

Praxis and Commonweal: no recourse to public funds housing - UK

Organisation implementing the project

[Praxis](#) is a community based human rights organisation in London, UK. Providing advice on housing, support and immigration to refugees and asylum seekers, the organisation helps around 1,300 people each year. There are 22 staff members and five volunteers (full time equivalent). Praxis is delivering this project in partnership with Commonweal Housing.

[Commonweal Housing](#) is a small charity with six staff members. They fund testing of innovative models of housing provision which are designed to address systemic failings (for example, this project is testing a model of support for migrants at risk with no recourse to public funds, a group that cannot access housing through any 'traditional' route). Commonweal offers funding, expertise and property to charities and social enterprises to help them with developing innovative solutions to housing people in need.

Project Description

The 'No Recourse to Public Funds' (NRPF) project provides safe homes for migrant families in London. These families are not entitled to claim financial support from the government due to insecure immigration status, and therefore are at risk of homelessness and exploitation.

Commonweal Housing approached social investors for funding to buy seven properties, and a further property was provided by a private landlord. These houses are leased to Praxis at below market rent as homes for NRPF migrants.

The project officially began in 2015 with the purchase and handover of the first properties. Across the eight houses, a total of 18 bed spaces are provided for families, and seven for single women.

The eight shared houses are in the London boroughs of Croydon and Redbridge. All properties have private bedrooms and shared bathrooms, communal living spaces, a kitchen and laundry, and a garden.

As well as housing, the project provides support, immigration advice and casework, and access to support groups.

Aims and Objectives

The two main groups supported by the project are:

- those excluded from mainstream housing provision but eligible for basic support from social services (families with children);
- those excluded from all support (single women).

Most of the people helped by Praxis have experienced gender-based violence, extreme poverty and exclusion due to their insecure immigration status. Many are victims of trafficking or are seeking immigration on human rights applications. Whilst waiting to secure immigration status, migrants are not allowed to work or access financial support. As a result they are extremely vulnerable, often becoming homeless and at high risk of exploitation.

Since April 2015, 106 people have been housed. This includes 45 women (12 single), one man and 60 children.

Through providing housing along with immigration advice and support, the project delivers a safe environment, supporting people towards more settled lives. The project has helped 60 people to resolve their immigration status. They have moved on to sustainable accommodation, creating a pathway to a more secure future.

Context

Restrictions on access to public funds are the single largest cause of migrant destitution in the UK.

For undocumented migrants, navigating the system of refuge and asylum is complex and daunting. Regularising immigration status is a lengthy process and many find it impossible to access even the basic rights they are entitled to.

Since 2012, a growing number of migrants are permitted to remain in the UK on the condition that they will not have access to public funds. The majority of these cases involve families, often headed by single mothers, with children who were born in the UK.

When vulnerable migrant families are eligible for statutory support from local authorities, they are usually housed in inadequate temporary accommodation. This often takes the form of cheap 'Bed & Breakfasts', which don't offer the independence or space a family needs. These rooms come at a high cost to the Local Authority, and therefore, many opt to move these families outside of London where accommodation is cheaper. This means vulnerable families risk losing contact with existing support networks.

In the case of single women, there is practically no housing provision. A small number of mainly faith-based organisations offer very limited provision. There are also a number of hosting schemes. However, these are time limited and mainly aimed at refugees or asylum seekers who do have access to public funds or asylum accommodation. Praxis makes some referrals to a housing justice hosting project for clients who fit into this group, but they do not adequately meet the needs of NRPF migrants requiring longer term accommodation.

NRPF destitute migrant women tend to be included under the term 'hidden homeless', as they often avoid rough sleeping by entering into precarious housing arrangements, often including sexual or domestic servitude.

Key Features

Migrant families with children are entitled to accommodation that is funded by Local Authorities, who refer them to Praxis and pay a nightly rate for their housing. This income stream is used by Praxis to cross-subsidise the provision of rooms for single migrant women for free.

Referrals are carefully assessed, ensuring that their needs can be met with the support available. Family referrals are usually for women with children. Most referrals for single women come from other Praxis services or partner agencies. Praxis also leads Street Legal, a partnership with St Mungo's and Refugee Action, working with destitute migrants and taking referrals from homeless outreach teams.

Referrals are prioritised in terms of needs, suitability and accommodation availability. For single women, internal referrals from advice and group work services or by the Red Cross are prioritised. In terms of need, a woman will be prioritised if she does not have any other option (such as asylum or hosting accommodation) and therefore would be imminently homeless.

Length of stay varies depending on an individual's specific set of circumstances and the type and complexity of immigration issue they have. On average, families are housed by Praxis for nine months, although the range goes from three weeks to over three years.

Monthly health and safety checks take place in the homes and any equipment for children, such as Moses baskets, cots and buggies, are provided. There is also a 24-hour emergency number available to residents.

There are two main ways that people move on from the project's housing into other accommodation:

- Families have successfully regularised their immigration status and can now access mainstream housing and homelessness provision. Praxis support these families to access benefits and legal advice, make homelessness applications, and attend interviews where necessary. On occasions they apply for grants to help people buy basic furniture and household items. Praxis also signpost people to organisations who can offer help if they need to move away from their existing support network.
- People become eligible for accommodation provided directly by the Home Office, for example after submitting an asylum application. Less practical support is needed in this case, as the Home Office automatically makes the relevant arrangements for accommodation and transport. Praxis contact people after they have moved to ensure they are okay.

In both cases, if residents have been accessing other services at Praxis, such as mother and baby groups or English classes, they continue to be welcome to attend. This gives continuity at a time of transition and beyond, as well as an opportunity to continue developing supportive relationships with others.

Funding

Commonweal raised a total of £2.3 million (USD\$3million) in social investment for the project, which was used to purchase seven houses. The funders are Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Big Society Capital, City Bridge Trust and Trust for London. The investment fund covered the total cost of the properties, refurbishments, legal and evaluation costs. An additional house was leased to the project by a private landlord.

Praxis leases the seven houses from Commonweal at well-below market rates (approximately £76,000 (USD\$99,000) per year at 2.5 - 3.5 per cent of the cost of the property. The lease agreement is for seven years. After this time, it is expected that the social investors will sell the properties, with Praxis having priority to purchase. In this case, they will explore investment opportunities with other partners, for example, a migrant housing association, in order to continue with the existing model.

The investors receive an annual return of between 2.5 - 3.5 per cent (it varies from property to property) on the amount paid for the properties. This is paid by Praxis from the income generated from the Local Authorities, guaranteed by Commonweal's main benefactor (Grove End Housing Limited)¹. If the investors choose to sell at the end of the seven years, any profit will be shared, with investors receiving 75 per cent and Commonweal 25 per cent. However, a return on their investment is entirely dependent on the London housing market at the time.

Local Authorities refer clients (families with children) to Praxis and fund their accommodation on a nightly fee basis. This income is used to cross-subsidise the project, to fund the spaces for single women. There is no cost for the residents. The model enables hardship payments for families to cover the costs of food and basic necessities.

¹ <https://www.bigsocietycapital.com/what-we-do/investor/investments/commonweal-housing>

The annual running cost is just under £250,000 (USD\$327,000) for both leasing the properties and providing services. This includes a percentage of staff salaries (housing officer, managers, immigration caseworker) and the costs of activities provided by Praxis.

Innovation

This is a unique collaboration between London Borough Councils, charitable organisations and social investors working to prevent homelessness and improve services for one of London's most disadvantaged groups.

By securing social investment to purchase housing, this model moves away from traditional charity models to a more sustainable system. Praxis is the first project in London to secure housing for migrants through social investment. They treat an insecure immigration status as a support need rather than a barrier.

Environmental Impact

Praxis works in partnership with staff and clients to raise awareness of environmental issues and encourage good practice in day-to-day activities, for example, through recycling and reducing energy and water usage.

Most clients have previously lived in precarious housing conditions, with little understanding of what constitutes adequate housing or energy efficiency. Residents are trained on health and safety, which includes energy efficiency (managing temperature, water usage, safe use of appliances). They receive comprehensive handbooks with information on recycling and waste disposal. They can also get involved in gardening and courses to build their own bikes.

Financial Sustainability

This project is testing a new template for funding projects which help vulnerable people, by combining social investment with cross-subsidisation. It demonstrates the potential savings for Local Authorities who house clients in this way. The average stay in Praxis accommodation is around 270 days. In comparison, analysis by the [No Recourse to Public Funds \(NRPF\) Forum](#) (led by Islington and including all London Local Authorities) found that the average support needed is 887 days². Lack of support to families in progressing their immigration cases, along with delays from the Home Office, are considered the main reasons for this. Although there are cheaper options than Praxis' housing (based on their per night fee), the Praxis model significantly reduces the amount of time and subsequently funding needed for families to move on.

Although initially some Local Authorities were in favour of a block booking contract (i.e. a fixed contract for a number of houses), in reality Local Authorities favour the 'spot purchasing system'. This means the project only receives funding for beds which are taken each night, which is a risk. The model depends upon an 85 per cent occupancy rate within the family units, as this is the income generating part of the project and is needed to cross-subsidise other activities. They have successfully met this target so far, with the average occupancy last year at 93 per cent. However, there is always the risk of Local Authorities opting for cheaper options and referring families outside of London.

London Councils have a maximum nightly fee rate in their London-wide Inter-Borough Accommodation Agreement (IBAA), which sets a maximum of £36 - 42 (USD\$47-55) (depending on the London area) for a studio flat. Praxis' nightly fee is £46 (USD\$60) per night for a double room in a shared house which exceeds this slightly but

² Pending publication

includes bills, housing support and access to free immigration advice and support groups. Evaluation of the project has shown that over the long term the additional support services provided by Praxis reduce the average length of stay making the approach more competitive (see Evaluation).

Social Impact

Residents can access services and connect to support groups organised by Praxis. These include creche services, English as a Second Language (ESOL) courses, and coffee mornings.

The local Quaker group provides space, tea and biscuits for peer support groups. Another local group provides free second-hand baby equipment, and Praxis receives donated Christmas presents from the public for the children they house. They also have links with schools, parenting support services and counselling services.

Through these groups, women form friendships and support networks. This creates positive relationships and develops skills. It also impacts positively on wellbeing, mental health, motivation to progress immigration and confidence. Previously, mothers have often been very isolated, so this is an opportunity to meet others to share experiences and form friendships. At least three mothers have accessed employment following their case resolution.

Single women have also benefited from attending groups and many have spoken about their experiences in different forums, such as parliament events, blogs and podcasts. They have also participated in informative videos and in a project which trains solicitors in working with young people. Three women have volunteered for Praxis.

The overall project was put together as a reflection of the experiences faced by NRPF migrant families and single women. Since it began, residents have been involved in external evaluations, groups and a service user forum which is open to all Praxis clients. Regular house meetings are held where they can give feedback.

Praxis helps to fill an important gap in supporting the housing rights of some of the most vulnerable people in the UK, by strengthening the capacity and ability of people to cope in a particularly difficult situation. The support in obtaining immigration status can save people from homelessness, destitution, and exploitation.

Together with other organisations, Praxis support their clients to access any statutory support they are entitled to, including accessing accommodation. The project also works with statutory bodies to raise awareness of best practice when working with vulnerable migrants.

Praxis has discussed the model with senior policy officers from London Councils and the Greater London Authority. This includes the Safer London Domestic Violence Project Manager, who produced the Pan-London Domestic Violence Needs Assessment Report and regarded the project as an innovative model of good practice.

Praxis played a significant role in uncovering the [Windrush scandal](#). They first shared their concerns with The Guardian about the growing number of Windrush clients who were being excluded from services and considered 'illegal' because they were unable to evidence their status. This scandal has had a significant impact on changing policy by highlighting the unfairness and cruelty of these policies. This includes the NRPF status imposed on vulnerable families and single women who Praxis work with, who in some cases are unable to access free healthcare or free school meals for their children.

In the long-term, Praxis hopes to help challenge exclusion and discrimination of migrants and to influence policy by encouraging women to gain confidence and speak out.

Barriers

Working with Local Authorities can be at times challenging, particularly when supporting families to approach social services for support (this is done by Praxis advice team and is an activity separate from the housing project). On occasions Praxis has engaged with solicitors to enter into a legal challenge on behalf of families having difficulty accessing Local Authority assistance, and in some cases, these had been Local Authorities who were also referring into the housing project. So far, they have been able to navigate these differences successfully and there is a mutual understanding that the first priority of Praxis is always the families and their rights.

There have also been situations where Praxis advocate for clients' needs, for example, when Local Authorities are not providing an adequate level of financial support or move-on support. So far, they have always been able to advocate for clients successfully.

There have also been occasions where Praxis has made formal complaints when they felt that Local Authorities were not meeting safeguarding protocols with families seeking their support. This has, at least once, led to significant improvements in their assessment process.

Currently the properties are subject to landlord licensing schemes, but new legislation introduced by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government will be extending HMOs (houses in multiple occupation) licensing regulations to all properties with more than two families or four individuals sharing. Praxis is exploring the potential impact of this on the project, as it may affect the number and type of referrals they can accept per house.

Lessons learned

The project is testing a new model of housing provision, so there have been many lessons learned:

- It is important to work flexibly with Local Authorities, as each has different processes and practices.
- Most referrals are for mothers with more than one child, or older children. This means extra rooms have to be used for children, and subsequently become unavailable for single women. Praxis has a separate house (not funded by the Commonweal model) which is used specifically for single women. This has been helpful in filling this gap and for housing women not suitable to share with families.
- Residents particularly appreciate the holistic support and quality of accommodation, reporting it as a moment of respite during a very challenging journey.
- Praxis is not leading on all immigration cases, but feedback from residents show that Praxis immigration advisers have played an important role in most cases of positive immigration status outcomes.
- Although there is no control group for comparison, a package of holistic advice and support along with a degree of housing stability is beneficial to immigration casework. It provides a safe space to keep documents and makes it easier to plan and attend appointments.

The wider support groups and services offered were not envisaged to be central to the project but have provided a lifeline to many otherwise isolated women.

Evaluation

Commonweal Housing regularly monitors the project and its replicability through a team of external evaluators and regular stakeholder meetings. The interim project evaluation is scheduled to be published in September 2018.

A key evaluation finding shows wraparound support and access to immigration casework has a significant impact on the progress and resolution of cases. The average length of stay in Praxis houses (calculated in June 2018) is 270 days. Recent analysis by the NRPF forum (led by Islington and includes all London Local Authorities) found the case-length for families across all London Local Authorities during the 2017-18 financial year was 854 days. Lack of support to families in progressing their immigration cases (jointly with delays from home office) was found to be a significant factor for these prolonged periods. This has helped make the case for the Praxis model of housing and support.

Recognition

As part of WINGS, one of the Praxis groups attended by 60 per cent of mothers in the housing project, some mothers participated in the [Lullaby Project](#), where they worked with the Irene Taylor Trust and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra to create lullabies for their children. This project featured on BBC Radio 4's Woman's Hour. One of the lullabies was recently played by the London Philharmonic Orchestra at Carnegie Hall in New York.

Praxis has made presentations and spoken about the project in many forums, including NACCOM (No Accommodation Network) and FEANTSA. They presented at the NRPF Forum, which is attended by representatives from NRPF teams from most London Local Authorities. In this forum, the project was introduced as a model of good practice, particularly as they are able to evidence outcomes in terms of case resolution and impact on families' wellbeing.

Praxis' CEO has talked about the project at the London Funders event and at the Strategic Alliance of Migrant destitution³.

Praxis is recognised in the sector as an expert on migrant destitution, and as such, Crisis invited them to co-chair a round table on migrant destitution as part of their 50-year anniversary campaign to end homelessness. As part of this work, they provided evidence and contributed to the briefing used at a follow-up All Party Parliamentary Meeting.

They were featured in The Guardian as part of their 2017 Christmas appeal:

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/jan/07/christmas-appeal-praxis-charity-trafficking-homeless>

The project features as a case study in a paper commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/how-improve-support-and-services-destitute-migrants>

Praxis Temporary Homes, which was the basis of this project, received the Andrew Ludlow Award in 2014.

³ <http://londonfunders.org.uk/sites/default/files/images/Meeting%20notes%204%20July%20-%20tackling%20migrant%20destitution.pdf>

Transfer

The project has seen an increase from two to seven Local Authorities referring clients to Praxis. Praxis is currently exploring the level of potential demand from other Local Authorities for these services.

Commonweal have offered a further three houses (an additional eight units for families and three units for single women) in North London. They are currently exploring this offer in the context of the new HMO regulations.

Changes in the housing market, and the uncertainty surrounding the UK leaving the European Union, may impact the financial return to social investors. This potentially means that the project will be less attractive for further expansion or replication in terms of social investment.
