



Migration, COVID-19 and community support in London and Liverpool.

This is the third podcast in a series for Stay Home Stories, exploring how the pandemic has changed our relationship to home, a research project involving museums and universities in London and Liverpool.

This third podcast draw on the experiences of community life based on interviews with migrants, refugees and people from diverse cultural backgrounds. It focusses on connections with the local area, mutual aid and the work of community organisations in supporting people through the pandemic. I'm Eithne Nightingale from Queen Mary University of London talking to Kathy Burrell, Annabelle Wilkins and Julie Begum.

Eithne: So, welcome. Could you introduce yourselves and the role you have played on the Stay Home Stories project? Annabelle?

Annabelle: Yes, I am Annabelle Wilkins. I am a researcher on the Stay Home Stories project and I have been talking to people about their experiences of home and home life during COVID-19. I have also been looking at how home has been represented in political debates and media coverage.

Eithne: Thank you. Kathy?

Kathy: I am Kathy Burrell. I am one of the co-investigators on the project. My focus has been especially on the Liverpool research in home and migration.

Julie: Hello. My name is Julie. I am a community development worker based in Tower Hamlets, London and I have been working with local communities during COVID and have worked as a community researcher on the Stay Home project.

Eithne: Could you say how you set about the research?

Annabelle: I started by doing interviews with lots of organisations that have supported people from different migration backgrounds and migration histories and these include refugees, people seeking asylum as well as people who have migrated for work or lots of different reasons. And I have also been doing interviews with individuals about how they have experienced home and everyday life during COVID-19.

Kathy: In Liverpool we have had three community researchers that we recruited. They have been interviewing people with quite a range of a different migration and religious backgrounds across the city. People from the Polish community particularly people in the Toxteth area.

Annabelle: So, in London too we worked with community researchers who conducted their own interviews with people that they knew or people within their networks. And their work

was really vital in helping us to reach people from lots of different migration backgrounds, people from different ethnic groups, people who lived in different areas of the city and in different housing types. So it was really important to ensure that a wide range of voices and stories are represented in this project.

Eithne: Great. And Julie?

Julie: Previous to the Stay Home Stories project I had been doing some community research on two previous other projects. And they were very focussed around the Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets and East London in particular. So I was quite keen not to repeat asking the same people again so I asked people that I knew, really, my friends, to get a wider cross section of London's communities.

Eithne: So maybe you could describe some of the overarching themes that have emerged from the research? Annabelle?

Annabelle: Yes. So we know that COVID-19 has amplified lots of existing inequalities, so inequalities with regards to housing and health care. We know that ethnic minority and black communities have suffered disproportionately and many of those inequalities have also affected the migrants and people of different migration backgrounds that we have spoken to throughout the research. Many of the people that we spoke to were being directly affected by changes in immigration policies, people that have had anxiety about Brexit, whether they would be allowed to stay in the UK after that. So COVID-19 has not come on its own. It has also been accompanied by lots of other issues in people's lives. I think that's what our interviews have really drawn out and demonstrated.

Eithne: Thank you. And Kathy?

Kathy: One of the strongest themes to emerge from the Liverpool interviews, I think, has been the impact it has had on people's ability to stay in touch with family, you know, in different countries. Particularly, say, the European people we spoke to who were so used to being able to go back and forth, whose whole sort of migration projects were created around the idea that you could pop back on a cheap flight and you could go, you know, a couple of times a year or you could go if you needed to for an emergency. And what we found is that people working through this feeling of being stuck and that was the first time they had experienced that. That was not in their minds when they thought that they were going to migrate. So having to really, sort of, re-calibrate how you stay in touch and where home is, I think, has been quite a difficult experience.

Julie: People were cut off, like Kathy said, from family, from friends for a very extended period of time. I knew people who had relatives in care homes or sons abroad who could not return back to the UK or people who were actually juggling lots of different challenges like work and how they and their living circumstances, so they could be living in multi-generational households and still having to work and trying to protect their family and the people that they work with. I was volunteering with a food bank in Bethnal Green and the demand for that food bank grew exponentially. Obviously we had to do it under COVID restrictions and people could not come in and pick out things that they needed. So what we did we had to have a system where people could pick up pre-packaged food depending on their needs of which we had to register at the beginning. And the kind of people that were coming were older people, families with young children, single migrant men who weren't living in accommodation where they could cook anything so we had to provide food that that didn't need cooking so they could be heated up or used in a microwave or, you know, use a kettle.

Kathy: Can you give any examples of community support that developed, for example, in Liverpool, Kathy?

Kathy: We have had lots of examples of community spirit in Liverpool. I think the interviews showed a real pride in that. There's been this legacy in Liverpool of underfunding, it has been hit really hard by austerity and what came through in the interviews was how, a real sense of people looking out for each other, in most interviews, so a different scale, more informal support, you know, through organisations. We have got a good example here, the voice of Sheila she self describes as European and Asian heritage and she lives in the L17 area.

So, if I'm thinking about Liverpool and also the area that I live in, I think what's been really great about the pandemic has been kind of that, like, community and people getting together to help each other. And I think – I feel like the camaraderie or the solidarity between people in Liverpool is always something that I really love and that I like to be a part of. And especially in the area where I live, sort of L17, there's always people kind of helping each other, people reaching out, or just, stopping and having a chat. And yeah, I really like that and it's just made it, you know, made me more proud to be part, you know, of this community and of Liverpool being my home.

Eithne: Are there instances of support in other areas of Liverpool?

Kathy: We can listen to Saba who describes herself as British Yemeni heritage and she talks about the Toxteth area in particular

So I'd say one of the biggest and best things that came out of COVID was how – how the community just came together and how it was really apparent that where you were in the UK was dependent on how your community came together. For Liverpool 8 and for some of the bad press that we do get, what we excel at is coming together in times of adversity and supporting each other. And what was really nice is that we had like media outlets that were willing to showcase some of those good news stories. So now when you Google Toxteth or Liverpool 8, that some of those good news stories are now showing up on those feeds, which gives a better picture to the rest of the UK. Also, that it's like the lessons learned that other people can come and learn from us, because we know how to do it.

Eithne: Yes. It is really impressive how communities have come together from these examples. And Tower Hamlets, of course, you have mentioned it Julie, you mentioned the food banks. Are there any other examples you would like to say of mutual support among the Bangladeshi community or other communities?

Julie: There is the Valance football club that is an organisation for young people, young men, primarily and these young men spent their time delivering hot meals to people when they could not do their usual activities so they had an arrangement with a food organisation that cooked and prepared meals for local people to their local tastes so not the tinned food stuff, you know, so rice, curry and things like that that might be much more appropriate to Bangladeshi people who are a lot more vulnerable. And they spent their time going round, delivering food to local people who could not maybe cook for themselves or go out shopping and it was really amazing to see how these young people had responded and stepped up really in a way that they had not done before in their community.

Eithne: So there have been some positives, even in this really difficult time, people coming together. But there must have been some people who fell through the gaps or whose needs it was really difficult to meet.

Annabelle: I think particular difficulties have been experienced by people seeking asylum, refugees and particularly undocumented migrants because many of those people don't have recourse to state funds, they can't access mainstream state support. And housing has also been a real issue with many people being made homeless or not having access to the places that they would normally stay with family or friends or informal forms of support and their usual networks, even charities or families or friends have been withdrawn particularly during the first lockdown, the peak lockdown period. This comes through really strongly in an interview that I did with Sarah who works for the Hackney Migrant Centre.

I guess it was just like the deterioration of support networks that people had. So, a lot of people that we work with, you know, have really unstable housing, like they'll be living with friends or like a member in their like church community or these, kind of, informal arrangements. And then, when the pandemic happened, a lot of people were told that they couldn't stay, the space was too small. You know, a lot of people had to leave, basically, a lot of people didn't have anywhere to stay. And then a lot of the charities or, you know, drop-in services that they relied on for like cooked meals or social support or kind of like immediate poverty relief, they all kind of closed down as well. And gradually everything was just kind of, you know – their entire support network completely withered and even – a lot of people get – you know, would have had – don't have a right to work and would have had informal cash in hand work that completely dried up. And then they might have been getting support from a family member elsewhere in the country or again people from their church community. And then, you know, even people that might have been slightly better off that were helping them financially wouldn't have been able to do that anymore. So everything just kind of – you know, all of that informal community base support they would have had, kind of disappeared.

Annabelle: Many undocumented people, in particular, work as domestic workers or cleaners, going into people's homes and their work really dried up in a significant way because people were afraid of having them in their homes very suddenly so in many cases they lost those jobs overnight. There was also a fear of even seeking support so getting tested or seeking any health care even if people did get COVID-19 in case they got reported to the Home Office because of their lack of status and this sometimes led to really deeply tragic consequences as explained here by Mariko Hatashi who works for the Southeast and East Asian Centre based in London.

So losing jobs as soon as the lockdown measures started because a lot of people who we interviewed work as a cleaner, part-time cleaner or some people are like domestic workers as well. So, yes, a lot of employers didn't want anyone coming in their home anymore and because it's just the nature of being undocumented, not many people do have contracts. So, it's really if your employers say that you don't have to come for a while until things settle, then you don't get paid. So that was really – that's one thing and of course the other thing was that there was still a lot of fear around getting tested or – I mean, at that time it was very difficult to get tested anyway but to seek healthcare support. So, people were really frightened about not just getting Covid but, "If I get Covid I can't go to hospital and if I go to hospital Home Office will find out about me." So, there was a lot of fear around that as well. It was really emotionally difficult and of course in extreme cases, because of that fear, we had a few people who suddenly died at home, not being able to call 111 or to get any emergency services as such.

Eithne: So how do organisations like Hackney Migrant Centre or others who would normally step in to provide support in such cases, and whose staff were also told presumably to stay

home, so how did they respond to these needs if in fact they did?

Annabelle: The organisations that I have spoken to, I think, across the board they really adapted very rapidly to the challenges of not being able to work in person or physically to support people. And in many cases within just a couple of weeks they had actually set up remote systems of support, so whether that's telephone support, so calling people that they knew needed help to organise things like food deliveries other essential services, or legal advice and assistance. And, in some cases, providing online support and making sure that people could access that, through things like phone vouchers, data vouchers and laptops. In this example, also from Hackney Migrant Centre, Sarah talks about how they shifted their work to this online and telephone support and developed a remote advice service also working with about 30 volunteers during that lockdown period.

It happened really quickly, actually. I feel like the process of events, we closed down end of March, then there was a two-week period where we were completely closed and I think the core staff team were devising plans to keep the service running remotely. Like, throughout the summer it was in its height and it was really busy and we had about thirty volunteers I think working on it. And some of those volunteers were just doing deliveries, some of those volunteers were just doing phone calls, some volunteers were doing both. And I think, by the end of the summer, the most people we ever had getting regular support from the project, I think we had about eight-five people.

Kathy: Kathy, were there examples in Merseyside?

Kathy: Yes, I mean there were lots and to pick one out in particular, that came through in the interviews, was the work of the Polish community, Merseyside Pologne. This was picked up in the interviews and we spoke to the leader of the group at the event we had and what we saw there was huge amounts of work happening, like volunteer work really but to give information. I think it was that information that people could trust that was really key. But picking up on what Julie said, as well, the organiser was talking about the importance of food as well how again, you know, British food just was not always appropriate. The kinds of food you would get just was just not the bread – it was just what people would eat or would want to eat necessarily, ideally, so quite important services to make people feel comfortable and at ease at a time that was really hard.

Eithne: There is something about familiarity of food, isn't there? It's something about giving succour or comfort to people in a time of stress.

Kathy: And it is dignity as well, isn't it? That is the whole thing. It's need but it's dignity. Yes, making people feel at ease or helping them to feel at ease, that sense of belonging. It goes a long way, I think, doesn't it?

Eithne: Yes. Great.

Annabelle: I also did an interview with The Big Leaf Foundation who support displaced young people in the Surrey area including people seeking asylum and unaccompanied young people who have recently arrived in the UK and one of the first things they did was to provide translated information on COVID-19. Many young people before that they were unable to even understand what lockdown was about, what they had to do, how to keep themselves safe during the lockdown so that was one of the priorities for them was really countering the kind of mis-information that people are often subject to and making sure they understood what support they could access through that information as well

Julie: I think the language used in COVID during the pandemic was really vital or the language I should say and we felt that the messages weren't quite getting through or they

were not translatable into community languages and so one of the outputs that came out of one of the projects that we were dealing with at Kings College University around how messages were being translated really between different communities was looking at how people who did not have access to English language they were making sense of what was going on and what were their resources and so we found that community mediators, so they could be people within the family or within the community, were really vital in making sure that people knew what was going on and also they could challenge what was going on in terms of the misinformation that was being spread so one of the things that came out of it was Coronware which was making these short videos around different elements of the pandemic experience in different community languages which were much more oral and not written so people needed to see and hear what was going on. So we got health professional from those communities, whether they were doctors or other health professionals, to actually let people know how to behave in this pandemic and what were the things they could to keep themselves safe but also to make other people safe and having these YouTube videos around I think helped people feel much more connected to what was going on and understand what was happening. And we needed to ensure they were being seen by as many people as possible so we worked with community satellite TV stations and other media outlets and resources to really disseminate those videos and those messages and we used social media. And there was a real solidarity, I felt, around the different communities and migrant communities that were living in London in terms of trying to keep people safe.

Eithne: I mean the videos were lovely, weren't they? They were sort of cartoon-like and they are really engaging and they bring out the whole intergenerational aspect about the older people really being confused as to why their grandchildren or children are not visiting or are not touching them. So, I thought they were really quite effective and moving.

Kathy: I have been showing my students the videos in my teaching and they really responded. They are so poignant. It is such a way of explaining and getting them thinking about home and family and, you know during the pandemic. So, I am so grateful for those. They really help us teach, help people understand those experiences

Eithne: And the fact they were shown on TV, on media channels that those communities were watching presumably

Julie: Yes. It is vital because we can't rely on mainstream media to get the messages out to different communities. We really need to think differently about how people, what people rely on to get their news and information and advice.

Eithne: One of the statistics I was interested in was that there was a high percentage of the British Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets that have actually taken up the vaccine. Is that right?

Julie: It is only when people made that information available to people in a way that was accessible that the take up increased.

Eithne: it's a difficult time, it's been an extremely stressful time. We have all known people, there was quite a high percentage of mortality, for example, within some of these communities. People I know in the Bangladeshi community who've died and in other communities, too, the Jewish community in Hackney for example, but there have been some positives out of this stressful time. So Kathy, could you identify any positives?

Kathy: I think that one of the things that has come through is that people had more time – people who weren't working obviously –had more time at home and that some of that time was invested in local communities so we have had people on a sort of sense of belonging

increased because they've had more time to explore local communities and more time to spend with people even though if you could not go into people's home you could see your neighbours. Suddenly, in our interviews, being able to see your neighbours, chat to them on a doorstep, wave to them, suddenly felt really important.

Eithne: Great. Annabelle have you identified in the south? Now we all know the north is very community driven, having come from the north but, no, I am sure there were examples in the south as well.

Annabelle: Yes so I think one positive outcome that many people in organisations have shared is the opportunity to collaborate with different organisations that they may not have worked with before and to come together on these issues that were challenging for lots of different communities. And Mariko who is from the Southeast and East Asian Centre talks about how the pandemic has actually encouraged new links between particularly East and Southeast Asian communities and how this has strengthened their resolve and their capacity to challenge racism which increased during the pandemic, there was lots of anti-Asian racism that has been devastating for those communities in particular.

I'm not sure about sense of home but sense of belonging and sense of communities, I think it has quite increased and I think this I actually hear more from the East and Southeast Asian kind of identity development, and also its kind of movement to challenge the racism and discriminations. So yeah, I mean, this is more about I think my interaction with – not necessarily with the migrant communities but with the wider East and Southeast Asian communities. I also feel that people do often say that it's really the pandemic has created this kind of East and Southeast Asian community.

Eithne: Were there any other examples of organisations or positives?

Julie: Yes, I think the Black Lives Matter movement took on a whole new meaning during the pandemic. If anything, the COVID pandemic highlighted the inequalities that were already here in our societies and communities and what it has done it has really shone a spotlight on them and this project has really helped to collect the examples and stories of different communities living in London and Liverpool and to show how people are meeting these challenges in a way that is full of solidarity so challenging the kind of inequalities that are around.

Eithne: Excellent. That is one thing to identify all of these issues, isn't it? It is another thing to contribute to change and to find what lessons have we learnt. So what can we learn, for the future, about the experiences of communities during the pandemic, Kathy?

Kathy: There was definitely a sense of frustration with the amount of good work that was happening within communities that just wasn't resourced, or wasn't recognised and the lessons learnt, I think, was that when these huge things happen the best placed people to support people are local. Understanding the conditions, understanding the situation, understanding the people living it and that they need support directly. Certain groups just don't get the same resources but if we are going to protect people and join together, you know, that resource needs to go to where it is most needed. Particularly Saba in Liverpool, again, these groups know what to do, these local groups who are working with people, they are the ones who need support because they are the ones who, at the end of the day, will be saving people's lives and reaching out to people.

Lessons learnt is that there's a real need for those people in positions of power to really, now, connect with people who were at grassroots. Because whereas things came to the halt for a lot of people when you look at it was the NHS that rose to the top and were really there at the forefront and our community workers. So the people who were

working on the ground with, you know, whether that was – whatever community or social group that was, their work carried on tenfold. And they were able to do things that, you know, larger organisations just took too long to get their acts together on.

Eithne: My first response was when, you know, a huge investment was put into that Test and Trace, for example, and I thought why is not that money, or a proportion of that money, actually going to grass roots because they are the people, who can encourage people to take the test, encourage people to isolate, encourage people to protect, so for me there was a huge frustration that this amount of investment was going into a centralised resource as opposed to a local resource.

Annabelle: I think, to add to what Kathy and you have been saying about the need for funding, I think what has also come through in the interviews with organisations is the importance of involving grass roots and community organisations in policy making decisions and actually consulting with them meaningfully at the high level that these decisions are being taken so really learning from the work that they are doing and implementing that on the ground. I think there has been some frustration from organisations that feel they are not being heard on these issues. I think that is another lesson to be learned in case of future restrictions or measures that might need to be taken.

Eithne: Julie, are there other lessons that you think...?

Julie: Yes, the kind of corruption that has been coming out of the government and the way they have been giving contracts to their friends or their allies or whatever as a kind of payoff for their loyalty. That has been shown up. It is just the leadership has been quite poor, really, around this, I think, in terms of central government. Local government and local organisations have had to step up and fill the gap where the central government has not really provided very good role models or very good examples of behaving well around the pandemic and we continue to see that. One of the things that came out of Tower Hamlets was having COVID champions from the local community that could really engage with communities that live here?

Eithne: Can I just pick up, Julie, what a COVID champion does?

Julie: OK they have been recruited as volunteers from the community to engage with people how to behave around COVID, giving out masks, talking about how to , particularly in the early days, of washing hands or keeping distance, just engaging with people in a way that is much more immediate so people can have a conversation about it, they can ask questions or they can voice any concerns that they might have about the vaccine or whatever it is that needs to be discussed in a way that is in a friendly way, in a way that is going to make them feel comfortable and that is informal. So having people from your community, your neighbourhood around to support you and they have access to the latest guidelines, the health promotion, they have been trained to do that sort of role. And what it has done it provides a really important link between more formal agencies and the local communities that live in Tower Hamlets and that is what we've needed, really, and these are just ordinary people who have stepped up to volunteer.

Eithne: Thank you. Is there just one thing that you would like to see changed. if you can identify..?

Kathy: I think we are seeing it, from the sort of human experience. There are so many things to see in change of funding but for me I really hope we hold onto the empathy that maybe we have reached, you know, listening to people's experiences, understanding other people's suffering, sharing in the same sort of worry. I think there was a moment where there was more solidarity and I really hope we hold onto that as a country as a society because I think it

is so important and I hope this is where our project and the videos that Julie has been working on, this is what it is about. It is about getting people to recognise that we have all shared something in this, that we have all been through something.

Annabelle: I think that it is possible with the funding and resources to make some of these changes and I think some of that should have been carried on because if the political will is there. So I am thinking of the 'Everyone in' campaign where homeless people were housed in hotels during that first lockdown you know the political will was there at one point but it is not sustained so I think the need to kind of sustain those efforts to actually help everyone and prioritise the most vulnerable throughout the pandemic experience would be something to focus on.

Julie: Yes. To echo Kathy and Annabelle a more just society to make sure that the resources and the needs are being met in a way that addresses some of the inequalities that people are facing.

Eithne: Thank you so much. It has been a really interesting, illuminating and challenging talk so thanks very much all of you.

Julie: Thank you, Eithne.

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With thanks to all contributors and to Jonty Lovell for the soundtrack *Blip*, a recurring sound he created to reflect the monotony of lockdown life, but also to instil a sense of optimism that things will get better. Follow him on Instagram [j.lovemusic](https://www.instagram.com/j.lovemusic).