

# ASSIST IMPACT STUDY 2011

Summary of interviews with ASSIST clients,  
volunteers, Trustees & partner organisations

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'I'm a human now. ASSIST made me stand up tall and feel like a human.'  
(Client)

'ASSIST has done a terrific amount of good work in providing a lifeline to people in desperate situations. It's been a tremendous effort.'  
(Partner Organisation)

'Look what we've managed to do. It's more than a small bunch of people could possibly have hoped for.'  
(Trustee)

## INTRODUCTION

The ASSIST Impact Study project was commissioned by ASSIST Trustees in April 2011. The aims of the project were to:

- produce a public ASSIST Impact Study document, to be used in awareness-raising, publicity and fundraising work; and
- develop a number of photographic and web-based case studies of ASSIST volunteers and former ASSIST clients.

The project's main activity was interviewing those involved with ASSIST. During April-June 2011, 29 interviews were completed with 3 Trustees, 14 volunteers, 5 current/former clients and 7 individuals from ASSIST's partner organisations. All interviewees gave written consent for their participation in the project.

As Impact Study interviews progressed, it became clear that the project presented an opportunity for – and was turning into – a wholesale review of ASSIST from the perspective of those involved with and supported by the organisation.

This report has therefore been produced to ensure the views, experiences, opinions and ideas expressed by interviewees are fully documented and made available to ASSIST. The report presents this information under the following headings:

- History of ASSIST
- Success
- Role & Purpose
- Governance
- Support
- Volunteers
- Awareness-raising & Campaigning
- ASSIST & Sheffield
- The Future

During the course of the project, volunteer and former client interviewees were asked if they would be willing to be the subject of case studies but - for a variety of different reasons - all interviewees declined to do so. The project was not, therefore, able to produce any case studies. The public ASSIST Impact Study document is due to be produced during September 2011.

Rachel Westerby and Ben Norsworthy, the research volunteers, would like to thank all those who contributed their time, thoughts and experiences to the project.

For more information about the project or this report, please contact Rachel Westerby at [rachel.westerby@gmail.com](mailto:rachel.westerby@gmail.com).

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

History of ASSIST (Section 1) sets out interviewees' recollections of how and why ASSIST was established. It includes their descriptions of the situation in Sheffield during 2002-3 that prompted early ASSIST meetings, the role of various organisations and individuals in these meetings, and the process by which ASSIST became a charity in late 2003.

This section also explores the way in which ASSIST has developed and expanded since it was established. Interviewees welcomed how ASSIST has become increasingly more professional and consistent, and identified the importance of key individuals in developing new teams and activities.

Whilst most thought it positive that ASSIST is now able to support larger numbers of people, they also mentioned some adverse consequences of expansion, including the loss of personal relationships and increased waiting times for clients.

Success (Section 2) collects together interviewees' examples of ASSIST's success.

Interviewees gave a range of examples of how ASSIST mitigates destitution, by providing practical support – cash and accommodation – and by using emotional support and friendship to improve wellbeing and reduce isolation.

Many also mentioned ASSIST's achievements in increasing public awareness of asylum and destitution, delivering high quality support almost solely via volunteers, securing the majority of its resources via donations from the general public and involving refugees and asylum seekers in its work.

Role & Purpose (Section 3) covers interviewees' thoughts on the aims of ASSIST, and any difficulties or barriers it encounters in achieving these aims and carrying out its activities.

Interviewees described how ASSIST aims to deal with the full range of needs that its client present with, providing both practical and emotional support, and a listening and caring function. Several interviewees characterised ASSIST's role as 'standing in the gap' - providing something where nothing else exists - whilst smaller numbers suggested that ASSIST might focus more on supporting the development of similar organisations in areas outside of Sheffield.

Almost all those involved in the project identified the UK asylum system - and UKBA itself – as making ASSIST's work more difficult. Other commonly mentioned difficulties included raising sufficient funds, negative public perceptions of asylum seekers and the pressures volunteers can encounter when working with destitute asylum seekers.

Governance (Section 4) summarises interviewees' views and ideas about how ASSIST operates as an organisation.

Several interviewees felt the involvement of Trustees in ASSIST activities can sometimes lead to a lack of clarity in decision-making, and two volunteers outlined what they perceived to be a lack of transparency and democracy in the process by which Trustees are selected.

Trustee interviewees viewed ASSIST's non-hierarchical management structure as positive, and volunteer interviewees particularly welcomed the opportunity to engage in organisation-wide discussion about difficult issues such as ending support. Some volunteer interviewees, however, saw a lack of hierarchy as problematic for some types of decisions, particularly those concerning competition for limited resources between teams.

Whilst interviewees did raise some concerns about communication, both internal to ASSIST and between ASSIST and its partner organisations, the majority felt communication was broadly good for a volunteer-run organisation. On fundraising and financial management, interviews revealed some tension within ASSIST around spending all available resources on supporting clients, or accumulating a financial surplus for the organisation to make use of in the future.

Support (Section 5) details interviewees' responses to a number of questions about the support ASSIST provides.

Many mentioned the unique nature of ASSIST support, again including the combination of both practical and emotional support, together with volunteers' willingness to listen to clients and work with those exhibiting challenging behaviour.

All interviewees were asked what actions ASSIST should take with regard to cash support when funds ran low. Clients and refugee/asylum-seeking volunteer interviewees, together with some other volunteers, believed the level of cash support - rather than the number receiving support - should be reduced. Others believed that ASSIST support would cease to be meaningful should it drop below a minimum weekly level.

The 'short-term' element of ASSIST was raised by several interviewees in the context of discussions about ASSIST support. Interviewees involved in starting ASSIST described how 'short-term' was included in the organisation's name to reflect the belief that policies causing destitution would change within a short time, and that ASSIST itself would no longer need to exist.

Other interviewees considered the 'short-term' element of ASSIST to refer to the limited time - generally held to be a maximum of 12 months - for which ASSIST provides support. They gave several reasons why this approach is necessary, including the inability of ASSIST to offer indefinite support, and the need to enable new clients - with potentially greater needs - to access support.

Several interviewees raised the lack of clarity around the exceptional circumstances in which support might continue after 12 months. The majority of interviewees agreed that ASSIST should withdraw support at any time in

response to consistently violent, aggressive or discriminatory behaviour, or from those working illegally. Many felt that 'working' should only be considered as such when it provides a regular weekly income comparable to or more than ASSIST cash support.

Volunteers (Section 6) covers interviewees' views and ideas about – and direct experiences of – volunteering with ASSIST.

Almost all volunteer interviewees were motivated to join ASSIST because they considered the situation of destitute refused asylum seekers to be unjust, and wanted to contribute to an organisation that sought to change or make a difference to this situation.

Refugee/asylum-seeking volunteers described a number of ways in which volunteering with ASSIST had been a positive experience, including by meeting new people, reducing their stress by being active, and developing new skills (including improving both written and spoken English language).

On volunteer recruitment, many early volunteer interviewees became involved with ASSIST by coming along with friends, or by volunteering in an informal capacity before being assigned a specific role. More recent volunteer interviewees tended to have found out about ASSIST from formal volunteering services.

Some interviewees were concerned that comparatively smaller number of volunteers are interested in becoming involved in support service roles. Others suggested that recruitment processes should include skills test exercises specific to particular roles.

All interviewees who discussed training for ASSIST volunteers agreed that it had improved greatly as the organisation had grown and expanded. Many mentioned volunteer induction as an extremely positive development, and several identified shadowing more experienced volunteers as a useful way of learning about a new volunteer role.

To improve volunteers' knowledge and confidence about available services, some interviewees suggested more structured shadowing of other teams within ASSIST, and visits to organisations to which ASSIST clients are routinely referred.

Awareness-Raising & Campaigning (Section 7) covers interviewees' views and ideas about this area of ASSIST's work.

Interviewees described how ASSIST's profile has grown a great deal since the organisation was established, and that this has provided a strong basis for its awareness-raising work. Awareness-raising was thought of as useful in terms of changing opinions and perceptions about asylum seekers, and as a fundraising activity.

Several interviewees mentioned ASSIST talks as a key awareness-raising activity, and the involvement of refugees and asylum seekers in delivering talks was felt to be extremely positive and effective. One interviewee suggested that the content of talks should be more tailored to the requirements of each specific audience, and that ASSIST might take a more methodical approach to reaching individuals and organisations in all areas of Sheffield.

Many interviewees described ASSIST as a non-political organisation that is also involved in campaigning on individual asylum cases. Whilst some interviewees felt that this was a tension or contradiction, none felt it to be problematic for the organisation. Some interviewees felt very strongly that ASSIST should become more involved in political lobbying on asylum and related issues, whilst others thought this type of work would be extremely resource-intensive, unlikely to produce great change and detract from ASSIST's core activities.

ASSIST & Sheffield (Section 8) draws together interviewees' views about ASSIST's relationship to the city of Sheffield. Interviewees gave many examples of how ASSIST makes a positive contribution to Sheffield, including by preventing rough sleeping, petty crime and poor health amongst destitute asylum seekers, and by building positive relationships between asylum seekers, refugees and longer term residents of Sheffield. Interviewees from statutory organisations believed that ASSIST enhanced their ability to carry out their roles.

Several interviewees contrasted the lack of public disorder related to asylum in Sheffield with the quite different experiences of other towns and cities, and suggested ASSIST was at least partially responsible for this difference. ASSIST was also seen as facilitating and supporting other asylum and refugee-related initiatives in Sheffield, such as the city's status as the first UK City of Sanctuary.

Many interviewees described ASSIST as part of a wider 'family' of Sheffield organisations, including Conversation Club, CDAS, SYMAAG and others. They provided examples of how organisations within this 'family' provide support and advice for one another, share clients, volunteers and Trustees, and work in partnership on a number of different levels.

The Future (Section 9) details interviewees' responses to questions concerning how ASSIST might improve or expand on its work, and their hopes and aspirations for ASSIST's future.

In terms of improving current activities, interviewee suggestions included extending the opening hours of the Night Shelter (particularly in winter), removing the 3-month waiting period for accessing support for those moving from outside of Sheffield, and expanding ASSIST's befriending service.

Interviewees suggested a number of new activities that ASSIST might undertake, including developing a team to take clients along to free or low-cost events and activities in Sheffield, holding celebratory events for clients and volunteers, and supporting the development of ASSIST-type organisations in areas outside of Sheffield.

Several interviewees felt that ASSIST could improve the way in it obtains feedback, both from clients and from volunteers leaving the organisation. They also highlighted how developing formal feedback mechanisms could be undertaken by current volunteers, and would not require any major expenditure by the organisation.

Other suggested improvements included providing a specific volunteer name for all clients on Case Manager (to ensure a point of contact in the event of any sudden developments in an asylum case), having a paid general manager, and requiring all ASSIST volunteers to contribute to organisational fundraising in some way.

In terms of the future, many interviewees hoped that ASSIST would be able to secure sufficient financial resources to enable long-term planning and – in some cases – growth on a regional and national scale. Others hoped that the policies that caused destitution would change, and that ASSIST would no longer need to exist in its current form.

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HISTORY OF ASSIST

An unexpected outcome of this project was the opportunity it afforded to document the history of ASSIST's establishment. Many interviewees welcomed the opportunity to offer their accounts of how and why ASSIST began, and looked forward to hearing the recollections of others.

Another consistent theme covered by interviewees throughout was how ASSIST has expanded since it was established, and the manner in which it continues to change and grow in the present.

This section deals with interviewees' responses and statements relating to ASSIST's establishment, development and expansion.

History of ASSIST

- Pre-ASSIST

Trustee interviewees described the situation in Sheffield directly preceding the establishment of ASSIST in 2003. Asylum seekers had begun to be dispersed across the UK - including to Sheffield - in 2000, and the circumstances of new arrivals presented challenges for service providers in the city:

'People were arriving only with what they were standing up in. Dispersal stretched our resources to the limit - we literally had nothing to give this new influx of people.....families were arriving into Sheffield without adequate clothing - without any clothing even - and no toys for their children.'

(Trustee)

As currently, accommodation and financial support was withdrawn from those whose claims were refused, and alternative support was often not available or accessible:

'We were all finding that there was no solution for evictions of asylum seekers. At the time there was no Section 4 or National Assistance support, or no awareness of them.'

(Trustee)

'One man who came to Conversation Club was refused, evicted from his housing and his support was stopped. I tried to signpost him, but he got no help. I didn't believe it. I also found others with the same problem. I gave him some money, but I couldn't do that indefinitely.'

(Trustee)

Early 2003 saw the widespread implementation of Section 55 - a provision enabling support to be withheld from those who did not claim asylum immediately on arrival into the UK - and several interviewees referenced this as contributing toward a significant increase in destitution amongst asylum seekers in Sheffield.

- Early Meetings

Trustee interviewees described how ASSIST began as a collective of individuals involved in work with asylum seekers and refugees in Sheffield who shared a common desire 'to address the lack of support available for the most vulnerable' and to 'establish what could be done'. The first meeting was called by Myra Davis in July 2003 and held at her home, and - from September 2003 onwards - meetings were held weekly. This initial series of meetings were chaired by Robert Spooner and involved individuals from a variety of professional and voluntary backgrounds:

'Paul was there as he worked for a housing association and so had a housing perspective and experience. Myra was there from Conversation Club and with a local voluntary perspective. Robert had previously been Chair of HARC<sup>1</sup> and so brought a homelessness perspective and experience of working in that area. There were also individuals with faith backgrounds who had refugees and asylum seekers in the congregations at their churches, including from St Marie's. Joan was there from health, and Sulay from the Congolese community also came to all the early meetings. Emma Grey from NRC<sup>2</sup> had links with lots of RCOs<sup>3</sup> and attempted to get them involved'

(Trustee)

'There were around 8-10 people, from various organisations including asylum seeker groups, and we were just asking "what can we do?".'

(Trustee)

- Becoming a charity

Volunteer and Trustee interviewees recalled how, at the time of the early meetings, the group did not think of itself as an organisation or formulate any long-term plans:

'...it was not called ASSIST or conceived of in those terms - we were just doing practical stuff to help ameliorate situation of many asylum seekers, which included destitution.'

(Trustee)

Those participating in initial meetings took several key decisions about the role, purpose and capacity of the group, the activities it would undertake and the needs it was trying to meet:

'The group was aware that there was no money available, and so it had to be about fundraising. We decided early on that we couldn't provide accommodation or change the asylum system. We also knew there was lots of sofa-surfing amongst destitute asylum seekers, and that hosts were mainly other asylum seekers or people on JSA. Friends and communities were starting to turn people away

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<sup>1</sup> Homeless & Rootless at Christmas (Sheffield)

<sup>2</sup> Northern Refugee Centre

<sup>3</sup> Refugee Community Organisations

because they couldn't afford the extra resources, for food and for heating if people were in all day. So the group's idea was that if we could give people cash, they can stay with friends and be less of a burden. It was a mixture of what was possible and what would best meet needs.'

(Trustee)

In order to create a vehicle with which to raise funds, participants in initial meetings decided to form a charitable organisation, and made use of their collective professional expertise and contacts to do so:

'HARC had a financial surplus that they were required to give to organisations that were working with destitute people. They gave £1000 to ASSIST to enable us to become a charity. Emma provided some assistance with documentation - the form of charity ASSIST should become and setting down the mission statement - and VAS<sup>4</sup> also helped.'

(Volunteer)

The group agreed on the name for the new charitable organisation based on key assumptions about its purpose and likely lifespan, and a degree of expediency:

'The group didn't have a name for ages. Myra invented the name. The 'short-term' bit of the name was created based on an assumption that the policy of destitution was so abhorrent that it would soon end, and ASSIST would no longer need to exist. The name was a mission statement.'

(Trustee)

'It was really to get us a logo and a name...'

(Trustee)

As interviewees recalled, ASSIST the charity was officially established by October 2003, approximately 3 months after the initial meeting was held. Throughout this period, the organisation continued to build on its original membership and support base:

'We gradually began to draw more support from churches. Volunteers wrote to us, I wrote back and they got involved. It was very organic, with Robert drawing people in, Paul getting volunteers and so on. It was very heady, with so many things going on. It's really stayed that way.'

(Trustee)

### Developing & Expanding

- Early Activities

As discussed above, ASSIST's early activities were initially focused on fundraising and distributing monies raised to destitute asylum seekers. ASSIST's original aims – in terms of amount of money raised and numbers to be supported - were modest, and the organisation deliberately sought not to publicise what it was doing:

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<sup>4</sup> Voluntary Action Sheffield

‘The initial aim was just to try to do something to help a few people. In December 2003, our goal was to try to raise £100 per week, to support 4 people with £25 each per week. The question became about how we then distributed that money. We started quite secretly, with no premises. We used the Archer Project to distribute the money. People were told to go there at a very particular time and to a very particular place, and to keep the money a secret’.

(Volunteer)

Both Trustee and volunteer interviewees focused on Helpdesk and Panel as the most significant early developments in what ASSIST provided. Central to enabling these developments were the support provided by partner organisations and – in particular – the central point of contact and focus provided by the Victoria Hall Drop-in:

‘At first, anyone used to refer anybody (for support). We then realised we needed to formalise it. We also needed information for people, so we started the tables upstairs at Conversation Club – it was started by Paul Snell<sup>5</sup>...and it became more formal and organised.’

(Volunteer)

‘Clients were referred to Panel from NRC at Victoria Hall. Margaret said “this isn’t working”, and that we needed an ASSIST table at the drop-in. She asked Paul to help start it, upstairs at Victoria Hall. At that time the City Council, Red Cross and NRC were all at the drop-in.’

(Volunteer)

- Consistency & Professionalism

Both Trustee and volunteer interviewees characterised ASSIST’s development since 2003 as a process of increasing professionalisation. This process was thought of as a positive progression from the emotional and highly practical motivations of many of those involved in carrying out ASSIST activities:

‘At the beginning it wasn’t at all organised. We were doing the best that we could but we were fire-fighting, and far more emotionally led than now. It was full of ‘pioneer people’ - both ‘see something and do it’ people and emotionally driven people. It was good in that things got done, but it was very inconsistent, and there were no assurances about fair or equitable treatment.’

(Trustee)

Whilst recognising the value of providing any kind of support at all to those who are destitute - however inconsistently - interviewees uniformly welcomed the developments in ASSIST processes and procedures that have taken place since the organisation was established. Panel was cited as a particularly strong example of how ASSIST has become more professional, organised and consistent:

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<sup>5</sup> Subsequent discussions with Trustees indicate that both Jo and Paul Snell established Helpdesk.

‘There’s Panel, for example. Panel now has Case Manager, a scoring system, a review process, and there’s a monthly accommodation review. Panel has gradually taken over more functions. It’s not very different from any other agency making decisions about allocating scarce resources, but it is unrecognisable from 3 years ago. When I first started, for example, there wasn’t a form on which to record Panel decisions.’

(Volunteer)

Interviewees also considered other aspects of the professionalisation of ASSIST – including the acquisition of an office and development of a central administrative function - as important both in improving the delivery of support, enhancing communication and enabling ASSIST to become a more cohesive organisation:

‘In the early days, there was no administrator. Referrals were in a file at someone’s house. Now we have a central office and Zohreh, who has a massive team of admin volunteers. The office is a base where people can get involved, a hub.’

(Trustee)

‘It’s good that ASSIST now have an office. For a long time there were no contact details, so now it’s very helpful that they can look at the database if we query a client.’

(Partner Organisation)

Interviewees contrasted the current division of roles and functions within ASSIST with the far less structured approach in use during the early stages of the organisation. Several identified fairer and more consistent treatment of those seeking support as outcomes of this development:

‘Now, it’s pretty robust – there are teams that do the different things, and ASSIST functions are ‘chunked down’ so it’s not everyone doing everything. Before, key individuals had multiple functions that were often conflicting. For example, the same person might take referrals of people in need of support, hand out money at Treasury and also sit on the panel making decisions about support. With the best will in the world, that won’t be unbiased. Everybody was involved in everything. Now, because functions are split, things are far more consistent.’

(Trustee)

- **New Activities**

In addition to increasing the scale of its operations in the time since it was established, ASSIST has continually expanded the functions and activities it carries out, and volunteer and Trustee interviewees identified several ways in which ASSIST develops new activities.

Some instances of ASSIST expanding its activities have been almost accidental, in the sense that resources or support have become available at a time when ASSIST can naturally make use of them. The establishment of the Advocacy Team is one example of a convergence of resources, support and prevailing need that led to ASSIST undertaking a new activity:

'In 2007, John Donkersley from NRC suggested we use Sheffield Advice Link for the additional table, which is when the work at SAL started. Panel were asking for more in-depth information on those requesting and receiving support, and we needed to formalise our referrals. Janice had started interviewing those on support, a sort of proto-advocacy. SAL provided the privacy to do more in-depth correspondence, telephone calls and so on.'

(Volunteer)

ASSIST also develops new services specifically to complement and enhance the delivery of existing activities and to respond to local needs and pressures. Several interviewees cited the Advocacy Team as an example of ASSIST's intelligent and creative management of its resources, and its continued focus on meeting the needs of its client group:

'We were realising that services like NRC were completely overrun, and also realising that by following up cases you could get people onto asylum or some other form of support. It's a long-term view – the volunteers that started it saw a bottleneck, where people on ASSIST support were desperate and in need but new people couldn't get it. It frees up resources if some people can be moved on to other support.'

(Trustee)

In some instances, new ASSIST activities are developed by incorporating informal work being carried out by ASSIST volunteers into the official functions of the organisation. Interviewees cited the new Befriending Team as an example of the organisation recognising what volunteers were doing, discussing the activity via the Committee process and reaching a consensual decision to formalise the activity:

'Befriending was happening informally anyway – I was doing it.'

(Volunteer)

'Befriending was...lots of teams had asked for it, it was happening informally, and it was needed. So it was discussed and approved by consensus at committee, and someone was sought out to do it.'

(Trustee)

Several interviewees highlighted the importance of individual volunteers in starting new activities, and attributed many key developments in ASSIST services - including Helpdesk, the Accommodation Team, the Events, Fundraising & Awareness Team and the voucher exchange scheme – to one or two named individuals:

'ASSIST is basically all about someone coming up with the idea and doing it. Accommodation and Advocacy were just that someone wanted to do it. The pattern is that core people start it then tend to fade out when more people get involved.'

(Trustee)

Interviewees broadly welcomed the freedom of ASSIST volunteers to develop new activities and responses. However, it was also clear that - in some instances - the 'core person' approach had caused tensions, particularly around collective decision-making and organisational approval and endorsement. The voucher exchange scheme was cited as an example of an activity begun without Committee discussion and which - when discussed - prompted some disagreement:

'A volunteer discovered that women with children couldn't buy baby things, and so bought their vouchers with money...it didn't go through the Committee, and when it was discussed there was a great deal of opposition. The objection was that they - the women - were not destitute, they were on Section 4 and so better off than those who are destitute. There are plenty of counter-arguments to this, of course, about the vulnerability of pregnant women and a humane approach.'

(Trustee)

Despite the tension between volunteer freedom and organisational decision-making, the voucher exchange scheme was also cited by interviewees as an example of how ASSIST functions as a type of 'family', that takes care of its members and pulls together to resolve contentious or difficult issues:

'It wasn't a strategic decision - we were lumped with an issue and we needed to pull together. It's like a family - you sometimes have members that do things you might not want them to, but you pull together to solve it. Also, the volunteer would have done it anyway, and we had concerns about safety and protection. So we had to do it. It is a need, it will happen, it's close enough to our mission to do it, and we need to look after the volunteer. Safety (of the volunteer) was a significant factor in our decision-making'.

(Trustee)

- Consequences of expansion

Interviewees identified several consequences of ASSIST's expansion, both in terms of new activities and the increased numbers of clients that it supports. The first of these relates to the nature of the relationship the organisation has with its clients:

'We used to know everyone personally. Everyone was a friend, someone you personally cared about. Now, people are no longer. This is a difference - when people are deported no one knows the details of their case, and it therefore takes far longer to mobilise a response. There is only a limited capacity to respond if you do not know any details.'

(Trustee)

'Supporting an increased number of people requires a bigger operation, but that means we no longer know people individually and the specifics of their situations.'

(Trustee)

'People are very stressed, clients are stressed, and we need enough time – and we don't have it - to deal with that stress. We can support you but you need to wait, and so on. This is a problem for our clients'.

(Trustee)

Another identified consequence of growth and expansion were the difficulties both have created for communication and coordinated decision-making across the organisation. Interviewees were particularly concerned at the potentially negative impact of these difficulties on ASSIST's clients:

'In terms of communication and coordination....teams take decisions that they think are correct, but they don't tell anybody else. Clients are then confused, because one person's saying one thing, and someone else in another team is saying something different. To them it's all just ASSIST. Growth has brought these opposing tendencies out. I mean, people do take less individual decisions and are more aware of needing to communicate, but then it has grown so much, so it's difficult to know what all the different bits are doing. The biggest impact is on clients, who get conflicting information.'

(Volunteer)

Growth – in terms of the numbers of people ASSIST provides with support – has also impacted on resources. It is clear that those within ASSIST who are responsible for managing resources are acutely aware of this challenge and the manner in which it affects the level and type of support the organisation can provide:

'We had big discussions about growth. Was it sustainable? Could we reach the commitments we'd made? We somehow keep growing, probably by the actions we've taken on playing with support levels and conditions.'

(Trustee)

2  
SUCCESS

All those interviewed in the course of the Impact Study project were asked for their views on how successful ASSIST is. Their responses fell into the five broad thematic categories detailed in the remainder of this section.

- Mitigating Destitution

Interviewees of all backgrounds consistently referenced ASSIST's success in mitigating the effects of destitution amongst its client group. They identified a number of key ways in which it did this, including in terms of both practical and emotional support.

Interviewees gave many examples of ASSIST's practical support, including provision of cash and accommodation, advice about alternative support and non-legal support to resolve asylum cases:

'I did get weekly money, yes, it's hard to say how long for though. It was more than a year. ASSIST helped to move me on to Section 4.'

(Client)

'It helped a lot with my case that ASSIST wrote a letter about my support, it helped me get Section 4. ASSIST provided a letter about my volunteering and contribution to the community. This really helped a lot with my decision – others without these kinds of letters have been refused.'

(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

'ASSIST is very successful in signposting and sorting out fresh claims and access to Section 4 support. They promote accessing Section 4 support by providing good advice and information about the need to sign up for voluntary return. It helps to allay people's fears about the implications of signing and means they go on to access support, and aren't destitute.'

(Partner Organisation)

Others working in Sheffield referenced the significant achievements of ASSIST in establishing the initiatives via which practical support is delivered:

'ASSIST set up a night shelter. I mean, Sheffield has never had one before. But ASSIST managed to get one set up.'

(Partner Organisation)

Client interviewees expressed how ASSIST support created a number of outcomes additional to meeting basic needs, many of which were related to the health and wellbeing of those being supported:

'ASSIST not only offers money but also helps with depression. It does this very successfully.'

(Client)

‘ASSIST is very helpful. I was in a bad situation with a lot of health complaints before I received support from ASSIST, but now because of the help that I have received my situation has changed 100 per cent.’

(Client)

‘Yes, I think is ASSIST is successful. When I first came I didn’t know what ASSIST meant. I was lost, like rubbish. I’m a human now. ASSIST made me stand up tall and feel like a human.’

(Client)

Similarly, many volunteer interviewees described how any kind of practical support from ASSIST can act as a counterbalance to the emotional and psychological effects of destitution:

‘Seeing a destitute asylum seeker go with hope. Someone will come here almost crying, with no food – you give him a voucher, you change his mood.’

(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

- Increasing Public Awareness

In response to questions about ASSIST’s success, the majority of interviewees mentioned its achievements in progressively increasing awareness of asylum and destitution amongst the general public. Several also identified the involvement of refugees and asylum seekers in this work as a measure of ASSIST’s success:

‘We’ve made Sheffield more aware of why people are here and what’s happening to them in our midst.’

(Trustee)

‘People are very surprised at the situation asylum seekers are in. They get their information from the tabloids. When the EFA<sup>6</sup> team do talks they take asylum seekers themselves to do the talks, which works really well. Outside of the hard practical stuff, this is the thing ASSIST does best.’

(Volunteer)

One interviewee from a partner organisation identified a specific instance of successful awareness-raising work carried out by ASSIST:

‘ASSIST articulate the plight of refugees very well...on BBC Radio Sheffield about the recent stories on the legacy case programme, for example, a volunteer explained the whole context in 2 minutes. It was very articulate and – via radio – reached a big audience who were possibly not sympathetic to asylum. To a certain extent, events like the World Over concert are preaching to the converted, but things like the radio interview go beyond this audience, and are very useful.’

(Partner Organisation)

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<sup>6</sup> Events, Fundraising & Awareness Team

- Resources

Many interviewees commented on ASSIST's success in securing funds via public donation, particularly when compared to other charitable organisations, and the way in which it has secured funds by raising awareness of the work it is doing:

'No other charity gets 60-80% of its income from individual donations – it's £60-80k per year.'

(Trustee)

'ASSIST has been able to influence local organisations and circumstances, in particular churches and local politicians, to raise funds, and develop and expand its functions. It has increased its financial resources (in this way).'

(Trustee)

One partner organisation interviewee considered ASSIST to be both successful and attractive to those making donations, based on his understanding that the majority of its funds are given directly to its client group:

'Giving money to ASSIST means giving money straight to its beneficiaries, and not a lot of charities can say that.'

(Partner Organisation)

Almost all interviewees considered ASSIST to be successful relative to the resources it had available to carry out its work. Many specifically mentioned the volunteer-led delivery of ASSIST activities as a measure of this success:

'There's no other organisation I know that has so many volunteers and so few paid staff. There's no other organisation I know of that keeps going with that ratio. So I'm amazed.'

(Volunteer)

'ASSIST has been in existence for seven and a half years...and has been run almost entirely by volunteers for the duration. If an appropriate financial resource were attached to the level of responsibility volunteers have and the kinds of decisions they have to make - like if someone can eat or not - ASSIST would be a multimillion pound organisation.'

(Trustee)

- Volunteers

Additional to ASSIST's success in delivering its activities almost exclusively via volunteers, interviewees also identified both volunteer-led delivery and ASSIST volunteers themselves as key aspects of why they considered ASSIST to be a successful organisation.

For some clients, their contact with ASSIST was markedly different from that with other services and organisations because delivery is led by volunteers:

'And as to successful, yes – they are amazing. It's a pure help from a pure humanity – they want to do it. They have lots of volunteers, which means they don't have to,

but they do. As a volunteer all the help you give comes from your belief and your heart. This makes a difference to the person receiving it.'

(Client)

Interviewees from ASSIST's partner organisations identified the abilities, knowledge and constructive attitudes of ASSIST volunteers as central to the organisation's success:

'ASSIST volunteers are always bright people, they know what they're doing....they provide a good service, they're not snobbish.'

(Partner Organisation)

'I found them to be lovely to work with, very accepting of the position we were in, pleased to be consulted and never critical. They showed a really mature understanding of the judgement and our responsibilities. It felt like we were working with them, rather than it being adversarial. I really appreciated it.'

(Partner Organisation)

When discussing the reasons why they considered ASSIST to be successful, several interviewees from partner organisations identified how ASSIST volunteers combined a compassionate approach to clients and a focus on professional and highly practical support and outcomes:

'Personally, it's their compassion. It shows through in their attitude and the way they run the service, the people. It's maybe not something that others think is that important, but where people are when they fall out of other services, they do whatever's needed to keep them going. They're also very well organised. They're nice, compassionate people, but not in an airy-fairy way, they're very structured and helpful.'

(Partner Organisation)

'ASSIST helps people with dignity and professionalism. The latter may be a strange word to use in relation to a voluntary organisation, but I've been impressed with ASSIST's professionalism and the way they treat people, which is so important.'

(Partner Organisation)

One Trustee interviewee noted ASSIST's success in attracting large numbers of volunteers from a wide range of different backgrounds and positions. S/he noted how the organisation now struggles to place all those who are interested in volunteering, and contrasted this current situation with the very different aims and expectations of at the outset of ASSIST:

'It's been fantastic. The situation was that asylum seekers needed money, and look what we've managed to do. The time and energy that people have given has restored my faith in human nature. Now we have so many people wanting to volunteer that we can't place them all! We've attracted so many people – experts, capable individuals, politicians. It's more than a small bunch of people could have possibly hoped for.'

(Trustee)

- Involving Refugees & Asylum Seekers

Interviewees described ASSIST as successful in terms of how it involves refugees and asylum seekers - both as volunteers and Trustees - noting the positive outcomes this type of activity can have for individuals and the organisation as a whole:

'...we've helped by getting them (refugees and asylum seekers) involved in doing things to reduce the stress and depression caused by inactivity.'

(Volunteer)

'ASSIST gives people with nothing to do - they can't work, or study - an outlet for their talents. For example (named volunteer), that's a real case of 'before and after'. The experience is superb for his development, whatever he ends up doing.'

(Volunteer)

'Another measure of success is that we have 2 Trustees who've come through the asylum system themselves, and lots of volunteers who are asylum seekers. You're giving them status, and not just looking down on them as clients. Just because we have the power and the money, they're not inferior.'

(Volunteer)

- Reputation

Many interviewees referenced how, since its establishment, ASSIST has been successful in building its organisational profile and reputation amongst many different groups of people, both within and outside of Sheffield:

'It is very successful...it is known within Sheffield amongst different communities, of asylum seekers, students, MPs, radio stations and others who volunteer. It has a good reputation.'

(Client)

'Yes, it's successful. It's not like in Huddersfield, for example, where they've not been successful in opening a night shelter. People do come to Sheffield from elsewhere, because they think they'll get money, but also because they think what we're doing is worthwhile.'

(Volunteer)

'They've raised their profile incredibly, and that's really down to them. For example, an organisation in Kirklees were applying for planning permission to start a night shelter there, and someone from the Local Authority contacted the Asylum Team in Sheffield to ask how ASSIST had done it.'

(Partner Organisation)

- Overall Success

Many interviewees, particularly those who involved with or aware of ASSIST from the outset, made statements as to the overall success and achievement of the organisation:

'It's helping people - regardless of their case, the outcome is that it does help.'  
(Volunteer)

'ASSIST has done a terrific amount of good work in providing a lifeline to people in desperate situations. There have been so many contributions to that work that should all be recognised – hosts, fundraisers, everyone involved. It's been a tremendous effort.'

(Partner Organisation)

3  
ROLE & PURPOSE

All of those interviewed as part of the ASSIST Impact Study project were prompted to discuss ASSIST's role and purpose, and any difficulties or barriers they felt ASSIST encountered in the course of carrying out its activities.

This section details the views and ideas expressed by interviewees in the course of these discussions, including summaries of two specific aspects of ASSIST's role raised by interviewees throughout.

- Aim(s) of ASSIST

All interviewees were asked to create a mission statement for ASSIST that summed up what they believed the aim(s) of the organisation to be.

Almost all interviewees described ASSIST's role as the provision of practical support for destitute asylum seekers, as in the response below:

'ASSIST aims to help people who are destitute and refused...it provides shelter, food, clothing, weekly money, access to solicitors and bus passes.'

(Client)

Those from partner organisations particularly focused on practical support as the main purpose of ASSIST:

'I understand ASSIST to be a voluntary sector support service for people who have failed their asylum application and are therefore destitute. Its value is not about all asylum seekers and refugees, more just destitution'

(Partner Organisation)

Amongst non-partner organisation interviewees, many also described ASSIST's role as encompassing both practical and emotional support, with a strong emphasis on responding to the isolation and exclusion experienced by many of its clients:

'Our purpose is to provide support for the totally destitute, not just in terms of financial support – although that's very important – but also in terms of personal contact for isolated people.'

(Trustee)

'It's to help people be proper humans, to help and be there for humans and to believe strongly in God.'

(Client)

'Our goal is to be able to provide means for dignity to people seeking asylum after their asylum application is rejected, to give people some hope'

(Volunteer)

'I'd say "helping destitute asylum seekers on their route to finding a solution to their immediate and long-term problems". It's vague, but it reflects the range of problems they come with. It's not just about accommodation and money.'

(Volunteer)

'It's offering a friendly place to go, and being open to listening to them. Treating them with respect and dignity - this comes first.'

(Volunteer)

The vast majority of references to campaigning as part of ASSIST's core mission – in relation to both individual asylum cases and wider asylum policy – came from partner organisation interviewees:

'It's to have a campaigning role. Their campaigning involves helping individuals and campaigning on political change'

(Partner Organisation)

Only one interviewee – a volunteer – made reference to the aims set out in ASSIST's constitution document:

'The relief of asylum seekers in areas of benefit who are refused and in need. And the education of the public. This is what's in the constitution document. Actually the constitution has never been formally approved, but what's in the constitution is, practically speaking, what ASSIST does – it's accurate.'

(Volunteer)

As the above responses demonstrate, the lack of reference to any official or documented organisational aims by the majority of interviewees did not equate to a lack of ideas about what ASSIST's role and purpose are. Instead, the variety of responses on ASSIST's role concurred with some interviewees' assertions that ASSIST has no overall organisational vision or aim, but rather a set of overall guiding principles that individuals involved in the organisation apply as they see fit:

'ASSIST is a united group of individuals - everyone has different outlook and perspective but all are in some way working toward a common vision of limiting the extent of destitution experienced by asylum seekers in Sheffield.'

(Trustee)

'It is difficult to say what the aim is, as ASSIST is a collective. It's a collection of teams. Everyone is committed to helping destitute asylum seekers, but an organisational vision is hard to pin down.'

(Trustee)

Interviewees largely saw this lack of a strictly defined organisational aim or role as a positive aspect of ASSIST, contributing both to the continued existence of the organisation and its ability to respond to the needs of its clients in a flexible and useful way:

‘ASSIST is a collective with principles. The principles can be interpreted differentially – it’s like guidelines versus rules. Some are sticklers for the rules, others bend them if they feel it’s necessary. Both the rules and the lack of rules are reasons that ASSIST still exists – it’s a necessary tension.’

(Trustee)

‘It’s important not to word the aim too tightly’.

(Volunteer)

‘People can go to ASSIST to talk to an individual about anything they need advice on. Often, asylum seekers receive a particular service from someone in a defined or specific role, and they then approach that person and ask about something outside of their role related to accommodation or support or something. In their role, they can’t or don’t have time to answer. ASSIST doesn’t have a narrowly defined role like that.’

(Partner Organisation)

- ‘Standing in the gap...’

Trustee interviewees repeatedly emphasised the role of ASSIST as being to provide something for destitute asylum seekers where nothing else exists. Their responses indicated that the aim of providing support for those for whom no other support was available was an original founding principle of ASSIST that remains an equally important element of its present-day role:

‘The aim was to help those that could be helped, with doing something better than doing nothing. ASSIST especially aimed to help those that others would or could not help.’

(Trustee)

‘ASSIST’S most important function? Providing something where there is nothing.’

(Trustee)

‘ASSIST stands in the gap where other service providers or institutions are unwilling or unable to help. When faced with people replying, “that’s not my job”, ASSIST acts as practical and adaptable gap filler between services.’

(Trustee)

Client and volunteer interviewees described ASSIST’s role in similar terms, with an emphasis on the ‘bottom line’ nature of the support it provides:

‘When all doors are closed, ASSIST is the only door that is open.’

(Client)

‘I wouldn’t know what to do or where to turn if ASSIST didn’t exist.’

(Client)

‘When you are refused and all doors are closed to you, ASSIST is the only place you can get help, and where the answer is never “No”.’

(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

Those from partner organisations also described ASSIST's role in terms of filling the gaps left by other services unwilling or unable to provide assistance to destitute asylum seekers:

'ASSIST gives people hope that there is a service still prepared to work with them when no-one else is.'

(Partner Organisation)

'ASSIST is a repository for everything no one else wants. I know what that feels like, because my team are the same within <partner organisation>. We have to say yes because we have a residual duty, and ASSIST has taken on a residual responsibility for everyone that no one else will help. And they do it very well.'

(Partner Organisation)

- Support Outside of Sheffield

Several interviewees referred to the lack of support for destitute asylum seekers available outside of Sheffield, and the way in which this causes those in need of support to travel to the city from elsewhere:

'It's difficult – in Doncaster and Barnsley, for example, there's nothing going on. ASSIST-type organisations can only really exist in cities, where there are more resources and maybe a university.'

(Trustee)

'So many people need to leave their areas to seek help from ASSIST in Sheffield. This is not good for the clients – people have come from around Yorkshire as well places as far away as Glasgow. They don't have friends or support here, but they have to come to get support like that from ASSIST because there's nothing in their area.'

(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

ASSIST volunteers have attempted to support the development of services for destitute asylum seekers in other areas:

'We tried to help Huddersfield to get over their problems around setting up a night shelter. It's really not happening there. They held a public meeting, which didn't help, it was inflammatory and very ill-judged. We did get a Conversation Club going in Huddersfield, but it's not clear how it will progress.'

(Volunteer)

Several interviewees from within and outside of ASSIST felt that the organisation might usefully incorporate supporting the development of services for destitute asylum seekers in other areas into its role and mission:

'It would be good for ASSIST to help groups in other areas more. This might stop so many people needing to leave where they live.'

(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

‘ASSIST should support groups in other areas. We have so much experience, we know about what works. But government policies in other areas act to prevent organisations from starting up and being stable enough to provide the same services as ASSIST in Sheffield. So people drift to Sheffield.’

(Volunteer)

‘It would be useful for ASSIST to support the development of other ASSISTS in different areas, definitely.’

(Partner Organisation)

- Difficulties & Barriers

In addition to commenting on ASSIST’s role and aims, interviewees were asked to detail any difficulties and barriers ASSIST faces in achieving its aims and carrying out its activities.

The majority of interviewees mentioned national asylum policy, the UK Border Agency and individual experiences of asylum-seeking as factors that make ASSIST’s work more difficult:

‘It’s the unremitting chaos of the UK Border Agency and the general asylum process. For example, an individual reports at Vulcan House on a regular basis and as required, and then UKBA tell them they have no record of them or their case. ASSIST deals with these types of issues endlessly.’

(Trustee)

‘National policy – we are dealing with the human side, the expectations and hopes, and it’s very difficult.’

(Volunteer)

‘ASSIST deals with a range of issues related to mental health and the effects of the asylum system. Asylum seekers can seem to volunteers to be exhibiting signs of having mental health problems. Often, though, medically, they aren’t mentally ill and so can’t receive help or support on that basis. But they are often suffering from stress and distress caused by the asylum process. There is no solution for this.’

(Trustee)

‘People just want status, that’s the main problem.’

(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

Both client and volunteer interviewees described how many clients - in particular those who are new to ASSIST and/or who do not speak English - can misunderstand the nature of ASSIST and assume it is part of the Home Office or wider government:

‘ASSIST was easy to understand for me. But lots of their clients don’t know what’s going on – they think ASSIST is the government or the Home Office. That’s mainly because of the lack of information or the language barrier. You may explain what ASSIST is, but not everybody will always understand what’s being said.’

(Client)

'We have to clarify that we're not the government – many clients don't ask us, they just assume.'

(Volunteer)

One volunteer interviewee with experience of being an ASSIST client felt volunteers should devote more time to explaining the nature of ASSIST to clients:

'Volunteers could not rush and take more time to explain to people what ASSIST is, that it's not government and is a small charity.'

(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

Every interviewee referenced the issue of resources, specifically financial resources and the reliance on volunteer delivery, and the multiple ways in which these issues can affect ASSIST's ability to deliver its activities and achieve its aims:

'It's the practical things - office space, money, general organisation due to it being almost wholly run by volunteers...the office space is far too small and chaotic, and it inhibits good organisation.'

(Trustee)

'ASSIST doesn't have many paid staff, it's run by volunteers. We have a lot of volunteers as well, so I can say that sometimes our processes and policies aren't kept to either. This is possibly due to pressures on volunteer time – they're often just in for a few days here and there – and we know it can be hard to communicate about changes and so on.'

(Partner Organisation)

'I've been to ASSIST on a Wednesday afternoon, and it's chaotic, there are so many people. Sometimes our referral forms are not filled in correctly (by ASSIST volunteers) which can make it difficult.'

(Partner Organisation)

ASSIST is also affected by the resource situation of other organisations working with refugees and asylum seekers in Sheffield:

'The progressive decline in funding and resources for other organisations has hit us really hard – Northern Refugee Centre and Refugee Council, for example – it makes it difficult.'

(Volunteer)

Volunteer-led delivery, whilst viewed extremely positively by interviewees, was also identified as creating specific difficulties around continuity of activities, planning and the retention of specific skills and expertise:

'If people leave there can be a gap – you can't recruit a replacement, you just have to wait to see who volunteers.'

(Volunteer)

‘In the holidays, for example, volunteer numbers are often low.’

(Volunteer)

The numbers of clients ASSIST supports has increased markedly since the organisation was established, and the numbers of clients approaching ASSIST for support and advice remains high. Interviewees described how increased numbers have presented a number of different challenges for the delivery of ASSIST services:

‘The numbers mean it’s difficult. Everything is difficult because of numbers.’

(Trustee)

‘The queue – the ‘human traffic’ – at the helpdesk, with people fighting, is a big problem. Security has needed to manage the space and the queue, although now it’s better, it’s in a bigger space.’

(Client)

The intractable nature of many clients’ situations and the lack of immediate solutions to many of the problems with which they approach ASSIST can exert particular pressures on volunteers. Volunteer interviewees did not explicitly state that these pressures prevented them from carrying out the activities associated with their role – in some cases they are clearly motivated by them – but it is conceivable that, in the longer term, they could ultimately lead to volunteers becoming less effective and/or leaving the organisation:

‘It can be emotionally difficult, for example if someone is detained that I’ve accompanied. You try to be professional and think of all you need to do, but sometimes you feel helpless. You can also feel angry and frustrated about the way asylum seekers are seen by people. You see the realities when you volunteer with ASSIST, and the anger and frustration motivates you to carry on.’

(Volunteer)

‘Wednesday afternoons at helpdesk are very tiring. There is such an accumulation of distress in the hall, so many insolvable problems, that you pick up on it. There’s so little we can do. Other volunteers are also tired – it’s a common issue.’

(Volunteer)

‘The dead ends are difficult. We have needed to talk to some clients about voluntary return where there are no other options for them.’

(Volunteer)

Finally, several interviewees noted how the generally negative public perception of asylum seekers can hinder ASSISTs work, both in terms of its influence on asylum policy and reactions to the organisation itself:

‘Influence of the gutter press public perceptions and so on, on policy.’

(Volunteer)

‘The main problem is public perception, it’s what they’re fighting against.’  
(Partner Organisation)

‘The way asylum seekers are considered by the public in general. That’s not really in Sheffield – which has grown to be a remarkable place – but the general public who don’t know much about ASSIST and would be in opposition to it if they did.’  
(Partner Organisation)

4  
GOVERNANCE

Whilst no specific questions about ASSIST and governance were included in Impact Study interviews, many interviewees raised issues related to this area in the course of discussing and responding to interview questions.

This section details their views on ASSIST and governance in the four key areas in which they were discussed.

- Trustees

Whilst many interviewees raised issues related to ASSIST Trustees during discussions on governance, only Trustee interviews included specific questions about ASSIST Trustees.

All Trustee interviewees described how they had taken on the role as a matter of expediency - to enable ASSIST to become a functioning charity - with very few expectations or understanding of what it would or should entail:

‘Trustees were needed to set up ASSIST as a charity. We didn't know what we were doing – at the time we didn't realise the legal implications of becoming a Trustee. We only knew that organisation needed to become a charity in order to attract funds. All the Trustees have learned on the job.’

(Trustee)

‘At the meeting the message was “we need some Trustees – who fancies it?”. It was a bureaucratic exercise, a means to an end. And we've really learned as we've gone along.’

(Trustee)

Nearly eight years after ASSIST's establishment, many Trustees now conceive of the role in much more formal terms:

‘I'm a novice at Trusteeship....but I understand now that the role of a Trustee is to steer the organisation, to provide governance, financial governance, health and safety and so on....Trustees are appointed on the merit of what they can bring, an individual's own personal specialisation.’

(Trustee)

ASSIST Trustees are often involved in operational activities. Some have dual volunteer/Trustee roles – for example, acting as both a Team Leader and a Trustee. Other Trustees are individually involved in loosely defined, ASSIST-affiliated activities such as informal befriending. The operational involvement of Trustees can be problematic in some instances:

‘There is some confusion over the role of Trustees, including from Trustees themselves, who are not always clear if they're talking as a Trustee, a volunteer or an individual.’

(Trustee)

‘There have been instances when Panel has made a decision but then a Trustee has overridden it. Trustees should be aware when they become involved in individual cases that the line between individual interest and the authority held by being a Trustee can be tenuous. In such instances, it is unclear where ultimate authority lies. It would make ASSIST more efficient if this authority was more clearly defined.’

(Trustee)

One volunteer felt Trustees could, in some instances, be less accountable than others in more junior roles within the organisation:

‘Sometimes people don’t do things and aren’t chased up, maybe because they’re Trustees.’

(Volunteer)

ASSIST Trustees are not elected, but rather selected and invited by other Trustees. Two volunteer interviewees voiced concerns about the process by which individuals become ASSIST Trustees, in relation both to accessibility and to the overall democratic nature of the organisation:

‘Right now, people don’t know how becoming a Trustee works. It strikes me as profoundly undemocratic, that it’s for life unless someone resigns or violates the conditions of being a Trustee. This is really important for ASSIST clients, many of whom come from countries in which leaders remain in that position for life. Although I’m not sure on the specific legal background, I think ASSIST – because of the type of organisation it is – should be as democratic as possible.’

(Volunteer)

‘I don’t understand why they can’t be elected for a finite period, and why they can’t be a beneficiary or potential beneficiary...there’s no opportunity, for example, for a £10,000 donor to say “actually I’d like to become a Trustee of ASSIST”.’

(Volunteer)

The recruitment of those with direct experience of the asylum system as Trustees was felt to be extremely positive, particularly in terms of how it brings a refugee/asylum seeker perspective to the organisation’s core management:

‘We now have Trustees who are ex-asylum seekers and refugees, which is excellent, and so there is some client-type feedback.’

(Volunteer)

ASSIST Trustees clearly value the status that their position has conferred as the organisation has increased its profile. Many make use of this status to positive effect, particularly in progressing the cases of individual clients:

‘I have a thing in my head about the value of the status of being an ASSIST Trustee and what it enables me to do on others’ behalf. ASSIST has a lot of clout....I value the status of being a Trustee because I write a lot of letters for people, letters to the

government about people in difficult situations. My signature as an ASSIST Trustee carries weight. I ought to step down as I've been there so long, but I don't want to.'

(Trustee)

#### Decision-Making & Democracy

Trustee and volunteer interviewees characterised ASSIST as a democratic organisation with a consensual and communal decision-making process. Trustee interviewees tended to view this structure positively, whilst volunteer interviewees had mixed views:

'Decisions are taken by discussion at Committee and reaching a consensus. No-one likes hierarchy, so ASSIST has a flat management structure, and nobody is in charge of anybody.'

(Trustee)

'It would be better if there was a defined authority or hierarchy. Sometimes Trustees don't answer email on really important things, or come back with their comments after deadlines have passed, so who is in charge?'

(Volunteer)

'Sometimes people have come back and told me "you shouldn't have done that", but I had to make decisions on my own because I received no clear guidance...I've had to take decisions myself.'

(Volunteer)

However - and as discussed later in this report (Section 5 – Support) - it is clear that ASSIST volunteers value the opportunity to engage in organisation-wide discussions on difficult or contentious policy issues, such as ending support, and are happy to abide by policy based on the outcomes of these discussions:

'Ending support is such a difficult question. It needs democratic discussion and agreement.'

(Volunteer)

Several interviewees noted how ASSIST's management structure and the manner of its decision-making have improved over time. Interviewees made particular reference to far more distinct arrangements for strategic and operational management, and the standardisation of the Panel mechanism for making decisions about client support:

'The relationship between Trustees and the Steering Committee is starting to be differentiated.'

(Trustee)

'Panel not dealing with clients makes the decision-making process easier. I don't think it should be any other way. It wasn't always like that – there were some very weird decision-making criteria...'

(Volunteer)

In many cases, improvements have taken place as a result of the skills and expertise of new volunteers and Trustees who have joined ASSIST as it has expanded:

‘Growth and key people who have joined have brought out the tensions – they have expertise in areas like structure, governance and processes, and have asked questions about “what’s going on here?” and “how does this work?”.’

(Volunteer)

One Trustee interviewee suggested ASSIST’s decision-making might be further improved by introducing a formal review mechanism for key strategic and operational decisions:

‘Any decision we take should be reviewed. This is part of a wider issue, that we should fix a time to review any thing that we start.’

(Trustee)

The growth of ASSIST, and the resultant increase in the number of functions and services it supports, has created at least some level of competition for resources between teams. Some interviewees, including Trustees, felt that decisions about resource allocation are sometimes reached based on internal lobbying rather than via a clear decision-making process:

‘As ASSIST grows, different teams are competing for resources, and there’s no real structure for decisions of this type. It is becoming problematic, because the more influential people get the decisions, and there have been some big inconsistencies and dual processes running.’

(Trustee)

### Communication

Interviewees raised the issue of communication in relation to many different aspects of ASSIST’s work and development. Many referenced positive aspects of communication within ASSIST:

‘Communication between teams and across the organisation is very good for an organisation run by volunteers.’

(Trustee)

‘There are lots of meetings, but this really does reflect the number of functions, and they are useful.’

(Volunteer)

Several interviewees – particularly volunteers – gave examples of the challenges ASSIST experiences in communicating information across its different teams, and the way in which this can impact on work with clients and partner organisations:

‘We stop taking new people on every now and then – effectively maintaining the same numbers on support. It’s not always clear to me what’s happening with the amount of weekly money provided.’

(Volunteer)

‘Communication – it’s an issue around teams, and between teams and the office, using all the links we’ve got so everyone understands what happening, how we work, and why we might be doing things differently. For example, the Archer Project, they can be frustrated at getting the wrong information from us. It can just be small details, but it causes problems.’

(Volunteer)

Interviewees largely acknowledged and were relatively accepting of the challenges volunteer-led delivery can present for communication. Several volunteers described how they coped with these challenges by being persistent about what they were trying to do and/or what they needed, until they received an adequate response:

‘If there was an efficient Managing Director, it should be possible for information to flow far better. The Chair now has made an immense difference, but she is a Chair rather than a Manager. So it depends on volunteers making their needs known.’

(Volunteer)

However, some also gave examples of where they believed a lack of efficient communication had negatively impacted both on volunteer capacity and the quality of ASSIST’s services:

‘There are some communications issues. For example, when volunteers come in...they need to access Case Manager, the calendar and so on, online. But normally, after a few months, new advocates don’t have this access – they don’t have the log-in details or the URL information – and I end up doing it, using my account. This also means they can’t access these systems from home. They’ve presumably all signed the confidentiality agreement by then, but all the work is appearing under my name, which can’t be right.’

(Volunteer)

As discussed earlier in this report (Section 1 – ‘History of ASSIST’), many new ASSIST developments and activities were begun by motivated and creative individuals who saw a problem or need and attempted to respond to it. Also as discussed previously, volunteers beginning new initiatives without consulting the ASSIST Committee or wider organisation can be problematic.

Several volunteer interviewees were clear that ASSIST requires internal consultation on ideas for new activities and approaches, but were concerned at what they saw as a lack of a clear or efficient process for volunteers to prompt consultation and receive feedback on their ideas. Interviewees described how this can cause frustration amongst volunteers and/or lead people to act without consulting:

‘ASSIST volunteers tend to be very driven people, which is great, but it does cause some sparks. People have very clear ideas of where they want to go. The

temptation is just to do it without consulting. But when you do consult, it's so unclear and it takes so long that you get frustrated.'

(Volunteer)

- Financial Management & Fundraising

Interviewees described how raising sufficient funds with which to continue the work of ASSIST is a constant concern shared by all those involved with the organisation. For ASSIST - as for other, similar organisations - raising sufficient financial resources is a year-on-year process that inhibits the organisation's ability to plan for the long-term:

'There is a consistent worry about funding, which it would be nice not to have. It would be good to be able to plan exactly how many we can support, with the financial back-up to do so.'

(Volunteer)

'ASSIST currently have financial backup but reserves are being spent. The shortfall is currently in the region of £25,000, and only £10,000 out of the required £70,000 is in place for next year.'

(Volunteer)

In addition to long-term planning – and again similarly to other organisations - ASSIST's ability to undertake improvements or develop new activities is governed and in some cases restricted by the level of available financial resource:

'Access to free food, for example, that discussion went on for ages, then it got to "who's going to do this, and with what?". Most improvements have resource implications, so it's about what can we do with existing resources.'

(Volunteer)

Interviewees shared some common concerns about ASSIST's budgeting and financial management, but also described how the organisation was progressively learning and improved in this area based on its experiences:

'We should really manage our money to give £20 per week to as many people as possible, and make sure we give our money to the right people.'

(Trustee)

'We apparently can't budget properly for this type of situation (reduced funds)...'

(Volunteer)

'There was a point when ASSIST did some projections and found they would be in large deficit by that year's end, so that made Trustees really become conscious of their responsibility in term of managing the organisation's finances.'

(Trustee)

Many interviewees suggested fundraising might be improved so as to increase ASSIST's financial resources. Many of these qualified their comments with an

acknowledgement that fundraising – particularly for the type of work ASSIST does and in the current economic climate – is a highly challenging area, and that their comments were not intended as criticisms:

‘It’s a challenge, but ASSIST should make sure it raises enough money, so that changes to support are not needed. ASSIST should raise enough and more funds.’  
(Client)

‘On fundraising, it’s not a criticism, but there must be other ways to raise money.’  
(Volunteer)

Interviewees’ suggestions for improving fundraising included lobbying politicians, and recruiting an experienced fundraiser as a Trustee or to advise Trustees:

‘I’m involved in raising money for ASSIST, by talking to churches. I don’t know what other sources of money there are for ASSIST – I know there are churches and street collections. I don’t know about specific funders. We should maybe lobby politicians.’  
(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

‘We could do with someone with fundraising expertise to advise Trustees - we always need money and may struggle with the current economic situation. The fundraising expert would need to be involved at this high level, at the Trustee level, because then they would feel completely involved, in a real job with real status.’  
(Trustee)

Interviewees’ comments demonstrated some level of organisational tension within ASSIST about financial reserves. Some interviewees felt very strongly that ASSIST should not build financial reserves, but should instead spend all available funds on support - essentially supporting more clients when more money had been raised, and reducing numbers or support when less money is available:

‘It’s embarrassing to have money in the bank when people are in need.’  
(Volunteer)

‘Sometimes there’s no money available – but if the money’s there, then clients should be able to access it.’  
(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

Other interviewees believed ASSIST should build reserves where income allows, and dispense support according to client needs rather than available resources:

‘We should also keep reserves for a rainy day and keep strict criteria as to who we support. We shouldn’t just give more away because we have more. Some people in ASSIST think we should do that because that’s what donors want and expect. But I think healthy reserves are a sign of good organisational management.’  
(Trustee)

‘There’s always a tension within the Trustees about money and need. It’s reserves and long-term planning versus people in need.’

(Volunteer)

5  
SUPPORT

All interviewees were asked a number of different questions about the support ASSIST provides. These questions prompted interviewees to offer their views on the nature and impact of support, to recount their experiences of receiving and administering support and to discuss the various individual and organisational challenges related to the provision of support for destitute individuals.

Interviewees' views and ideas in this area fell into the six broad thematic categories detailed in the remainder of this section.

- Nature of ASSIST Support

During discussions about ASSIST support, many interviewees talked about the manner of ASSIST volunteers and the approach they take to their work and to the organisation's client group. For many clients, this element of ASSIST's work makes it distinct from other service-providing organisations with which they may have come into contact:

'The best and biggest is how they believe and trust people. They believe what people say, and that their need for help is genuine. All ASSIST clients are complete strangers from every country, so to trust them is difficult. I couldn't give my key to someone, let them stay overnight, but volunteers do.'

(Client)

'It's all beautiful. They're not proud, they just help people, and that's the best thing about them. It's like a family. They're not proud of themselves.'

(Client)

Volunteers also emphasised the importance and value of listening to clients, providing human contact and working with those exhibiting challenging behaviours:

'Listening to people and giving them some contact is sometimes all you can do, but it so often has value.'

(Volunteer)

'No-one says no. If people are stressed out and aggressive or violent, someone will talk to them to try to calm them down.'

(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

ASSIST support was consistently described in terms of how it responds to the full range of needs that clients present with:

'It's an – and I hesitate to use this word, normally – but it's an holistic approach that ASSIST takes. What does this person need altogether? What is needed as a whole person?'

(Volunteer)

‘What are we offering? We’re offering £20 per week, food, shelter and so on, which is all great. So if you think of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, we’re meeting the basic ones. But we’re offering more than that. We’re improving people’s quality of life.’  
(Trustee)

‘I was given accommodation and £20 per week – it was emergency accommodation that later became permanent. ASSIST volunteers also took me to the hospital – I had lots of health complaints and got treatment for them. I had some problems with my mental health, depression caused by my eviction, and they also got me treatment.’  
(Client)

ASSIST’s responding to the totality of needs arising from destitution also includes providing opportunities for activity and creativity:

‘The arts workshops from which the ASSIST cards are produced... it’s nice to do something productive with an instant result. There is a value in people who can’t work being able being productive – it builds confidence and gets them active when other things are difficult.’  
(Volunteer)

Partner organisation interviewees also valued the approach ASSIST takes to supporting its clients. They described how it gives them faith that vulnerable clients - for whom they can often provide only a very specific or narrowly defined service – have someone monitoring their wellbeing:

‘Befriending for the most vulnerable people is very important. It’s very reassuring for us to know that peoples are being checked up on at regular intervals by ASSIST.’  
(Partner Organisation)

Many interviewees described the impacts of ASSIST support at an individual level. Some clients talked about support in terms of its transformative effect on their lives and outlook, and both volunteer and partner organisation interviewees described witnessing similar transformations in clients as a result of the support they received:

‘ASSIST has taught me not to do bad things, to do good things in my life.’  
(Client)

‘You can see a difference in them when they get accommodation, they change remarkably. One man became a person, he got a lot of confidence.’  
(Volunteer)

‘ASSIST gives people a sense of belonging, structure, direction and hope.’  
(Partner Organisation)

Several interviewees referenced the manner in which ASSIST support can enable individuals to regain some degree of control over their life and status in the UK. Some volunteers – particularly those with direct experience of the asylum

system – outlined their belief that those in receipt of ASSIST support should use the relative stability that support provides to pursue a longer term resolution to their situation and status in the UK:

‘I think it is treating asylum seekers with respect and helping them to have a sense of control and responsibility for their lives. That’s what support’s about.’  
(Volunteer)

‘In terms of resolving my status, I helped myself. ASSIST supported me but didn’t help with that. I got myself a solicitor. People on support should help themselves and follow their own case, go to the Refugee Council, go to the CAB and so on – they should never stop until it’s resolved.’  
(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

As discussed in section 3 of this report (‘Role & Purpose’), destitute individuals often travel from areas outside of Sheffield to access ASSIST support. Those who do so are currently unable to access mainstream ASSIST support for several months. This aspect of ASSIST support was a source of concern for some volunteer interviewees, who believed it to be unjust and in need of change:

‘Currently, support is only for people who have been in Sheffield for 3 months, which isn’t fair. Some people come from outside Sheffield – for example from Rotherham or Barnsley – and we say we can’t support them. But people are coming because they’re really in need, people don’t move without reason. But they’re denied, though they might even be signing in Sheffield. So anyone who’s signing in Sheffield and moves here after they’re evicted should be given support.’  
(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

- ASSIST & Information

Client interviewees repeatedly referenced ASSIST’s provision of information:

‘The best thing is the information which I have been able to access from ASSIST.’  
(Client)

‘The most important thing ASSIST gives is information, for example information about finding a solicitor.’  
(Client)

Those from partner organisations also referenced this element of ASSIST’s support and its usefulness for clients seeking support:

‘They promote accessing Section 4 support by providing good advice and information.’  
(Partner Organisation)

‘ASSIST is very successful at the support it gives, especially giving people information.’  
(Partner Organisation)

Those from partner organisations suggested that ASSIST could reach a larger number of people – including both potential clients and those from partner organisations – by making similar information available via its website:

‘It would also be useful to have information on areas that ASSIST deals with – for example what Section 95 support is, what Section 4 support is, what people are and are not able to claim, from the Home Office and from ASSIST – clearly available on ASSIST's webpage. This could act as an authority on subject matter, and avoid people acting based on their own individual interpretation or misinterpretation, or the mistaken interpretations of others.’

(Partner Organisation)

- Emotional Support & Friendship

Section 3 of this report (‘Role & Purpose’) looks at ASSIST's expansion since 2003, and the perceived reduction in the personal and familial element of ASSIST support that has resulted from it. Some interviewees were keen that this dynamic be addressed, and suggested discussions with partner organisations and celebratory ASSIST events as potential ways of doing so:

‘ASSIST should discuss it with Conversation Club, CDAS<sup>7</sup>, SYMAAG<sup>8</sup> and so on. Are we all sure we're pulling our weight in making people feel loved? By loved, I mean they're here, they're troubled and they need joy.’

(Trustee)

‘The ASSIST AGM is excellent, but there's lots of official business to get through, and we just need a party. It's an expense, I know people think it's money wasted, but I think it's invaluable.’

(Trustee)

‘We need to make decisions about support that – by their nature – are glum. But we also need to make sure that both volunteers and clients are happy that the caring element is ongoing.’

(Trustee)

Whilst the relational nature of ASSIST support, and the friendship and solidarity between its clients and volunteers, were very much valued by interviewees from within and outside of ASSIST, some interviewees also described how this aspect of its work can - in some instances - be problematic:

‘People become too involved. Perhaps this is because of ASSIST's volunteer base – it is perhaps inevitable that people become personally involved. Here, we operate within strict guidelines which are clearly defined – but ASSIST's guidelines for working with people are much more fluid and far less clearly defined.’

(Partner Organisation)

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<sup>7</sup> Committee to Defend Asylum Seekers

<sup>8</sup> South Yorkshire Migration & Asylum Action Group

‘And we must be careful that people who come to Helpdesk every week asking for accommodation don’t get preferential treatment. It’s difficult to navigate these very personal relationships.’

(Volunteer)

- Cash Support

Trustee interviews were asked for their views on what questions should be included in Impact Study interviews. Several requested that interviewees be asked what action ASSIST should take in relation to cash support levels when financial resources run low. Interviewees – including Trustees - offered a number of different responses to this question.

Those with direct experience of receiving ASSIST support focused on the value of receiving some cash rather than none, and the value that any level of cash support carries over and above the purely practical:

‘When funds are low it should be more people with less money. It’s about destitution and basic needs – we can’t just take 3 when 5 are suffering. I believe in sharing. The amount of support should be determined by how much money is available.’

(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

‘The same amount of people supported with less money, definitely. It’s the only fair way and one is better than nothing. £5 is a massive difference, but £5 less is better than nothing. When you have £5 in this country you feel like a king.’

(Client)

‘If they don’t have the money then how can they carry on supporting people? If they have less money then they can give £10. It’s better to share evenly than to have nothing, and although £10 is not enough it’s better than nothing.’

(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

Responses from some volunteers concurred with this view, and pointed to what they believed to be the necessity of offering support to as many people as possible in a time of high demand:

‘It should support more people with less money. They get so little anyway, and when you’ve got nothing something makes a difference.’

(Volunteer)

‘When the queue for support is as long as it is, we should reduce the support amount rather than the numbers we support.’

(Volunteer)

‘There should be no minimum support level. In desperate circumstances, the smallest amount makes a massive difference. It’s not just about destitution, it’s about all the things that go with it – depression and so on. So being able to get a coffee, go to the Archer Project or whatever, makes all the difference.’

(Volunteer)

Many volunteers accepted that support might need to be reduced, but stated that ASSIST should set a minimum weekly cash amount below which cash support would cease to be useful:

‘It is probably better to ensure that the money that’s provided is enough to live on. We shouldn’t just take on more and more people.’

(Volunteer)

‘There should be a minimum amount of £10-15, as anything below that is pointless.’

(Volunteer)

‘I’d keep the weekly support rate at £20 per week. It was £25 per week 6 or 7 years ago. The value of money has changed, and anything less than £20 is useless.’

(Volunteer)

One volunteer suggested that support levels should be set in relation to the time of year and the resultant additional needs clients might have at these times:

‘There needs to be a different approach if it’s in winter.’

(Volunteer)

Volunteer interviewees expressed a number of concerns about the adequacy of current support levels, particularly in relation to the amount and availability of emergency money and the points system by which client access to cash support is determined:

‘Is ASSIST successful? Yes, up to a point. When it first started, it provided £25 per week and £10 in emergency Archer vouchers. So I felt like it was not enough, but a reasonable amount. Now it’s not enough – just £5 emergency limited to 3 weeks, and what can you do with that?’

(Volunteer)

‘The points system has always been in existence. We took on about 90 people, then the Trustees realised we had to cut back. It bugs me that you can only really get enough points (to access support) if you’re ill. So it’s like we’re not helping the destitute, we’re helping the destitute who are ill. If you’re fit and well and in the same situation, you can’t get support. But then you probably will become ill because of your situation. These are horrible choices.’

(Volunteer)

Several volunteer interviewees described how demand for cash support from ASSIST fluctuates. One interviewee provided data on cash support levels and numbers accessing this support over a two-year period, suggesting that demand decreases when support levels are reduced:

‘It’s also about demand, and that’s currently very high...when I started, there was a paucity of new clients. In my time the demand has fluctuated quite a bit.’

(Volunteer)

'If you reduce money then clients disappear. In the past, when money has been reduced, less people want support. Is it worth going in on a Wednesday afternoon to collect £15, when you could get a day of illegal work for the same money? When money increases, then there are more people who will claim. The figures confirm this over 2-3 year period. When money was reduced to £15 a week from £20, many clients didn't come. In December 2010, the money was reduced and less people came, and we supported only 46 individuals when the budget is for 70.'

(Volunteer)

One volunteer with prior experience of receiving support from ASSIST suggested that clients should be more aware of ASSIST's financial situation, particularly in relation to the overall economic situation in the UK, and use this awareness to determine how they use any cash they receive:

'The economy is a problem at the moment. If ASSIST don't get enough money because of this, then they can't do anything. But if the economy is bad then you should help yourself. If you only get £10 then don't eat so much, you know, don't get the bus and walk instead. Or save some money when you're getting £20 in case it goes down later.'

(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

- Short term?

ASSIST is an acronym for 'Asylum Seeker Support Initiative (Short Term)'. The 'short term' element of ASSIST's name has given rise to a number of different perceptions of ASSIST's aim and purpose and of the nature of its work, both within and outside of the organisation.

Trustees and volunteer interviewees who were involved in starting ASSIST described how the inclusion of 'short-term' in the organisation's name was based on an assumption that government policy in this area would change, and that ASSIST would no longer be needed:

'I thought that within a couple of years the government would change its policy and ASSIST wouldn't need to exist.'

(Volunteer)

'The emphasis on short-term was included as it was initially thought that the policies of destitution would be short-lived. It was thought that they were so abhorrent that long-term support would be unnecessary.'

(Trustee)

It is clear that there is some disagreement on the 'short-term issue' amongst those within ASSIST. There is a general ASSIST policy that cash and accommodation support are withdrawn after a period of 12 months and – for some – this equates to fulfilling the 'short-term' nature of ASSIST's work. Two Trustee interviewees described this association as a 'misperception' that in some instances had caused a founding principle of ASSIST – that of not returning people to destitution – to be lost:

‘The ‘short-term’ bit of ASSIST’s name has caused confusion. Volunteers think it means that support is short-term. It’s maybe a lack of induction. It’s caused a slight mission drift, about the idea of putting people back into destitution.’  
(Trustee)

‘The fragmented nature of ASSIST means it’s difficult to communicate the consensus about the short-term issue. It is difficult – it takes a lot of work to change the commonly and long held misperception amongst volunteers about 12 months support. The differences at play are quite subtle. There’s not 100% agreement amongst Trustees. It’s 12 months and then support uniformly stops versus not putting someone especially vulnerable back into destitution. But there is a recognition that we can’t support indefinitely. The 12 months idea is entrenched and mainstream within ASSIST’.  
(Trustee)

Several volunteer interviewees firmly believed ASSIST support should be short-term, citing how ending support after 12 months enabled new clients – with potentially greater needs - to be taken on:

‘I’m quite passionate that ASSIST is short-term support, and that people staying on support for longer than 12 months is preventing new claims. I’ve no problem with being arbitrary by using criteria, although there are sometimes exceptional circumstances.’  
(Volunteer)

‘You could argue that those at the beginning of the support process are more in need than those at the end. So you possibly could say that someone in need and who’s never been supported is more in need than someone at 9 months, and the latter should give way to the former. So what do you do? Make it 9 months maximum? There will be many different views. I think it should be short-term, but that’s just my view and I might not have enough information.’  
(Volunteer)

In some instances, interviewees from partner organisations shared the lack of clarity within ASSIST regarding the short-term nature of its support:

‘It’s in the title – it’s short-term. It’s meant to be tiding people over until they get to the next point in their life where they can move forward. It maybe needs to be clearer what short-term means. Is it linked to case length? It’s difficult, but ASSIST can’t offer support indefinitely.’  
(Partner Organisation)

Some Trustee interviewees were uneasy about any policy that involved removing support from ASSIST clients. Whilst they acknowledged that individuals from whom ASSIST support is withdrawn are often able to access alternative support – from individual volunteers acting in a personal capacity, or from churches – they felt that donors did not contribute to ASSIST with the expectation that support would be withdrawn.

‘Generally, ASSIST is right in that people will come forward to support those they get to know and who have been supported by ASSIST for a while. People rarely end up on the street. But the ASSIST case is a little bit different – people give us money so that people are not on the streets.’

(Trustee)

These concerns echo the differing views expressed by interviewees regarding ASSIST organisational reserves, covered in Section 4 (‘Management & Decision-Making’).

- Stopping Support

Connected to – although distinct from – the issue of how far ASSIST support should be considered as short-term, is when and if ASSIST should stop an individual’s support, either after 12 months or in any other circumstances. This is a current issue of concern within ASSIST that has grown in prominence as the organisation has developed:

‘The issue’s become prominent as ASSIST has become more professional about the decision-making process. Before, someone in the Accommodation Team would say, for example, “No, you can’t end her support, she’s 64...”, and decisions were made like that. So what’s happened is people saying “No, we have a policy”. Panel were challenged twice on their decisions about people who were known and loved – people were challenging the policy.’

(Volunteer)

The level of concern and lack of a defined ASSIST policy regarding the continuation of support after 12 months has been recognised, and – at the time of interviews being carried out – an organisation-wide discussion on the issue was due to culminate in two workshops for Trustees and volunteers. Volunteer interviewees uniformly welcomed this method of resolving the issue:

‘There is an upcoming meeting about the circumstances in which support wouldn’t be ended. There are two meetings – one in June and one in July - involving volunteers and Trustees. These meetings are the culmination of a long period of discussion and reflection, and there are lots of different views. Key to these discussions is what are the exceptional circumstances that would mean support continues after 12 months. Are there any? And what is the process by which to arrive at this view?’

(Volunteer)

‘I’m glad that we’re looking at it ...ending support after 12 months has caused acute distress. People can reapply, but they must complete 3 months in the Night Shelter before doing so. I can’t see a solution. From the outcomes of the workshops, I’ll take away what I the best and fairest way of dealing with this situation’.

(Volunteer)

ASSIST does have an established review process, carried out by Panel, that reassesses supported individual’s ongoing needs and subsequent continued

eligibility for support at regular intervals throughout the initial 12-month period:

‘At Panel we get new case reviews via the Advocacy desk. Reviews are about if they qualify for support based on our predetermined criteria. We also look at 3, 6 and 9-month reviews of supported clients to determine if their support should continue. Support is up to a year, and at that point we’ll review and decide to end support unless there are exceptional circumstances.’

(Volunteer)

The current review process does incorporate some consideration of the exceptional circumstances in which support could continue past 12 months, although these are – in their current state – highly subjective and nuanced:

‘At 9 months, people on support get a letter saying that their support will stop at 12 months save for exceptional circumstances. Currently, ‘exceptional circumstances’ are where their case is so near resolution that stopping support would make no sense, and where there are very serious physical or mental health issues. These need evidencing, and have to be really serious – so not just depression, although it could be counselling for suicidal thoughts, for example.’

(Volunteer)

Some Trustee and volunteer interviewees felt that ASSIST support was conditional on clients attempting to resolve and/or improve their situation, and that without sufficient evidence of such efforts, support could reasonably be withdrawn after 12 months:

‘If ASSIST supports them for a year and they’re not fully cooperating in trying to resolve their case, have poor future chances of getting leave to remain, or are not engaged with society through – for example – volunteering, or having a social life, like going to Conversation Club, we should withdraw support. The latter is part of resolving a case, as it creates an opportunity to present a case to the government based on someone’s life here, that they’re doing all they can do.’

(Volunteer)

‘If people don’t try and improve their situations then we should stop support. After one year, there should be a review.’

(Trustee)

‘Support is conditional. Individuals should progress their case, try to move onto Section 4. They should do something proactive to move their situation forwards.’

(Trustee)

Interviewees described stopping an individual’s support as extremely difficult, for a number of different reasons. For clients, the act of requesting support can require a significant personal effort, and stopping support can therefore impact greatly on an individual. Stopping support may also differentially affect clients depending on their gender:

'It's very hard to stop support. It's very hard for men to ask for support in the first place, to say "I've got no money", so for it to finish is very hard. For men, it's easier to sleep on the road than for women. But some people won't ask for support even when they're hungry and sleeping rough.'

(Client)

For volunteers, making clients understand that their support will stop – even where they have been notified that it will – can be challenging, and the nature of the relationship between ASSIST clients and volunteers can affect volunteers' ability to withdraw support from individual clients:

'People really don't believe that we'll stop supporting them.'

(Volunteer)

'People become friendly with clients. The personal relationships make it difficult to end support when the time comes to do so.'

(Volunteer)

Whilst interviewees welcomed the role of Panel in taking decisions about support without being in contact with individual clients, decisions to end support can cause tensions between ASSIST Teams:

'Helpdesk and Advocacy can get frustrated with Panel, with people returning to Helpdesk when their support has been stopped, for example.'

(Volunteer)

In addition to discussing stopping support after 12 months, interviewees were also asked for their views on any other circumstances in which support should be withdrawn. Many gave examples of inappropriate or unacceptable behaviour that they believed would constitute grounds for the withdrawal of support:

'Support should be stopped when someone is racist, discriminatory, an alcoholic, breaching someone's privacy, violent, homophobic...someone who is breaking the law by behaving like this. It's the same for ASSIST volunteers – they can't act like that.'

(Client)

'ASSIST has withdrawn accommodation – both hosted accommodation and the Night Shelter - where people have been intolerable. This is right and proper.'

(Volunteer)

'Violence, unacceptable behaviour and misbehaviour – although this needs scaling, and clear warnings before support is stopped.'

(Trustee)

Many of those who raised the issue of client behaviour as possible grounds for the withdrawal of support also stated the importance of recognising where client behaviour is caused by stress related to their situation. Many recommended a case-by-case approach to sanctioning poor behaviour, and emphasised

attempting to resolve the issue through a direct dialogue with the client concerned:

‘If they do it consistently. Not just like a momentary stress that causes bad behaviour.’

(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

‘For behaviour we should take a case-by-case approach, it can’t be a definite rule.’

(Volunteer)

‘Support should not be cut off because someone is angry. ASSIST should try to manage it initially, by talking to the person.’

(Client)

Many interviewees mentioned illegal working as grounds for the withdrawal of support. Interviewees were not concerned about illegality, but rather about dishonesty on the part of the client in relation to their needs:

‘There are circumstances in which ASSIST can say that a person has broken trust, especially where people are working and taking support. In those cases, we can’t continue support.’

(Volunteer)

‘There are lots of people working illegally and also getting money from ASSIST. They cause problems for people who aren’t working. It’s a difficult decision – the problem is not working illegally, the problem is doing both, working and getting ASSIST support. People shouldn’t lie and – if they’re found to be working – ASSIST should stop their support. Anyone who comes to the UK shouldn’t lie – it just creates an extra problem for them.’

(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

Interviewees qualified ‘working’ as meaning receiving a steady income equal to or more than ASSIST support, and cautioned against considering very low-paid or occasional work as ‘working’ in this context:

‘We can’t stop supporting someone who is destitute. But determining destitution is quite complex. If I hear that someone is washing cars for £5-10, even if I know that it’s not legal and it means someone is receiving a total of £10 for a week – what can that honestly do for a full week? It would be inhuman for you to count the £10 someone is making from doing that.’

(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

‘I think that where there is clear evidence of another source of income - very clear evidence - then support might be stopped. The issue, though, is if this income provides what they need, and is it regular? If it involves earning more than £20 per week then support should probably be stopped, because some people are completely destitute.’

(Volunteer)

Several volunteer interviewees stated that instances of ASSIST clients receiving support and working were comparatively rare and, where they did occur, were well managed. Several also cautioned against ASSIST attempting to police or investigate the issue in any serious way:

‘Very occasionally we find out that someone who’s receiving support is working. These are rare occasions. Generally we have a quiet word, and people just stop coming to collect their support.’

(Volunteer)

‘But there are so few cases, and we worry about it too much, to a level that it doesn’t warrant. We shouldn’t be taking pictures of people in Pizza Hut.’

(Volunteer)

The Night Shelter was referenced as an important development for ASSIST support, particularly due to the way in which it can prevent the total destitution of those from whom other support has been withdrawn:

‘It’s easier to evict when we can say there is a night shelter to go to. It’s hard, but the night shelter is useful because it can stop you feeling guilty because someone won’t be completely destitute. And if they’re not at the night shelter then they must have friends they’re staying with, so you’re reassured.’

(Trustee)

6  
VOLUNTEERS

Volunteer interviewees of all backgrounds were asked a number of different questions about how they came to volunteer with ASSIST, and their experiences of being an ASSIST volunteer. Other interviewees also discussed volunteering and ASSIST volunteers during the course of their interviews.

Interviewees' experiences, views and ideas on volunteers fell into the five thematic areas detailed in the remainder of this section.

- Asylum Seekers, Refugees & Volunteering

Many ASSIST volunteers have direct experience of the asylum system. Some are seeking asylum whilst volunteering for ASSIST, whilst others have been granted some form of leave to remain in the UK.

All volunteer interviewees who had been granted leave to remain in the UK had begun volunteering with ASSIST whilst their asylum claim was still ongoing. ASSIST also involves clients in activities – including public speaking and creating artwork for ASSIST cards – that can be considered as volunteering.

Refugee and asylum-seeking volunteers described a number of different ways in which volunteering with ASSIST had impacted on their lives. Several mentioned the way in which being an ASSIST volunteer had given them a sense of status and importance in the UK:

'Whenever I go to offices or services I can say "I'm a volunteer with ASSIST". Everyone has heard of ASSIST and knows that it's good.'

(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

'I don't have any qualifications here or in my home country, but now I see myself as important. People call me, ask me things – I'm important in this society.'

(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

'Before I joined ASSIST, only my friends called me by my name. Now I meet people in the street, calling my name. This is very different to telling people lies, like before, trying to hide who you are.'

(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

For refugees and asylum seeking volunteers, including ASSIST clients, being involved in volunteering had enabled them to develop new skills, widen their experience and increase their confidence:

'I've volunteered as a speaker to raise funds for ASSIST, speaking with Robert Spooner. Before that I had no experience of public speaking – I was nervous at first, but now I'm confident.'

(Client)

'I had no previous experience as a volunteer. ASSIST was the first time I heard about volunteering. I only heard about volunteering in the UK.'  
(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

Many refugee/asylum-seeker volunteer interviewees described volunteering a way of reducing or distracting from the stress of seeking asylum, mainly by keeping busy, dealing with operational issues and developing friendships. For some, witnessing the situation of destitute clients enabled them to see their own situation more positively:

'Most importantly, it kept me busy – writing reports at home, sorting out volunteer availability, dealing with volunteers not being able to make it at the last minute. Instead of worrying about my own problems I worried about those things.'  
(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

'I volunteered with ASSIST to talk to people instead of locking myself away and seeing bad news on the TV.'  
(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

'I was conscious of being very lucky – I had Section 4 accommodation and vouchers. It helped reduce my stress because I could see that other people were far worse off.'  
(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

'I meet people and have a chance to get to know them. It puts my own life in perspective – I say "I'm lucky – I have papers, a place, my own life. I'm making connections".'  
(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

'I helped people and I made friends, I got a lot of friendship. It keeps me busy and very happy to be working.'  
(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

Those refugee and asylum-seeking volunteers for whom English is not a first language referred to the way in which volunteering had enabled them to improve their English language skills:

'I've gained lots of things – my English is far better than before, because I listen to and can speak with people. And other volunteers have helped me with my English, helped me to practice.'  
(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

'English writing, that's much better. ASSIST just say to me 'write as best you can'. Before, I wasn't confident as I made too many mistakes in my writing. Now I'm really confident, and help others to write letters.'  
(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

Whilst emphasising the supportive nature of ASSIST and its volunteers in terms of English language ability, some volunteers described their lack of English

language proficiency as a source of frustration and challenge, and as a barrier to volunteering for others they know:

'I'm sometimes angry about my writing, because I can't spell. So sometimes when someone asks me to send a report in....well, it's frustrating and I'm a bit embarrassed.'

(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

'Other friends have mine have tried to volunteer with ASSIST, but don't have the right levels of English.'

(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

Volunteer interviewees of all backgrounds believed that those with direct experience of the asylum system enhanced the quality of the services ASSIST provides, particularly in terms of relationships and empathy with clients:

'I have also experienced being helped – I know they're vulnerable and need help, and I believed I could offer advice and support.'

(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

'Ordinary people have everything to learn, whereas asylum seekers already know and can empathise. Human relationships are great when you're on that level.'

(Volunteer)

One volunteer interviewee raised difficulties that can be caused by asylum seekers acting as volunteers, including conflicts of interest created by changes in their circumstances and some practical aspects of many asylum seekers' situations:

'Asylum-seeking volunteers can be struggling with their own problems, which can act as a barrier to volunteering. They may also need to ask for help from ASSIST for themselves, which is a conflict of interest. It's easier when they have status and are refugees. Some have left because of these conflicts. Contacting some asylum-seeking volunteers is a problem sometimes – they don't have credit on their phones or sometimes they can't even charge them.'

(Volunteer)

Volunteering for ASSIST and becoming involved in ASSIST activities were also described in terms of being an opportunity to contribute to the organisation and – in some cases – to offer something in return for support received:

'For example the painting. I have paintings that have been made into cards that ASSIST can sell. It helps raise funds and also helps with my asylum claim. It has changed me – I feel better for doing something in return for getting money.'

(Client)

'Clients with difficult cases can find voluntary work (at ASSIST). This provides a sense of being able to give something, which is terribly important.'

(Volunteer)

- Motivation

Volunteer and Trustee interviewees described a number of different motivations for becoming involved with ASSIST. The most common of these was the sense of injustice they felt at the situation of destitute asylum seekers, and the desire to contribute to something that improved this situation:

‘We’ve always had an amazing quality of volunteers and help, advice and guidance. I think it’s due to the issue being so clearly wrong and people feeling that they have to do something.’

(Trustee)

‘The issue is such that intelligent people would want to do something about it. You can’t sleep easily if you know about it, and once you’re doing something you feel a bit better.’

(Trustee)

‘It was to volunteer in something close to my heart, meaning the injustice of what was and what is happening.’

(Volunteer)

‘I had previous experience in West Africa. We were always made very welcome there, there was a lot of hospitality for us and our children. So we were mortified at the lack of welcome here.’

(Volunteer)

‘There’s a sense that you can make a considerable difference to the everyday lives of clients.’

(Volunteer)

Some interviewees described their motivation to volunteer as originating in their religious – specifically Christian – beliefs. One client also identified Christian beliefs and principles as motivating factors for ASSIST volunteers:

‘I have Christian beliefs, and I therefore wanted to get involved to help people who are homeless.’

(Volunteer)

‘Volunteers...believe strongly in God. In the beginning the Christian element was important. Now it has grown up and it’s maybe not quite so important, but at the start it was very much based on Christian principles.’

(Client)

As detailed above, many refugee and asylum seeker volunteers became involved with ASSIST to help them to cope with their own situations. Similarly, for many non-refugee/asylum seeker volunteer interviewees, volunteering provided a way to help deal with particular circumstances and events in their lives, including bereavement, retirement, inactivity and unemployment:

'I'd had a difficult year with family bereavements and I felt disengaged, so I thought I would volunteer.'

(Volunteer)

'For me housework wasn't enough. So I wanted something to do, but something that was useful.'

(Volunteer)

'It was also for me to do something – to get out of that cycle of doing job applications. So it was part altruistic, part me filling my needs.'

(Volunteer)

For many volunteers, ASSIST provided an opportunity to get involved with something that chimed with their personal interests. In many cases, volunteering with ASSIST was viewed as a natural continuation or extension of these interests and of previous, related voluntary roles:

'It fits with the world and my concerns. It fits. I could turn the page and do something else, for example to do with word development, and it would be a continuation. The story is grabbing me. And I came to Sheffield to retire!'

(Trustee)

'I'd already been involved with homeless projects in the past. I'd always supported similar projects, and this was the same sort of area. It was an extension of my previous work.'

(Volunteer)

Several interviewees described how they began volunteering with ASSIST as a way of developing new skills and broadening their experience:

'I wanted to offer practical support to people and have an opportunity to campaign, both locally and nationally. ASSIST met those needs.'

(Volunteer)

'ASSIST was an opportunity to broaden my experience, really just to get involved with people and with a topic I had no direct experience of.'

(Volunteer)

- Recruitment & Placement

Volunteer interviewees were asked to recall how they came into contact with ASSIST and were recruited to their role. Volunteers who joined the organisation relatively recently – within the past 2-3 years – described how they had found out about ASSIST via mainstream volunteering services:

'I found out about ASSIST from the Voluntary Action Bureau bulletin last August.'

(Volunteer)

'In October 2008 I got the 'Handbook of Volunteering' from Voluntary Action Sheffield. I read through it for a couple of weeks, and then contacted ASSIST.'

(Volunteer)

‘The Volunteer Bureau has a database of volunteer opportunities to match to criteria, like location, skills and so on. The database came up with a list of hits and I took them away. There was a brief ASSIST profile saying that volunteers were needed and where. It grabbed my imagination. I went on the ASSIST website to suss it out and build up a picture. The website was useful as an information tool.’

(Volunteer)

Other interviewees noted how they had first been made aware of ASSIST via talks given at their church. Churches were noted as important for the recruitment of accommodation hosts:

‘Robert gave a talk at our church mass. We were told they needed volunteers and money. We got in touch with the Volunteer Coordinator – it took some time for her to respond, as she had a long list. The Volunteer Coordinator then waited for a team who needed volunteers.’

(Volunteer)

‘Hosts tend to be recruited from church groups, generally as a result of Robert’s talks.’

(Volunteer)

Other volunteer interviewees described how they had taken an active role in recruiting friends and acquaintances as ASSIST volunteers:

‘What would I say to someone who is considering volunteering with ASSIST? I’d encourage them. I have done for 2 of the current volunteers.’

(Volunteer)

‘I have brought my friends along to volunteer, I tell a lot of people. I bring people here, to the Night Shelter, and take people to Victoria Hall so they can volunteer and make friends. I can only give them the information, not everyone should do it. I explain about it. I just want to let them know they can.’

(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

Interviewees described how - in the early stages of ASSIST’s development - the process for recruiting volunteers was very informal:

‘Getting in contact with ASSIST was very easy. I came in with another volunteer – I knew her – so volunteering and being taken on was very informal.’

(Volunteer)

‘A volunteer was asked if they knew of someone who could accompany someone to Vulcan House, so I took up this role, and ended up going with that same person for a period of about 6 months. So the start of it was very informal. Then Teresa found out and thought I should be a volunteer.’

(Volunteer)

All volunteer interviewees considered that the process for recruiting volunteers had markedly improved over time, particularly as a result of ASSIST's increased administrative capacity, and to the extent that new volunteers can sometimes be surprised by its formality:

'We have improved the way we involve new volunteers. Originally people had to be very committed or know someone to become involved. Individuals who were interested in volunteering didn't know who to contact and phone calls weren't returned. There were more urgent things to do than these administrative tasks. Initially there was no real administration. Now with a central office, and with Zohreh and Jenny, procedures are efficient and monitored. There is a base to act as central point of contact.'

(Trustee)

'Now, volunteers are flooding in for Helpdesk. Some are very surprised that they have to be formally recruited'.

(Volunteer)

Several interviewees referred to the professional backgrounds of many ASSIST volunteers, and the way in which such individuals had made use of their skills to increase ASSIST's organisational and management capacity:

'Quite a lot of people involved with ASSIST have professional backgrounds and are used to managing people and organising. So they're using those skills to build up the teams here, they're just unpaid.'

(Volunteer)

Whilst acknowledging the quality of many ASSIST volunteers, both volunteer and Trustee interviewees also expressed some concern about the capacity of ASSIST to assess, at the point of recruitment, the skills and suitability of volunteers in relation to particular roles or teams:

'Because Team Leaders are also volunteers, there is still no capacity to assess whether people are well suited to their teams'.

(Trustee)

'I have doubts about quality and ability of some ASSIST volunteers. They think they can do simple tasks such as putting data into Case Manager... but sometimes the quality of information inputting is poor...when I've requested people for particular projects from Jenny I've been given people who don't possess the correct skills. So I've had to spend time training them. An exercise should be designed, and if it cannot be completed then it should be clear that the individual does not possess the necessary skills.'

(Volunteer)

'Regarding recruitment, we should state quite clearly when recruiting volunteers that there are qualities we require for certain positions – if you do not possess these skills then do not apply. We should screen applicants better, not operate a 'job-for-all' policy. This is especially true of more specialist areas.'

(Volunteer)

Based on their experiences with ASSIST, volunteer interviewees suggested that particular issues be taken into account when assessing an individual's suitability for volunteering with ASSIST. Criteria mentioned included age, employment status and distance from ASSIST:

'Volunteer-wise, anyone who travels from a long way away doesn't normally work out in the long-term.'

(Volunteer)

'We really need retired people – they're far more static.'

(Volunteer)

Interviewees noted the difficulties ASSIST can encounter in recruiting volunteers to fill specific skills gaps within the organisation:

'Generally, in management, you'd try to fit people into slots. But you can't put a volunteer somewhere – people take their own decisions about how they're going to help you. So it can be difficult to fill the gaps.'

(Volunteer)

Volunteer interviewees felt that difficulties in recruiting volunteers for particular activities tended to be experienced more in relation to 'back room' and awareness-raising functions – essentially those activities where volunteers are not working directly with clients:

'We have asked people to do research projects, but people are not interested in fundraising and funding. They want to do frontline services.'

(Volunteer)

'Fundraising, publicity and education. That's the hard part, it's a slog. But there's a lack of volunteers for it – really a lack of people prepared to take ownership and leadership. People want to work with clients, all the time.'

(Volunteer)

Some volunteers expressed concern about recruiting volunteers of sufficient drive and quality to replace those individuals who had started the organisation. They were optimistic about the involvement of newer and younger volunteers in the organisation, if not wholly convinced that they would be able to push the organisation forward when founding individuals ceased their involvement:

'It was some very inspirational people that started it, and lots of those aren't getting any younger. There are lots of younger people – including refugees – now involved, and the hope is that they have the courage to continue it.'

(Volunteer)

ASSIST volunteers are drawn from a wide range of backgrounds. Some interviewees considered the diversity present within ASSIST's volunteer base as an extremely positive aspect of the organisation:

'Everybody learns at ASSIST. There are many volunteers from many different backgrounds, students for example, so ASSIST does good things to increase diversity and mutual respect.'

(Client)

- Training

Volunteer interviewees were asked several questions about the training and guidance they had received to help them carry out their ASSIST volunteer role. There was uniform agreement amongst interviewees that training was useful and necessary, both to ensure volunteers were able to carry out their role to the required standard, and to make the experience worthwhile for volunteers themselves:

'Training is really necessary to do a volunteer role correctly and to get the most out of it.'

(Volunteer)

Volunteer interviewees also described how the provision of training within ASSIST had improved over time:

'Any organisation develops its training and support over time. So ASSIST's has grown and improved.'

(Volunteer)

'I've not had much training. But when I joined there was only the Office Manager and no Volunteer Coordinator. There's much more in place now, I acknowledge that.'

(Volunteer)

'I've attended two or three training sessions here, at Victoria Hall. There are more of those than there used to be, they're well-organised.'

(Volunteer)

One commonly mentioned improvement in terms of training was ASSIST's induction session for new volunteers. Interviewees viewed the content of the session as extremely useful, and recommended that all new volunteers attend the session:

'It's important that the induction is done as soon as possible, so volunteers can have a clear knowledge of everything ASSIST does, the different teams and functions, and why it's important.'

(Volunteer)

'Induction is now more formal. Previously Teresa did a trip round the drop-in to introduce people to ASSIST, but now there's a formal Induction Session – you can

compare the two to see the difference. ASSIST had begun work on the Volunteer Induction Pack before Teresa though.'

(Volunteer)

'For the first 6 months of my volunteering, I wrote down after any training session what was good and bad about it. Most of the good points – who Northern Refugee Centre are, what Section 4 is, explanations of terms and so on – all of these are now included in the Induction Pack and session.'

(Volunteer)

Volunteer interviewees also referenced several other training initiatives that they had found useful, and recommended that more technical training be repeated at regular intervals:

'Helpdesk training, debriefing meetings, and training on how to go about attending to clients. All of this was helpful.'

(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

'Some training has been very good, for example John Donkersley from Northern Refugee Centre ran some training looking at Section 4, Section 95 and explaining terminology. There is a need to revisit training every now and then, but training does pop up quite consistently.'

(Volunteer)

Shadowing is a long-established method of training ASSIST volunteers, as in the example of the Advocacy Team, below:

'When volunteers come in as advocates, they shadow established advocates, and then get to the stage when they're judged to be ready to advocate.'

(Volunteer)

One interviewee suggested that experience of Helpdesk – which potentially could be achieved by shadowing - is a crucial learning point for all ASSIST volunteers:

'What would I say to someone who is considering volunteering with ASSIST? I'd say apply for Helpdesk and then – if you want - do something else. Helpdesk is an education and lets you know about the problems people have. Helpdesk gives you more of an opportunity to talk to people and learn about their situation.'

(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

Others described ways in which shadowing those in other ASSIST teams could enhance their ability to carry out their role, improve communication and reduce potential tension and misunderstandings between teams:

'Earlier this week I visited Helpdesk – I was invited to attend to find out more about their team. It was useful, as befrienders need a good understanding of what other teams do. We need to be able to tell people we're befriending where to go for help.'

(Volunteer)

‘Helpdesk and Advocacy can get frustrated with Panel, with people returning to Helpdesk when their support has been stopped, for example. This has got better because Panel have tried to explain the decision-making criteria. They’ve asked Helpdesk to make mock Panel decisions as part of this process, so they can’t often challenge Panel decisions after doing that. But Helpdesk and Advocacy deal with angry and sad people. This is Panel work, but it has got better.’

(Volunteer)

‘It’s invaluable, as a Helpdesk volunteer, to be involved in the Night Shelter. It means you know where you’re sending people to and what they can expect.’

(Volunteer)

Similarly to shadowing within ASSIST, several volunteer interviewees referenced visits to partner organisations as extremely useful in building their confidence and reassuring them of the usefulness of what they are providing:

‘An example of a good training initiative is with the Archer Project. I kept giving people Archer Project vouchers without really knowing what the project even looked like. So I organised a visit, and found out that my down and out version of what the project is like differed greatly from the very lovely reality. It cheered me up, because I knew we were sending people somewhere good. The visit was my suggestion, and Margaret organised the trip. I’ll suggest it again for new volunteers, and also suggest a visit to St Wilfrid’s for the same reason.’

(Volunteer)

Interviewees identified a number of challenges to ASSIST’s ability to train volunteers effectively, including volunteer availability, differing levels of commitment to attending training amongst volunteers, and long-term retention of information communicated during training sessions:

‘It’s difficult to plan training for volunteers because of differing availability.’

(Volunteer)

‘I go to all the meetings and get the information I need. Volunteers should try to go to all meetings – it helps them to deliver ASSIST services.’

(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

‘People need training, they need to be diligent in attending training and meetings and they need to take it all on board.’

(Volunteer)

One volunteer interviewee felt that volunteer training was weighted too heavily in favour of frontline services, and that volunteers involved in support services – in particular fundraising – would benefit from training specific to their roles:

‘I’ve not had any formal training. Training is done for front line services. Maybe training for grant applications is difficult, but there is a lot of background information required to do that role.’

(Volunteer)

- Volunteer Management & Support

The pressures that can be experienced by ASSIST volunteers in their roles are referenced in a number of different places within this report. Many volunteer interviewees talked about the danger of volunteers becoming exhausted, and contrasted the volunteer experience with that of paid employees in this regard:

‘The work can be very stressful and there’s a danger of volunteer fatigue. All volunteers experience this. Volunteer numbers in the Advocacy Team do fluctuate, from having enough volunteers to having hardly any. So managing the pressure and stress needs to be kept in the minds of people running the organisation. The current Chair has been very clear about this, which is one of the good things.’

(Volunteer)

‘Some people can get exhausted. A contract of employment is a protective thing – for example for Jenny, who’s very clear about her role and her hours of work. For volunteers it’s hard to talk about annual leave or working hours, or not being generally on duty when in Sheffield. Some people have dropped out – not many, but some have gone rather than say “I’m just doing this or that”. Others just wear themselves out. It’s really about a balance between being healthy and saintly.’

(Volunteer)

To combat exhaustion and ‘burn-out’, one interviewee suggested limiting the period of time volunteers remain in particular roles:

‘Volunteers do get burned out. People should change volunteer roles fairly regularly, ideally spending a maximum of 3 or 4 years in one role and then changing. There’s no policy on this though, and it might be difficult to implement because of the high turnover in some teams.’

(Volunteer)

Volunteer interviewees valued the formal support mechanisms in place within some ASSIST teams:

‘Teams have developed support networks. There are regular Team Meetings, post-Induction training for befriending, advocacy and helpdesk. This is all in frontline teams though, I’m not sure about support services.’

(Volunteer)

Interviewees also referenced the mutually supportive dynamic within teams, particularly between newer and more experienced volunteers, as important in dealing with pressures and making volunteering a pleasant experience. Some were concerned that, for some individuals, this type of support might be difficult to ask for and so would not be available to all volunteers:

‘It’s improving. It’s a nice and important aspect of the work, the teamwork. So new volunteers can ask for help from the more experienced volunteers if they’re stuck, that’s a very strong feature of my team. The goodwill and tolerance makes it very pleasant.’

(Volunteer)

There is also a lot of mutual support. Helpdesk debriefing is invaluable. But it is difficult to see someone, another volunteer, who is coping very well, and then for you to say “I had a terrible afternoon”, so I’m not always sure that everyone is being supported.’

(Volunteer)

## AWARENESS-RAISING & CAMPAIGNING

The Impact Study project included interviews with organisations that had hosted ASSIST talks, and which therefore focused on the awareness-raising element of ASSIST's work.

Whilst the remainder of Impact Study interviewees were not asked specific questions about ASSIST's awareness-raising and campaigning, many interviewees raised issues related to these areas in the course of discussing and responding to interview questions. This section details the views, ideas and opinions they expressed.

- Reputation & Profile

It is clear that ASSIST's profile and reputation have grown considerably in the 7-8 years since the organisation was established. Interviewees noted how awareness of the organisation now extends to a diverse range of people, communities and institutions, both within and outside of Sheffield:

'I'm not sure everyone would say the same thing, but I think ASSIST permeates the whole asylum community, even those who are not given help.'

(Trustee)

'It is known within Sheffield amongst different communities, of asylum seekers, students, MPs, radio stations and others who volunteer. It has a good reputation.'

(Client)

'Everyone in Sheffield and South Yorkshire knows about ASSIST. I don't know about further afield than that, but definitely it's the case in South Yorkshire.'

(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

ASSIST's high profile and good reputation has both encouraged and enabled its involvement in awareness-raising and campaigning work:

'As ASSIST's profile has grown, it has enabled it to become involved in campaigning and speaking...and campaigning and speaking has led to more campaigning and public speaking on asylum issues.'

(Trustee)

- Awareness-Raising

The varied nature of the views and ideas expressed by interviewees demonstrated how awareness-raising has a number of different meanings and purposes in the ASSIST context.

Several interviewees described awareness-raising as a fundraising activity, which ASSIST is compelled to pursue so as to continue supporting the growing number of destitute people in need of support. Interviewees who referenced this aspect of awareness-raising believed that individuals become more likely to

donate to ASSIST as their knowledge and understanding of asylum and destitution increases:

'I'm now involved in the Events, Fundraising & Awareness Team, because we need more and more support so we can support the numbers who are in need. This can only happen if people are aware and they want to help. It has to be voluntary to keep it organic. It's great that this raises money.'

(Trustee)

For many interviewees, fundraising was just one way in which awareness-raising work might create support for ASSIST – others might include becoming a volunteer or telling other people about ASSIST:

'It's about getting information to people and moving them emotionally with that information so they respond by doing something – be that giving money, telling their friends about us or whatever.'

(Volunteer)

Many interviewees felt that the purpose of awareness-raising was not to create support for ASSIST, but rather to change perceptions about asylum seekers:

'When I do it I don't look for money, I look to change hearts.'

(Volunteer)

'It (awareness-raising) also spreads awareness and raises interest in the people involved, dispelling images of criminality. It's the best way, forming a deeper knowledge.'

(Trustee)

The way in which volunteers become more aware of the lived experience of destitution through their contact with destitute people was, for some interviewees, part of ASSIST's wider awareness-raising work:

'ASSIST is a centre for raising awareness. Many people have come to volunteer - students, refugees themselves...people learn about destitution, even those who have worked with refugees previously. It's important to have interaction with someone who is destitute, very important.'

(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

One interviewee described ASSIST's awareness-raising role as including being a point of reference and/or a partner for academic research into destitution affecting asylum seekers:

'It's the perfect place to understand destitution. If I was a student and I was doing research about destitution, it wouldn't be a good report if I didn't consult with ASSIST. You understand the real meaning and situation from ASSIST.'

(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

Interviewees from partner organisations to which ASSIST had delivered talks described the success of this method of awareness-raising in changing negative perceptions and opinions. One interviewee described how the perceptions of some previously hostile audience members quickly and visibly altered during a talk:

‘The reaction of those listening changed over the course of the talk. It started off as hostile, but by the end they were shocked by the stories. It was good, in terms of the reaction. Some remained hostile throughout though, and were still cross that it had been organised...’

(Partner Organisation)

This set of interviewees described the involvement of refugees and asylum seekers in delivering talks as an extremely effective method of engaging hostile and/or disinterested audiences:

‘The two refugees were brilliant, their talks were very strong, powerful and heartfelt. And people – even where they had been hostile – really had to listen because of who they were and what they were saying.’

(Partner Organisation)

These interviewees also expressed some concerns about the content of ASSIST talks in relation to specific audiences. They drew a distinction between talks delivered for the purpose of raising funds - the content of which they felt would necessarily focus on the work of ASSIST - and talks aimed at changing perceptions. They suggested that talks aimed purely at challenging misperceptions should focus less on the activities and processes of ASSIST, and more on highlighting and undermining ‘myths’ about asylum and refugees. They also suggested involving audiences more directly in the subject matter of talks by making use of interactive techniques and including time for discussion:

‘Most talks are probably about the work of ASSIST and raising money for this work, and not so much about getting rid of misconceptions. Talks could be more interactive – not just talking, but more myth-busting, about the headlines versus the reality, and include some time for discussion and reflection. Maybe a bit more ‘imagine you’d been through...’ and so on, to create some empathy. The talk wasn’t focused enough on the impact, it was very process-based.’

(Partner Organisation)

Interviewees from some partner organisations felt ASSIST’s awareness-raising and publicity work was not reaching the areas of Sheffield in which the majority of challenges lie. One interviewee suggested taking a ward-based approach to this work, to ensure more consistent coverage of the city:

‘ASSIST are overwhelmingly middle-class people from the South West of the city. But that’s not where the challenge is in terms of misconceptions and cohesion. It’s in other areas, and they’re not doing enough in those areas to publicise the work that they do.’

(Partner Organisation)

‘ASSIST should find a champion in each ward. ASSIST is not representative of the city as a whole, so it has to try to find people to bang drums in particular areas.’  
(Partner Organisation)

Volunteer interviewees expressed some concerns about ASSIST’s written publicity material, both in terms of its suitability for the general public and the reliability of the data it includes. Several also identified how changeable volunteer capacity had presented challenges in regularly reviewing and renewing publicity information:

‘The publicity material about what we do is maybe not suited to the general public. The data is out of date. We’ve tried to get a new version done, but volunteers get fed up when changes are required or are doing something else. So it’s maybe too high a target.’  
(Volunteer)

Many interviewees viewed ASSIST’s awareness-raising work as instrumental in creating and encouraging positive views of asylum and asylum seekers in Sheffield:

‘My awareness has increased because of ASSIST, their campaigns, the work of different individuals, their involvement in the drop-in, Refugee Week, Summer of Sanctuary and so on. They’ve positioned themselves right at the front of the agencies working in the city.’  
(Partner Organisation)

‘ASSIST’s existence and awareness-raising does something on a broader level. For example, a committee of people in Sheffield voted for asylum seekers to have the right to work. That’s phenomenal. It’s got to have been the influence of ASSIST that played a part in that.’  
(Trustee)

- Campaigning & Lobbying

ASSIST is often involved in campaigning on individual asylum cases, particularly where individuals are detained or at risk of removal from the UK. It is clear that this aspect of ASSIST’s work has in some instances been extremely successful, as one client interviewee described:

‘If I didn’t meet ASSIST I wouldn’t be alive. I was nearly deported and the ASSIST campaign saved me. They wrote letters to MPs, and ran a big campaign for me. The publicity of it was maybe not nice, but it was better than being removed. I was in detention so I didn’t know what people were doing for me outside. I learned about it a few weeks later – it was on the internet, in the newspaper – it was unbelievable.’  
(Client)

Several interviewees – including some current volunteers – first became aware of ASSIST because of this individual campaigning work, and many had initially thought ASSIST was solely a campaigning organisation:

‘I’d not previously heard about ASSIST. I knew about some of the people involved – I’d seen key people like Myra and Robert at demonstrations about students who’d been detained...but I had no idea of the range of ASSIST activities. I thought they just campaigned.’

(Volunteer)

In addition to being involved in campaigning on individual asylum cases, some ASSIST Trustees and volunteers also correspond with MPs, local Councillors and/or government departments on issues related to asylum policy. One Trustee described how these activities can cause some ambiguity in relation to ASSIST’s role:

‘ASSIST is not a political organisation. It’s about education and awareness. But ASSIST volunteers do write to MPs and so on. So it’s not a campaigning organisation, but individuals do campaign. This is a necessary ambiguity.’

(Trustee)

Whilst the tension around the political and campaigning nature of ASSIST was thought of as manageable when discussed in terms of the activities of individual volunteers, interviewees offered differing views on ASSIST’s organisational involvement in political lobbying and the issues this question had created. Some interviewees felt ASSIST to be the ideal organisation to carry out this kind of work, whilst others felt it to be both inconsistent with ASSIST’s original purpose and unrealistic in relation to the organisation’s capacity:

‘ASSIST should also have a voice and be given a chance to have a voice on addressing issues of destitution to the Home Office. If you sent anyone from Panel to the Home Office it would have an impact on their decision-making. Individual stories would raise information the Home Office don’t have when they’re making a decision.’

(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

‘Policy and high-level dialogue – do we need to be more engaged? We never set out to do this and it’s a huge task. There is a tension within ASSIST as to if this is appropriate.’

(Trustee)

Some interviewees questioned the usefulness of ASSIST’s involvement in this area of work, given the intractable nature of asylum policy and the demoralising effect the lack of tangible results could have:

‘On political campaigning, I do wonder how much difference it would really make. It must be really demoralising, the lack of change in policy (as a result).’

(Partner Organisation)

One interviewee thought ASSIST could be more effective at political lobbying at a local level, and that the outcomes of doing so would be positive and productive:

'It is a conscious and on-board City Council in terms of the issues, but I don't feel communicated with. ASSIST don't effectively engage with the City Council on a government or policy level, or with individual politicians.'

(Partner Organisation)

8  
ASSIST & SHEFFIELD

All Impact Study interviewees were asked if and how Sheffield would be different if ASSIST did not exist. Trustee and volunteer interviewees were also asked about their work with other organisations in an ASSIST capacity, and the project included a number of interviews with individuals from organisations with whom ASSIST works.

This section draws together interviewee views and responses on ASSIST's relationship to the city of Sheffield.

- Contributions to Sheffield

Many interviewees identified a number of different ways in which the work of ASSIST has contributed to improving and enhancing Sheffield.

Several raised the lack of public disorder experienced as a result of destitution amongst asylum seekers in Sheffield, and contrasted this with experiences in other towns and cities. Many attributed this relative calm to ASSIST's practical support, and the way in which it both reduces and prevents homelessness and criminality:

'The night shelter keeps people off streets, mostly young men, and is therefore crucial in keeping the city calm at night. Because of ASSIST Sheffield has not seen the 'explosion' around asylum and destitution that has happened in other places.'

(Trustee)

'ASSIST only gives a small amount of money but it stops people from doing bad things, from committing crimes. The limited financial assistance from ASSIST stops people from doing bad things for which they could be arrested, such as eliminating the need for people to steal.'

(Client)

'Of the 100 or so people that ASSIST helps, if ASSIST did not exist and provide limited financial assistance, these people would have no other alternative but to be forced to steal food. This would mean more problems and work for the police.'

(Client)

Interviewees also raised how ASSIST's work in preventing homelessness amongst those who are destitute prevents physical and mental ill-health:

'Without ASSIST there would be more people on the streets, dying during the winter. Stress-related illnesses and desperation would increase.'

(Client)

'ASSIST without Sheffield would be horrendous. It would be overwhelmed with the social aspects of asylum – the homelessness and poverty - and the poor health that these create.'

(Partner Organisation)

Interviewees also described how ASSIST's practical and emotional support helps to build positive relationships, between asylum seekers and the settled population, volunteers and clients, and amongst different asylum-seeking populations. Interviewees felt that this aspect of ASSIST's work had contributed to the overall diversity and cohesiveness of the city:

'ASSIST clients and volunteers learn how to be treated by other people and how to treat other people, which is good for diversity and things like that.'

(Client)

'Without ASSIST there would be more people wandering the streets, begging, sleeping rough, more aggression between different groups of people. By the latter I don't just mean asylum seekers and the mainstream population, I mean – for example - like the problems a few years ago between the Kurds and the Pakistanis. And between different groups of asylum seekers. If there were no Conversation Club milieu and no ASSIST support, then those antagonisms would get worse.'

(Partner Organisation)

'Because of ASSIST, the people of Sheffield now know that asylum seekers and refugees are part of the human community and the human race. This makes Sheffield very different from other cities.'

(Client)

'There's also the diversity and variety of cultures within Sheffield and ASSIST's role in enabling that.'

(Volunteer)

One interviewee outlined how, in the longer term, ASSIST support can enable asylum seekers to make individual contributions to the city:

'I've met people from minority groups in Sheffield that have said just that – that Sheffield would be different without ASSIST. One individual I know who was previously supported by ASSIST now does voluntary work with older people. I think without ASSIST Sheffield would lose something, that thing about people who come here being able to be the best they can.'

(Volunteer)

Interviewees credited ASSIST with having created a reputation of welcome and friendliness for Sheffield, which had enabled other initiatives – most notably City of Sanctuary – to develop in the city:

'Sheffield as a city is known for accommodating refugees. It has a tag of friendliness and community spirit, which would disappear without ASSIST.'

(Client)

'I don't live in Sheffield. But the reputation of Sheffield as a City of Sanctuary would suffer without ASSIST.'

(Volunteer)

Interviewees from statutory partner organisations described how ASSIST enhanced their ability to deliver services, mainly through the way in which ASSIST support enabled them to deal with their concerns at the limitations of their own roles. They expressed their strong confidence in the nature and quality of ASSIST's provision, and their appreciation of its availability for their clients:

'ASSIST is somewhere that our clients can be sent and you know that they will get sound help. There is complete confidence in ASSIST and their provision of services.'  
(Partner Organisation)

'It's valuable because as a Local Authority, we have clear duties and responsibilities that end at a certain point. It's an absolute comfort to know that there is an organisation that picks people up where we leave off. Personally, I morally couldn't have done my job without knowing that there was an organisation to pick up those who were affected by it. I felt slightly better because there was, and because it is a reputable, capable and caring organisation.'

(Partner Organisation)

'If someone turns up late on a Friday and is homeless, I can ring the night shelter number, someone always picks up and they'll do something for them. It's helpful, of course, and so reassuring, and it also just makes our lives very much easier.'

(Partner Organisation)

'Without ASSIST there would be a severe deterioration in mental health – amongst both clients and those working in statutory services.'

(Partner Organisation)

- Sheffield 'family of organisations'

ASSIST is often referred to as part of a loose, informal 'family of Sheffield organisations' working in the area of asylum. One Trustee interview described the origins of this 'family' and its member organisations:

'But then 9/11 happened, and we had a meeting to discuss what we could do. It included refugees and asylum seekers, and we established two groups – one for caring and one for campaigning. We initially went to the drop-in to make cups of tea, then we started the conversation corner, then STAR<sup>9</sup> was established. It was very organic – Conversation Club, then CDAS<sup>10</sup> and SYMAAG from the campaigning group. Then City of Sanctuary. Gradually all these different things came together.'

(Trustee)

This 'family of organisations' exists in more or less the same form today, and includes ASSIST:

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<sup>9</sup> Student Action for Refugees (referring to the Sheffield branch of the national STAR organisation)

<sup>10</sup> Committee to Defend Asylum Seekers

‘CDAS is the campaigning arm of a family of organisations that includes ASSIST, City of Sanctuary, STAR, SYMAAG and others that work on the asylum question, and with whom we are associated or work directly with.’

(Partner Organisation)

Interviewees described the particularly close relationship between ASSIST and Conversation Club, both in terms of the origins of the organisations and the individuals involved – Trustees, volunteers and clients – with both:

‘We have a number of volunteers in common – not just Trustees, lots of other volunteers too. And Conversation Club has people in common with ASSIST – our members are often ASSIST clients, and vice-versa. We’re a sister organisation. We’re seen as that because we’re in close proximity and we have so many people in common. Our members will often have gone to ASSIST first.’

(Partner Organisation)

ASSIST works in partnership with a number of other organisations in Sheffield, both within and outside of the ‘family’ outlined above. Interviewees characterised the relationships ASSIST has with its partner organisations as one of mutual support, and gave a number of practical examples to support this view:

‘NRC has oversight of the ASSIST Advocacy Team. The goodwill of their staff is very important – we use their interpreters, check out information with them, we can go and ask them and they support us.’

(Volunteer)

‘It’s an exceptional example of close working with the Mulberry Practice. The staff there are very, very helpful, but also very firm about how - for example - they can’t prioritise our clients over others. You always know where you are.’

(Volunteer)

‘We’re not funded for ASSIST clients like we are for probation and other groups, and it’s a big chunk of our resources. But all our clients are in need, with no money and no accommodation, and need support. There aren’t many places that offer free food, and we’re lucky that we’re tapped into the right sources. We have 20 years experience so we’re inundated with food, and so we can – and should - offer that support to ASSIST clients.’

(Partner Organisation)

‘Without ASSIST we’d be snookered, we wouldn’t be able to cope with the numbers. ASSIST are a very good filtering system.’

(Partner Organisation)

‘If I want advice, I’ll go to Richard – he’s from Conversation Club but mainly he’s involved with ASSIST. He’s very knowledgeable, which is good for ASSIST but also great for us. Robert will offer to share resources, Edmund advises on funding, and we use ASSIST rooms for meetings. ASSIST really wants to help us out, it’s very positive.’

(Partner Organisation)

9  
THE FUTURE

All interviewees were asked for their views on how ASSIST could improve, and this section details their suggestions for improvements in the five distinct areas in which they were made.

All interviewees were also asked to outline their hopes for the future of ASSIST, and a summary of their responses in this area is included at the end of this section.

- Improving Current Activities:

Interviewees made a number of suggestions for improvements to ASSIST's current activities. Some related to improving the way in which services operated:

'The opening and leaving times of the Night Shelter. It should open earlier, like 7pm or 6.30pm, and people should be asked to leave by 8.30 or 9am. In the winter people using the night shelter have to wait in the cold until 10pm, then leave at 7 or 8am when it's very cold.'

(Client)

'When support is stopped and you find out on the day you come to collect it. Two weeks notice of this happening would be useful.'

(Client)

Several volunteer interviewees suggested that ASSIST could improve the way it links with other organisations working with asylum seekers and refugees, to enhance the support it offers to its clients:

'We could do with increasing the resources we link to, like RCOs and other ethnic groups and organisations, and local regional and national organisations. There are so many organisations working in the same area, and it's not clear if we've fully exploited that.'

(Volunteer)

As referenced in Section 5 of this report ('Support'), one interviewee suggested a change to the guidance governing access to support for those moving into Sheffield:

'Anyone who's signing in Sheffield and moves here after they're evicted should be given support.'

(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

Several interviewees suggested that ASSIST improve its response to the needs of its clients and partners by expanding some of its current activities:

'I think the befriending service could be expanded as often the clients I see need a lot of support that the Advocacy Team sometimes can't offer.'

(Volunteer)

‘We should strengthen accommodation. There’s lots of competition for not enough accommodation, and we need to provide more.’

(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

‘At the moment they just run a drop-in service one day per week. If that could be broadened, it would be helpful. The beginning and end of the week would be helpful. At the moment, if someone comes to us on a Thursday they can’t see ASSIST for a referral until the following Wednesday. We don’t put anyone on support until they go to ASSIST.’

(Partner Organisation)

- **Developing New Activities:**

When asked about ways in which ASSIST might improve, many interviewees suggested new activities that the organisation might undertake.

Suggestions were made on the basis of client needs that interviewees felt were not currently being fully met, and developments elsewhere in the asylum sector that had impacted on the work of ASSIST. They included focusing more on gender-specific provision, expanding the scope of ASSIST advice and providing more structured support for social and leisure activities:

‘It would be good to address the gender gaps that persist. Females with children receive section 4 support, for example, but men largely don't have Section 4. Most ASSIST clients are young, single men - and they therefore have no immediate support and are far more susceptible to mental illness and depression.’

(Trustee)

‘Some mothers, even though they’re getting some support, are still in abject poverty. Conversation Club provides mothers with an invaluable chance to socialise, and it provides their children with potentially only chance to speak amongst peers in their native language. ASSIST should focus more on women.’

(Trustee)

‘It would also be helpful if we could be trained to complete Section 4 applications, to cope with the lack of capacity of organisations like NRC.’

(Volunteer)

‘I’d like to extend stuff for people to do, like Conversation Clubs, volunteering, sports – definitely physical things to do. We currently have a list of places to send people, but we don’t have the manpower to take people along. It’s important to take people. People need to get used to the place and the journey, to feel comfortable.’

(Volunteer)

‘We should have a group that looks specifically at what our clients could be involved in and welcomed at – festivals, events and other things going on in the city. It’s to keep people going. So the group would look at what’s going on in Sheffield in the next 3 months, and how we get people to go. Leaflets are no good,

we need to take people along, go with them. It could be a group of volunteers to do this, to find freebies for our group, look at festivals, to get money from a bank or a company for transport and ice-cream. Anything that's fun.'

(Trustee)

As referenced in Section 3 of this report ('Role & Purpose'), several interviewees suggested ASSIST might formally take on supporting the development of ASSIST-type organisations in areas outside of Sheffield. These suggestions were based on ASSIST's extensive experience in this area and the way in which this could enable services to be successfully established, and how the availability of services elsewhere would prevent clients needing to travel to Sheffield to access support:

'ASSIST should support groups in other areas. We have so much experience, we know about what works. But government policies in other areas act to prevent organisations from starting up and being stable enough to provide the same services as ASSIST in Sheffield. So people drift to Sheffield.'

(Volunteer)

One Trustee interviewee suggested that ASSIST stage celebratory events for clients and volunteers, both as a means of maintaining and improving the sense of ASSIST being a 'family' organisation, and as a potential way of raising funds:

'Parties for clients. When Channel 4 came they asked us if we have meals for clients, and we had to say no. And I think this is a lack. We did have a meal in Victoria Church, which was cooked by the Eritrean community. It was a big meal, attended by Councillors, there were loads of tables – it was a fantastic sight. There was a coffee ceremony on the altar, there were flowers, and there was a wonderful spirit of everyone together. We charged and made a little bit of money.'

(Trustee)

- Obtaining Feedback

Several Trustee interviewees were concerned that ASSIST has no formal way of obtaining feedback from its clients, and instead relies on a number of core assumptions about client experiences on which decisions about the type and nature of ASSIST services are based. They suggested developing client feedback mechanisms, both as a way of ensuring ASSIST's services meet client needs and of evidencing the effectiveness of ASSIST's work to potential funders:

'We do not involve services users – therefore what do they think? There is no mechanism to engage with them. For example, is accommodation more important than money? There is no evidence to back up our core premises. Does £25 every week really allow you to stay with a friend? We don't know.'

(Trustee)

'Thinking about what we should concentrate on...maybe client feedback can help us with that. So to ask if ASSIST wasn't here, where would people be? What are we preventing? How much of a difference do we make to individuals? Volunteers

would really respond to that in a newsletter, and funders want to know “why is your model the best way of working?”.’

(Trustee)

One volunteer interviewee suggested that ASSIST might implement more formal mechanisms for obtaining feedback from volunteers leaving the organisation, and suggested making use of the skills of particular volunteers to develop them:

‘We can look at things that aren’t resource-heavy but are improvements. These could include quality assurance measures, like exit questionnaires to find out why volunteers leave. This is really useful information for the organisation. There are lots of people in ASSIST - volunteers - who physically can’t get around but who have the skills to develop these kind of things.’

(Volunteer)

Other interviewees suggested how ASSIST might combat any reduction in personal contact with clients caused by expansion (referenced in Section 1 of this report):

‘Certainly those on our books, we need to know them. It would be good to have a named individual, a volunteer, on Case Manager for each person we’re supporting, who knows someone and can provide information and/or contact the person if anything happens. It’s also so the client knows that’s there.’

(Trustee)

- Management, Staffing & Resourcing

Several interviewees suggested that increasing the number of paid staff ASSIST has would improve the organisation, whilst also acknowledging the resource implications this would entail:

‘All that aside though, the resource concerns, paid staff would be wonderful. The paid staff we’ve had have been wonderful. The Volunteer Coordinators have been very different, with different roles.’

(Volunteer)

‘We do really well on communication given that it’s all volunteers, but a paid General Manager or CEO would make it more organised and easier to put communications structures in place.’

(Volunteer)

One volunteer interviewee suggested that all volunteers should be required to contribute to ASSIST’s fundraising activities in some way:

‘All volunteers need to do something for fundraising, be it put up a poster or buy the ASSIST Christmas cards.’

(Volunteer)

As referenced in Section 4 of this report ('Governance'), two volunteer interviewees felt that the process for becoming an ASSIST Trustee could be changed so as to make it more accessible, transparent and democratic:

'Another improvement would for Trustees to revisit how they recruit Trustees. This would send a strong message that they're not there for life.'

(Volunteer)

- Information for Partner Organisations

One partner organisation interviewee made a number of suggestions about how ASSIST could improve the level and type of information it provides to the organisations with which it works, via its website, email, a newsletter and/or in person at partner organisation team meetings:

'It could do with a webpage or similar that gives general asylum information, signposts to what's available and so on. I've picked up information on support, for example, as I've gone along. It would be great to receive an updated version of this information periodically – a new staff member remarked the same very recently. We need more information about Wednesdays, about what exactly is on offer. It would be really useful for new staff here. It would also be useful to receive periodic updates from ASSIST – maybe in person to the team, or via an email or a newsletter.'

(Partner Organisation)

- Hopes & Aspirations

When asked about their hopes and aspirations for ASSIST's future, many interviewees referred to increased and consistent funding as a factor they believed would enable ASSIST both to continue and increase its current provision, and develop and expand the organisation further:

'That they get some proper funding and structure and organisation. That they have a secure future, so they can plan to develop their services. I'd love to think that they could have a portfolio of accommodation that they could use.'

(Partner Organisations)

'That we have a lot more money. That we keep going. And that an Operational Manager role is created so Trustees aren't struggling with policy and operations.'

(Volunteer)

Others – most notably refugee and asylum-seeking volunteers – expressed their hope that ASSIST would expand its work into areas outside of Sheffield, and ultimately become a national organisation:

'That it can expand outside of Sheffield to other areas, so there's an ASSIST in every city.'

(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

'For ASSIST to become a big organisation like the Red Cross, and me personally to be a manager.'

(Refugee/Asylum Seeker Volunteer)

One volunteer interviewee expressed concern about the future climate within which ASSIST would be working, and hoped that the organisation would be able to withstand any resultant pressures:

'I hope they remain, because I do think things will get more difficult for an organisation like ASSIST in terms of government policy. I hope ASSIST stays strong, despite the increasing pressures.'

(Volunteer)

Ultimately, many of those involved with ASSIST hoped that the policies that brought it into existence would change, and that the organisation would therefore no longer need to exist:

'I hope that the government changes its policy and we can run down what we do for destitute people and do something more constructive with the money. Essentially, a change in policy would mean allowing people to work.'

(Volunteer)

'I hope that it doesn't have to exist in its present form, that refused asylum seekers can work or receive adequate support. I'm not sure what else to hope – I'd like to see it fade away.'

(Volunteer)