

CARAG HOUSING

MARCH 2021

Project Report



Photograph: Sophie Gardiner

WHO WE ARE

About CARAG

We are a community group made up of asylum seekers and refugees based in Coventry. Our members come from Africa, Asia, the Middle east and as far as South America.

The group is run by asylum seekers, refugees and volunteers from the local community. We have a constitution and are governed by an elected committee. We have come together to share our experiences, support each other, and speak out for rights and dignity in the UK. We want to achieve for asylum seekers the right to work, better treatment for refused asylum seekers and better treatment for all asylum seekers in the UK.

This report is about Right 2 a Home project, which was run by a team of seven of our members.

Most problems that we face as migrants or asylum seekers stem from housing and homelessness. Mental illness, physical illness, drug abuse, alcoholism, not being able to renew your status: having no secure place to stay can bring these issues on, make them worse, and make them harder to sort out.

I honestly think CARAG housing is the best thing that we at CARAG have done so far.

Obviously, it is thank you to MiFriendly Cities and other organisations and funders, NACCOM and others who have come forward and supported us. It is a brilliant.

CARAG member



WHAT WE DO

Right 2 a Home → CARAG Housing Foundation

Right 2 a Home was designed as a research project to prove the need for accommodation for destitute migrants in Coventry, and was awarded £5000 through MiFriendly Cities Social Innovation programme in March 2019.

We started the project in Autumn 2019. Our initial project aimed to learn how to establish accommodation projects such as hosting, persuading people or organisations to offer accommodation at nil or very low rents, transforming empty buildings, free places in existing projects. We hoped to learn how to establish short term accommodation and provide support for refused asylum seekers and other migrants with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) from others who have done this, through research, building partnerships, and campaigning.

Refused asylum seekers and other migrants with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) are often made destitute due to gaps and inadequacies in Home Office support while preparing for an appeal or further submissions. Most CARAG members are in this situation. Coventry Refugee Migrant Centre (CRMC) saw 260 destitute refused asylum seekers and migrants in 2016 alone. Coventry Night Shelter provides overnight sleeping space for about 100 people a year with others turned away due to lack of space.

Many CARAG members have been homeless, and many projects run by others do not serve them well: for instance, often people have to leave during the day, stay for short periods, leave when their status changes and get referrals from organisations that are often difficult to contact. In addition, many shelters do not offer effective legal support to regularise one's status. Homelessness prevents us sorting out our status, and our status makes us homeless. And being homeless makes us sick, depressed and less able to maintain friendships and family links.

We joined NACCOM, the national network of organisations working in this field, attended their conference, and designed our research. We did some initial surveying of our members and interviewed several organisations in the field. We started asking people about their ideal accommodation – what would they want? What would it look like?



During the research, I contributed my thoughts and views about the experience of being homeless and destitute and why housing is important. I advocated for:

- The right to be able to live in a safe place
- Having the safety of knowing if you're out and about, you can leave what you are doing and go home
- That security of having somewhere to be and go to
- Housing as a basic human right
- Giving people their humanity back, for those who had found themselves homeless – giving someone a space gives people their humanity back
- It's a big part of our lives. If you haven't got a space you could go to, it compounds everything else, you cannot plan anything or do anything.

Resident

However, then the pandemic hit. We no longer needed to make the case for housing destitute migrants because the government decided it had to be done temporarily through its “Everyone In” programme.

We also no longer needed to be researching numbers and needs as these became evident through the scheme. Coventry took in 22 migrants initially amongst other homeless people. We knew, however, that the government funding would run out, and that when it did those accommodated would be evicted and we would face a crisis. We therefore started to think how we could plug that gap when migrants were again facing destitution. We believed that we could run a project that better met people’s needs, so we moved from researching needs to ‘make a case’ to trying to meet needs by providing accommodation. As a result, we became the first migrant run destitution project in the UK: the CARAG Housing Foundation.

We established relationships with Coventry City Council and with Nehemiah, a black run housing association in the Midlands. We raised further funds: £7,000 from the Migration Exchange and £30,000 from the Resourcing Racial Justice Fund. And when we realised that two of our migrant members were about to be evicted from the “Everyone In” accommodation by the City Council we moved swiftly and found a private landlord willing to rent a five bed roomed property to us. On 26th October 2020 we signed the lease for one year and our housing project began!

When I first met CARAG I knew they would be terrific to work with: a real passion for justice, creativity and determination. I expected they would produce a really good bit of research and then get down to the slightly boring and long drawn out business of negotiating for housing. When the pandemic hit, I thought it would be difficult even to do that. But then they seized the moment, and just went for it and now they are housing 5 of their members, and housing them in dignity and hope. I believe they are the first such project in Europe. It makes my heart sing whenever I get news from them.

Councillor Sue Lukes, Islington Council, Housing expert, MigrationWork CIC consultant to CARAG

Photograph: Islington Council



CAMPAIGNING

Alongside delivering our housing project, we have also raised awareness around the issue of migrant homelessness and destitution through talking at events and to the media about our work. We want to show others what is possible, to motivate them to try and set up similar projects.

People have been keen to hear from us about what we are doing: we've spoken at events run by the following organisations: Migrants Organise; South Yorkshire Migration + Asylum Action Group; Campaign Bootcamp; NACCOM; Sisters United; Migrant Help Conference; Women for Refugee Women; IOM; Scottish Asylum and Refugee Action Group; Amnesty International and many more.



Groups like CARAG: they have got such a key role in being really good influencers and power changers.

Katie Fawcett, NACCOM

HOUSING PROJECT

Our housing project is different to other housing projects. We have torn up the Migrant Sector Rule Book that in parts has onerous license agreements when housing migrants. We've stripped away arbitrary time limits and put need at the centre of Length of Stay. We are firmly putting in place our values, with dignity and humanity at the core of every decision that we take. We are transforming the term 'moving on'. Our residents will only move on once we have done everything we can to get their Immigration Status regularised.

We are currently registering as a Charity: the CARAG Housing Foundation. The housing project is run by a committee of five people.

Here they treat human beings as human beings, not commodities, by letting me be myself without a lot of constraints; by giving you a space without putting a lot of arbitrary rules in place.

Resident



HOUSING PROJECT

We accept applications from people who are:

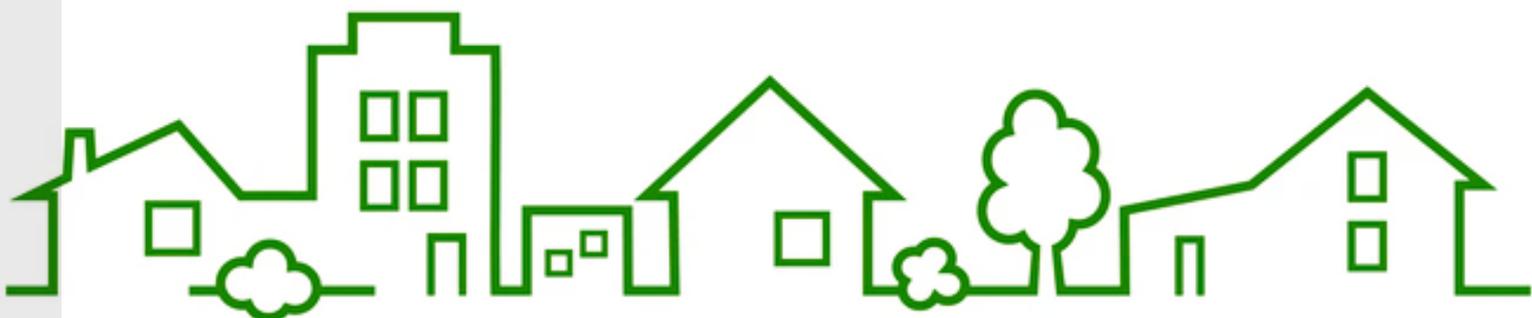
- CARAG members
- No longer eligible for Section 4 or 95 Housing support
- And / or they're experiencing insecure accommodation as a result of their
- Migration Status
- Have severe mental health conditions and / or they have a pre-existing health condition and are being denied access to treatment because of their immigration status

The support on offer includes:

- A private room in a shared house on an initial 12-month license, (however Residents can stay longer if their case has not been determined by the Home Office and or they have exceptional circumstances e.g. a health condition)
- Food and financial support
- Support from a culturally sensitive mental health provider. This type of support is not available in mainstream services.
- Casework and advocacy support
- Legal cost allowance for each Resident of up to £1000.00
- Once we have secured charity status and further funding, we intend to prioritise paying for further legal representation for residents

The rules / ethos:

1. It is the responsibility of the residents to look after their private and communal spaces in a way that they would their own home.
2. We do not want to create too many rules and our emphasis is making sure the residents understand their responsibilities.
3. We have fortnightly check-ins at the house
4. ININI Initiative have more regular contact, providing for mental health support, advocacy and food



WHAT WE'VE ACHIEVED

- Secured a further £37,000 funding
- Secured a five-bedroom house to rent
- Housed five homeless CARAG members
- Developed our local, regional and national networks and strengthened relationships with other organisation

ACHIEVEMENTS

Who we have helped and how we have helped them

Our residents have found a new sense of freedom, autonomy and their mental health has improved significantly.

| As a result of being housed, residents: | |
|---|--|
| Are able to develop skills and confidence | <p>"I'm now able to access the internet – I can take some courses – upskilling myself. It opened me up to a whole new world: it's given me a peek into what I can actually be able to do. It empowers me ... I'm better served." - Resident</p> |
| Decrease in isolation | <p>"People in the house are looking out for each other. In the CARAG house, they are more like family. That's what the strength is. You know there is always somebody there for you." - Last Mafuba, Inini, mental health support provider at Carag House</p> |
| Feel treated with greater dignity and humanity | <p>"This place is tailored to give people some confidence and to treat people as human beings. To value people." Resident</p> |
| Improve their physical and mental health | <p>"By just being there you have eliminated a number of things that leaves you vulnerable. For some homeless people, they end up losing their ability to care for themselves on the streets, because there are no facilities to have a shower. People lose it and not caring for themselves. Being in a house, all these things come back. The house is extremely clean. Being able to live in a clean environment and cleaning after themselves, taking care of themselves and their place. There's a great change mentally and physically." "People are happier. It releases their anxiety levels, their anxiety levels go down." - Last Mafuba, Inini, mental health support provider at Carag House</p> <p>"All of the residents are saying it's transformed their mental health. The feedback we have received is that people feel they have some degree of their Humanity and Dignity back" - Nathan, R2AH</p> |
| Are able to take steps to regularise their status | <p>"I can explore the world of helping myself and regularising my status in an environment that is stable and secure. When sofa surfing or homeless, keeping documents is difficult – you're having to be on the move all the time. Now I can try to build something and regroup my life together." - Resident</p> |
| Are able to make plans for the future | <p>"People are more confident. You can actually sit down and talk to them about their plans. They are now planning – that's a huge change from a life where you don't plan. You're just roaming before – now they have purpose." - Last Mafuba, Inini, mental health support provider at Carag House</p> |

IMPACT

What is unique about this housing, and what impact does this have?

Culturally sensitive mental health support

Residents have access to regular mental health support from someone who has shared the same experiences as them, who visits them at the house.

“There’s a difference talking to someone who doesn’t understand what you’re going through / someone who can speak my vernacular – I can express myself better. They can resonate better with what I’m saying. They will respond better and give me better advice due to their experience.” - *Resident*

The house being migrant lead

The house is led by a community of migrants and refugees. This fosters a unique supportive environment.

“It is key for people to hear the voices of people who have lived through the horrendous and unjust asylum and immigration system. People with lived experience, they’re the ones who can inform us of the effect of this, and what it has caused for them, what the barriers are. As a network we want to see how we can take this learning, take what’s needed, and help others to implement that. There is a lot to do in the charity sector around shifting the power imbalance, and looking at how we can empower and equip people.” - *Katie Fawcett, NACCOM*

“It being run by migrants and people who have lived experience – they’re better positioned to understand the needs of us in the property because they’ve been through it and experienced it.” - *Resident*

Longer term leases (12 months with a possibility to extend)

The long term leases allow plenty of time for people to be well, and to address their immigration issues.

“For me it is about peace of mind. This kind of freedom where you can be relaxed a bit. While you are sorting your papers without the pressure of thinking you’re going to be kicked out.” - *Lorraine Masiya Mponela, CARAG Chair*

“12 months would give people a comfortable amount of time to feel healthy again, give them their dignity back.” - *Katie Fawcett, NACCOM*

Being part of a wider, active, supportive community

The house is connected to the CARAG organisation and community – to live in the house, you must be a member of CARAG. This creates a strong network of social and emotional support around the house and its residents.

“It’s what we do as CARAG. We look out for one another. People will take a CARAG member and support them to get to the GP and get to hospital, to encourage one another. We are migrants and we understand one another. Life in this country is different to where I come from, where everyone belongs to the community, and everyone will help and support you. It’s not like that in the UK. But in the house, people are looking out for each other.” - *CARAG Member*

CASE STUDIES

Case Study:

One of the men living in the house is now eligible to apply for status via the 20-year route.

He must gather a lot of evidence – which is difficult once you have been homeless, as it is very hard to keep track of all the documentation required. He is receiving casework support from a CARAG member who is supporting him to find an organisation who will support his application, or the resources to cover this cost.

Case Study:

When Covid struck, I was staying in a shelter, and was put into a self-contained flat, and then a hotel. After this, we were given a letter saying we had to leave. We found ourselves with nowhere to go. We started looking for places to rent. We came up against the hostile environment – landlords would ask you for a passport, first thing. They would ask ‘Where do you work? How will you pay? Where are your required documents?’

[This resident was a CARAG Member, and was then offered a space in the CARAG house] It's a relief to be there, having been where I was before. It is the beginning of another process. They give me financial support to be able to feed myself, clothe myself. CARAG has also supported me with phone credit. It has allowed be some semblance of normality. Something I had not experienced for the last few years.

Being homeless and having no support is like being alone in the world. People's confidence is worn down. Simple tasks people cannot do. It is so difficult to execute simple tasks.

Now I have keys to a room where I know I can open the door, go in, shut the world away, be in a safe secure and comfortable space. Be able to do everything that I require. This has given me the security that I require as an individual. It has taken a weight off my shoulders not worrying about where to sleep or eat: stability. I can explore the world of helping myself and regularising my status in an environment that is stable and secure. When sofa surfing or homeless, keeping documents is difficult – you're having to be on the move all the time. Now I can try to build something and regroup my life together.

I'm now able to access the internet – I can take some courses – upskilling myself. I'm taking some IT courses and MOOCS, online – one on info technology – and one on data analysis processes. It opened me up to a whole new world: it's given me a peek into what I can actually be able to do. You need a skill to navigate the world of employment: I can now think about what this could be. It empowers me in a way where I can use that, whether I'm volunteering or whatever else. I'm better served.

LEARNING

The key challenges we faced:

- **Capacity** – we are a small, voluntary group, and there is lots of work to be done.
- **Our focus** has never been housing – it was peer to peer support.
- **We faced challenges** in registering as a charity as a migrant-led organisation (see below)
- **Setting this up** during a pandemic was difficult as we all had other concerns at this time, but finding a house and setting up a housing project has been the light in the darkness for us.

Even if we have difficulties, within the difficulties we still find something positive.

Loraine Masiya Mpnela, CARAG Chair

Before you start, you need:

- A good management structure
- Competent people with a diversity of skills sets. Our team has expertise in finance, law, public health, mental health, administration, web design and leadership
- Experts / advisors / supporters with a wealth of experience in Local Authority admin and the third sector is very helpful.

Constitution

- It can be challenging knowing what constitution to go for – understanding the implications of different models in terms of attracting funding and navigating the policies.
- We navigated this through seeking advice from
- several organisations
- We decided to register the project as a Charity.
- Registration as a charity is taking longer than expected. There have been some obstacles that we've faced as a result of being wholly migrant led. We've had to overcome regulatory and compliance challenges.

Unfortunately some Institutional Bias as a result of not being British nationals have come to the fore. However, we haven't let that stand in our way, we've got on with it - advice from those who have done this before – such as Migrants Organise – has been invaluable for helping us to navigate these barriers.

LEARNING

Our long-term aim is to end migrant homelessness. We will work with all our people including our new residents to share their stories and to persuade policymakers to end No Recourse to Public Funds and to recognise housing as a human right.

CARAG Housing Foundation Team

Getting support (advice, houses, funding etc.)

- Talk to as diverse a group of people as you can in the charitable, migration and housing sectors. We made a big list of all the organisations we could learn from, and split these up between us to talk to.
- People have been kind, keen to share their knowledge and experience and to support us.
- There is a real appetite among many partners and funders to support genuinely migrant-led initiatives.
- Social media and online events have helped us to increase the reach of our voices, as we've been able to present about our project at events across the UK without leaving home. People we have met online have turned into donors and supporters.
- We've talked at a lot of (mostly online) events about our work. This has been very effective for building relationships and networking. Relationships have been key for securing funding and offers of support.
- People and organisations change: when we first met the Council their line was that homeless migrants should go "home". We kept at it, we did not give in, and they changed.



LEARNING

It looks hard and probably people will tell you this can't happen. Because there are many hindrances – we've met a lot of blocks. If we had listened to naysayers we wouldn't have been here today. It's about trying all you can and being creative along the way, and reaching out.

I remember for us to get this house, we tried contacting councils, housing associations with everyone saying no. A single Tweet changed everything. We had loads of responses. That's how we got the house. Now we have a list where when we have more money we can get the next one. We have people saying we have this property here and there.

Lorraine Masiya Mponela, CARAG Chair



Contracts and policies

- Documentation is important in order to set up safely, well, and within the law.
- We asked other organisations for example policies, license agreements and so on. We sought advice from experts to help us amend these to suit our needs.
- We've also sought to simplify license agreements, putting residents at the heart.

This project was selected to take part in the Social Innovation programme, run by MigrationWork CIC as part of the MiFriendly Cities project. MigrationWork provided specialist training and consultancy support to help projects develop their innovative ideas. Projects also received seed funding. This programme was funded by the EU's Urban Innovative Action fund.

Contact us

If you are interested in knowing more, or learning about anything else in this report, please contact us at:

Twitter @caragcoventry
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Thanks to:

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Report by Tamsin Koumis of MigrationWork CIC, Loraine Masiya Mponela and Nathan Ndlovu from Coventry Asylum and Refugee Action Group (CARAG).

