additionally, those from BAME communities face additional risks. For the safety of visitors, staff and volunteers, the drop-in could not reopen at a time where the risks far outweighed the benefits.

This of course affected HMSC and our visitors, and staff and volunteers were faced with the challenge of needing to adapt the service for remote delivery. Remote systems were gradually created throughout the year and immigration advice sessions continued over the phone. A streamlined remote service was established in March 2021; with a new online database and filing system, and visitors communicated with mostly on the phone, and also by email, WhatsApp, Zoom video call, and in exceptional cases in person, where they could not access us virtually. This and the global pandemic was a massive change for HMSC and our visitors, and has had both negative and positive outcomes.

"My visa expired last April, but on account of COVID I was unable to renew it"

For Gabriel, her whole case came about because of COVID-19. Gabriel came to the UK in the 1980s and has lived here on two year work visas since. She's really well thought of in her profession and her employers always help her to do her renewal applications. But this time when it was expiring last year, Gabriel's work had stopped completely and she was on furlough because of Coronavirus lockdown.

Her employers were meant to help her get the forms out, but with lockdown she was left completely without help, and could not get in touch with them to learn how to renew her visa and get references.

She told us: "My visa expired last April, but on account of COVID I was unable to renew it. One of my supervisors, she was on to me to get it sorted, but I knew I couldn't send it in before the time, and then COVID came. We lost communications because everything was down. There was no contact to anyone. Things were getting hard on me. Finances were windling away and everything, and then I was stuck, actually stuck financially".

Impact of COVID-19

Gabriel tried to go back to work later last year, but her employer got a negative verification notice from the Home Office. Things became back up and running, but she's now unable to pay to renew her visa because she's been out of work for over a year. A *pro bono* (without charge) solicitor is now working on her case since May 2021, but it has been nine months since her status expired and it is unclear how long it will take to get this resolved.

Gabriel and Chevelle also discussed waiting times and said they feel they have become even longer because of COVID-19. Chevelle told us: "I think we're all just probably waiting. I think the COVID situation has had an impact on my waiting time, and the waiting time has already been ages, a long time waiting, so. I don't think at the moment it's down to HMSC. I think it's more down to the Home Office and the backlog that they have, and the pandemic and stuff and everything that's going on". Our Casework Coordinator reiterated this, saying waiting times to get an immigration advice appointment with HMSC has been about the same. However, the Home Office has a huge backlog and it is taking longer to get responses on applications. It has also taken longer to find visitor's solicitors, because solicitors have even less capacity and so waiting times are longer.

"I think the COVID situation has had an impact on my waiting time, and the waiting time has already been ages"

"I think it will be easier if done face-to-face so you can try to help them"

Abdu and Chevelle also discussed the impact of HMSC services moving online because of Coronavirus lockdown. They have both only used our service since moving online, and they talked about the difficulty of not having face-to-face contact.

HMSC learned that the instructions we give are not always easy to take action on. Abdu told us: "sometimes when HMSC gives you some instructions to do, it's not easy to go ahead and do it". We asked if he could think of a way to improve this, for example more support in doing it. He explained "I think it will be easier if done face-to-face so you can try to help them". This has been one of the challenges of online working. For some of our visitors, face-to-face communication is better.

Chevelle reiterated the need for face-to-face contact, or at least the option of Zoom more, so you can see the person you are talking to: "I think in the beginning I wanted to see a face-to-face person, not just over the phone. But I realise that it's not a usual thing for HMSC, it's because of the pandemic. But yeah, I was happy to see you on the Zoom chat and stuff like that, to see the person I'm talking to".

She told us when she first started using the service, all of the contact was by phone. Since then she has spoken to three people on Zoom and she prefers that.

Impact of COVID-19

"I was happy to see you on the Zoom chat and stuff like that, to see the person I'm talking to"

We asked our visitors what they would think of a hybrid system - some contact being face-to-face and some online. Abdu agreed with a hybrid system: "for me both services should be available. Because sometimes we need to meet people to explain what you need. So face-to-face. And then sometimes we want to use the phone call, so if both services are available it will be great for me".

For Chevelle, she thinks it would help to have the first appointment with someone face-to-face, so you can know what the person you are working with is like: "I think the first appointment would be nice if it was in person, and then after that, I think it's alright to kind of have some of it remotely like you said. But for me, I'm just, usually anxious on the first ever appointment, because it's such a sensitive issue. So it's kind of like you want to know that you're dealing with someone that understands what you're going through and that they are listening. Because like I said before, there's so many people that don't actually listen. So yes, I think the first appointment for me is where you can just know if someone is genuinely interested in the problems that you're having, and if they're going to be really trying their best to support you with it. Or if it's just going to be sitting on the desk and you don't know when

anyone's going to respond or if anything's going to happen. So yes, I think after the first one it's usually alright to have a phone call or something like that".

This again raises the problem of how organisation staff can appear and behave to visitors. It also displays the importance of face-to-face contact for building rapport and trust - even just that first time.

"I think the first appointment would be nice if it was in person, and then after that, I think it's alright to kind of have some of it remotely"

HMSC considered moving back to our face-to-face service in April 2021, but we spoke to 20 of our visitors and the majority preferred the remote immigration advice service; with 9 people preferring the appointment on the phone, 5 who did not mind, 5 face-to-face, and 1 who would like face-to-face sometimes. We are in continuous conversation about if HMSC should move to a hybrid system. However, this has now been put on hold because of the Omicron variant and government advice to work from home.

Conclusion

Waiting and Limbo

- Waiting and limbo has become a part of life for our visitors. They demonstrated positivity and resilience, but this of course has a negative impact.
- All five of our visitors said, despite being happy with the service, they are still in the same situation with their immigration status as they were when they first came to see us.
- HMSC has found solicitors for 4 out of 5 of the visitors cases, but at the point of the feedback group it was only 2 out of 5 (this does not have a correlation with the feedback; the staff and volunteers referring visitors were not aware of these findings).
- Reasons for not having resolved their immigration situation include strict immigration laws, complex bureaucracy, high application fees, long waiting times, a severe shortage of legal aid and *pro bono* (without charge) solicitors, and a lack of inhouse immigration caseworkers at HMSC.
- It can take a great deal of time to find a legal representative for our visitors to even start working on their case. This is aided by our partnerships and collaborative working with ILC, Refugee Law Clinic, and other organisations, but there is a crisis of capacity. This research reaffirms the bottleneck between advice and complex casework identified by Justice Together's report *A Huge Gulf: demand and supply for immigration legal advice in London*.

Empathy, Listening and Being Available

- Even when time and resources are stretched, it is crucial for staff to demonstrate trauma informed care and show empathy, actively listen, be available to visitors, and give the impression of time.
- It was great to hear that our visitors have a positive view of HMSC staff, saying they are empathetic, understanding, listen, and are there when you need them.
- However, a visitor said this had not been the case with other organisations. Staff had been aggressive, not understanding and do not listen.

Conclusion

Accessing Immigration Advice and Support

- Here we look at difficulties in accessing immigration advice and support in the UK further.
- Our visitors demonstrated the diversity of experiences they can have. Abeo has found it easy to access immigration advice, but support has stopped there because advisers could not see a legal route for his case. Contrastingly, Abdu was in the UK for a year with no advice at all, and only has a solicitor three years later through working with HMSC. It is unsurprising that Abeo would find it easier to navigate the UK system than Abdu – Abeo was born and educated in the UK, whilst Abdu arrived for the first time in 2018 to seek asylum. This highlights the need for better outreach and signposting to newly arrived asylum seekers, especially when they register with the Home Office.
- It was both positive and negative to hear that, compared to other organisations, HMSC is doing a good job. People have been able to get hold of us and received an immigration advice appointment quickly.
- A visitor explained her difficulty of even getting hold of other organisations for the first time. HMSC was a “last resort” after failed attempts. She was sent in circles, either getting no answer or response, or speaking to someone who gave her another number to call, which started the circle again. This presents a problem of communication and availability in the sector that needs to be addressed.

Impact of Covid-19

- Unsurprisingly, COVID-19 was an important topic of conversation given the global pandemic and the migration from a face-to-face to online service at HMSC.
- For one of our visitors, her entire case came about because of the Coronavirus lockdown, which cut her off from her employers when she needed to renew her work visa. This means she is now classified by the government as an ‘overstayer’ and has experienced a breadth of problems, as explained in the report.
- Our visitors feel like waiting times have become even longer and organisations are even more difficult to get hold of because of the pandemic.

Conclusion

- They also explained the difficulties of working online rather than face-to-face, for example building trust and rapport between staff and visitors, and visitors having face-to-face help with the actions they need to take next.
- They offered solutions such as having the first appointment face-to-face to help build rapport, and utilising Zoom technology more, so when working remotely you can still see each other's faces. Additionally we discussed the benefits of a hybrid system, where there are options for both face-to-face and remote working together.

Next Steps

- Where to go from here? Getting feedback is not just about looking back but also looking forward. How can HMSC positively change what we are doing to work better for the people our services are for. Our visitors are the experts, and we need to ensure we learn from their experiences and that their voices are heard.
- Therefore we will set up an Experts by Experience group, comprised of a group of visitors, to give regular feedback on their experiences and ensure that our service is user-led. The group will have real decision-making power in the form of a representative who will feed back to our Board of Trustees.
- The findings in this report will also form part of HMSC's upcoming strategy - the organisation is currently in a period of acute change and growth. We will take into account the need to undertake this sort of work regularly and ensure that there is a channel for feedback from our visitors.

Acknowledgements

We would like to say a massive thank you to:

- Our visitors, for having this conversation with us and providing this learning for HMSC. If any visitors would like to be part of future feedback groups, the Experts by Experience group, and similar activities please let us know: info@haringeymsc.org.
- Our partners providing crucial support to our visitors, such as Islington Law Centre, the Refugee Clinic, Cardinal Hume Centre, and many more who have not been mentioned in this report.
- All of our staff and volunteers for their invaluable work.
- Justice Together, Migrants Organise and Prof Cornelius Katona from the Helen Bamber Foundation, who have provided resources referenced in this report.



Contact

Haringey Migrant Support Centre

St John Vianney Church Hall, 386 West Green Rd, London N15 3QL
www.haringeymsc.org | info@haringeymsc.org | [@haringeymsc](https://www.instagram.com/haringeymsc)

