



Behind the Headlines: Report on research into the effectiveness of the advice and advisory service of the Southwark Day Centre for Asylum Seekers

Sally Inman and Maggie Rogers with Ajoke Ojie and Abel Oge-Dengbe

First of all it is an open place and everybody is welcome. Secondly you get advice about immigration kind of stuff whereby you don't have to pay like going to solicitors outside where they will be demanding money. This is free. Thirdly, they help in terms of vouchers and food – lunch – they make people welcome and you relax and interact and have some food packs as well which goes a long way as well as not everybody works, so even the food pack means you have something in the house for the kids and yourself

When I come and my immigration problem...they were there for me...when I come with financial problem they were there for me...when I feel stressed they were there for me...and still they are there for me

Introduction

There is currently heightened awareness in public perception of Refugees in ways that are both positive and negative.

This report should be considered within the context of an ever changing and often hostile asylum and immigration environment - and within the context of the holistic work of SDCAS which seeks to promote equality rather than dehumanising, stigmatising or restricting asylum seekers and refugees from being part of society in a meaningful way and supporting people to build resilience throughout the asylum process.

The introduction of another Immigration Bill is likely to be devastating for our clients and bring new challenges. The situation for Refugees will be very difficult as the people we work with still have restricted access to vital services so that basic needs such as food, shelter, healthcare and social contact are not being addressed.

As well as a warm welcome, SDCAS is able to act as a bridge between client and agencies which can best meet a range of needs which usually include language barriers, asylum and immigration problems, mental and physical health issues, isolation, poverty/destitution, no recourse to public funds, and other welfare issues all which impact on how well people are able to engage with society as a whole.

Our work with this client group aims to help people to move beyond a sense of helplessness to control and at the same time increase mutual understanding and engagement between asylum seekers, refugees and their neighbours (those born in the UK) through activities e.g., volunteering, environmental work, training opportunities, wellbeing sessions, socialising, and advice and advocacy services which formed the basis of this research project.

Pauline Nandoo

Coordinator

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
Main Report	5
Origins and aims of the research	5
Methodology	5
Findings	7
Knowing about the centre	7
Provision of English	8
Immigration issues	9
Housing and finance	10
Therapeutic services	11
Local Authorities	12
Ethos and culture	13
Reflections of co researchers	17
Conclusions	20
Reference	21
Acknowledgements	21
Appendix 1	22
Training programme for volunteers	22
Appendix 2	23
Interview Schedule	23

Executive Summary

1. The idea for the research came from meetings with the co-ordinator where she discussed the need for the centre to provide evidence of the impact of the services offered on the clients. In particular, she was keen to know the impact of the advocacy and advisory service on the clients. The research ran in parallel with another piece of work led by an external consultant involving professional training sessions with centre staff where agreed aims, objectives and outcomes for the various aspects of work of the centre were agreed by staff
2. We adopted a qualitative methodology because we were wanting to access the multiple meaning structures involved in the experiences and perceptions of participants which we believed was best achieved through a qualitative approach. We conducted 10 one to one or small group semi structured interviews with clients; visualisation exercises; 3 longer one to one interviews with clients who are also volunteers to provide case studies and staff interviews. The interview questions were based on based on the outcomes determined by staff in the theory of change project sessions.
3. We involved some of the more established clients who were also volunteers as co-researchers in the research project. The reasons for this were three- fold. Firstly, such clients would be able to relate to other clients in a way that might open up their experiences and feelings that might be more difficult for us to achieve as relative strangers. Secondly, we felt that a parallel gain of the research could be to provide research training to some clients who would then gain new skills that they could use in other situations. Thirdly, if we were able to train clients/ volunteers then the project would be more sustainable in that it would not totally rely on us as researchers and could continue to develop without us. We provided research training and mentoring for the co- researchers.
4. Findings

4.1 Knowing about the centre

Interviewees stated that they had found out about the centre through a range of means. The most common ways of finding out were through a church, friends,

through key workers, GPs and health workers. Whilst there were consistent routes to the centre clients' needs and ways through these routes were very different.

4.2 Provision of English

Interviewees were aware of the English classes available at the centre and were positive about the provision. However, most of those we interviewed spoke reasonably fluent English.

4.3 Immigration issues

All those interviewed either had or still were facing immigration issues of some kind. The centre was clearly hugely important in relation to helping clients to try to resolve their immigration problems. All those interviewed had made use of solicitors working at the centre, the advice and support given by centre workers and the referrals and communication with the home office made on their behalf by centre staff.

4.4 Housing and finance

All clients said that the centre provided good advice, made appropriate referrals and worked closely with housing agencies on behalf of clients. However. All those interviewed had different needs and were at various stages of their 'journey' and thus used the centre in a range of ways.

4.5 Therapeutic services

Clients were aware of the range of expertise available in the centre including doctors, therapists, counsellors and a range of therapeutic activities including massage , gardening and music therapy though some of these services have now been withdrawn due to cuts in funding. All clients interviewed were extremely positive about the work that the centre does in this area.

4.6 Local Authorities

Clients were appreciative of the support given by the centre particularly the liaison role played by the centre. Clients were aware that the interventions provided by centre staff often

4.7 The ethos and culture of the centre

Throughout the interviews the ethos and culture of the centre emerged as the most dominant theme. Interviewees repeatedly talked about the centrality and importance of aspects of culture and ethos as experienced by clients. These aspects included a welcoming atmosphere; empathy and sensitivity; opportunities for clients to gain confidence and self-esteem; provision of a place of safety and friendship; a lived commitment to equality and inclusion; care and responsiveness; enabling engagement and ownership; and a sense of purpose.

5. Reflections of co researchers

The co-researchers were asked to reflect on what they had learned from doing the research. They identified the following :

- Developing research skills
- Developing confidence and transforming self-esteem, validation of own skills and strengths and expressing who they are
- Developing what we call a charitable heart , a feeling for others
- Developing team work
- Appreciation of diversity and the different strengths of clients
- Realisation that the particular position of being both a client and a researcher enabled a unique perspective on the position of refugees and asylum seekers

6. Conclusions

- i. The findings demonstrate that the centre's provision in relation to advice and advocacy is much valued by clients who experience the centre as their first 'port of call' when they experience issues in relation to e.g. immigration, housing, finance and health issues. All the clients we interviewed were very positive about the support and advice they had been given, sometimes over a number of years.
- ii. The quality of the provision is evidenced by the fact that clients direct others in difficulties or isolated to the centre even though some of them live some distance away.

- iii. Interviewees consistently praised the care and persistence of those who work at the centre. All the clients we spoke to felt welcomed and valued by staff and expressed confidence in how their concerns and problems were being addressed.
- iv. The co-researchers proved to be invaluable, building trust and confidence in clients and mediating the interview situation. They also developed a range of skills during the training and the research process. These included transferable skills that can and are impacting on other aspects of their lives. These include self-confidence and self-esteem, empathy, respect for and appreciation for diversity, teamwork as well as more clearly defined research skills. Their development demonstrates the possibilities of using projects such as this to build knowledge and skills.
- v. Perhaps the most important finding of the research is the overriding importance of the manner in which the centre operates in providing advice and advocacy. The holistic approach to support derives from a strong culture and ethos which involves a welcoming atmosphere; empathy and sensitivity; opportunities for clients to gain confidence and self-esteem; provision of a place of safety and friendship; a lived commitment to equality and inclusion; care and responsiveness; enabling engagement and ownership; and a sense of purpose. It is these things which together give the centre a unique identity for clients and maybe distinguishes it from what might appear to be similar provision elsewhere.
- vi. In common with many similar organisations the centre runs on small amounts of funding which means that staff work long hours to try to meet clients 'needs. There is increasing concern about future funding which the clients as well as staff are concerned about. This research has demonstrated the high quality of advice and advocacy work provided by the centre. Some of this is provided by professionals on a voluntary basis. If this work were to be lost through lack of funding then the implications for refugees and asylum seekers are massive and would indicate a bleak future for many people in this position.

Main Report

Origins and aims of the research

The idea for the research came from meetings with the co-ordinator where she discussed the need for the centre to provide evidence of the impact of the services offered on the clients. In particular, she was keen to know the impact of the advocacy and advisory service on the clients. The focus on impact was strengthened by the parallel work with the centre, which was being undertaken by a consultant, based on a theory of change model (Ellis, Parkinson, Wadia 2011). This project involved professional training sessions with centre staff where agreed aims, objectives and outcomes for the various aspects of work of the centre were agreed by staff. In meetings with the co-coordinator and the consultant it was agreed that the research would use the agreed aims and outcomes for the advisory and advocacy service as a basis for the research with clients. We came up with the following aim

To explore the clients views and understandings of the effectiveness of Advocacy and Advice Service

Interviewing started in March 2015 and was completed in July 2015.

Methodology

From the outset we had proposed that we adopt a qualitative methodology because we wanted to access the multiple meaning structures involved in the experiences and perceptions of participants, which we believed was best, achieved through a qualitative approach. We were also aware that the centre had already secured some useful quantitative data on clients, including some data on impact, from a survey recently undertaken (ref?) so we could use this data where appropriate. We chose to use

- 10 one to one or small group semi structured interviews with clients
- Visualisation exercises
- 3 longer one to one interviews with clients who are also volunteers to provide case studies
- Staff interviews

The interview questions were based on based on the outcomes determined by staff in the theory of change project sessions. The clients interviewed should not be seen as necessarily

a representative sample of the whole client group. Centre staff approached clients initially and/or volunteers and those that agreed to be interviewed were largely self-selecting. The visualisation was an attempt to enable clients to think more freely about their experiences and was a method we had used in previous research projects where it had provided some rich data. The visualisation exercise is below.

Visualisation

Close your eyes. Think back to when you first came to the centre- which words would you use to describe your feelings, thoughts, fears and hopes (could be recorded through drawings or colours)

Close your eyes again. How do you feel now- what words would you use to describe how you feel? What things have made the difference? (could be recorded through drawings or colours)

Co- researchers

In our initial discussions about the research we had proposed that we might involve some of the more established clients who were also volunteers in the research project. The reasons for this were three- fold. Firstly, such clients would be able to relate to other clients in a way that might open up their experiences and feelings that might be more difficult for us to achieve as relative strangers. Secondly, we felt that a parallel gain of the research could be to provide research training to some clients who would then gain new skills that they could use in other situations. Thirdly, if we were able to train clients/ volunteers then the project would be more sustainable in that it would not totally rely on us as researchers and could continue to develop without us. The co-ordinator advertised for volunteers to work with us and we initially provided research training for 4 clients/ volunteers. The training session was over 2 days and included input from us on what is meant by research and what qualitative research entails; analysis of film material to identify observation techniques; designing interview schedules; role plays of one to one and group interviews and data analysis (see appendix 1)

One of the clients/ volunteers dropped out after the training and we worked with 3 during the research though one played a more minor role due to other commitments at the centre.

The co-researchers conducted all the interviews with us and as time went on took the leading role in the interviews with us providing a backup role and probing answers where necessary. They also worked with us on the data analysis and we spent many hours together discussing the interview data and grouping it into themes. We also interviewed the co-researchers to get at the experience of working in this way.

Findings

The findings are largely directly based on the semi-structured interviews and relate to the outcomes. So we have grouped the findings under the categories used in the interview schedule (see appendix 2)

Knowing about the centre

Interviewees stated that they had found out about the centre through a range of means. The most common ways of finding out were through a church, friends, through key workers, GPs and health workers. Whilst there were consistent routes to the centre clients' needs and ways through these routes were very different. This was a very straightforward question seemingly asking for a factual response but in reality the question opened up insights into the depth of the difficulties faced by these clients. This question was followed by the visualisation, which often added depth to their answers on how they came to the centre.

A friend told me about it. We live in the same house and my friend was coming to the centre and he invited me to come with him.

I had some difficulties some years ago as an asylum seeker...my papers were not very good...and I was a little bit confused so I decided to look for help. So I went to St Giles...it is a church but they do have other services that they offer...like for homeless people...and I was sort of homeless at that time so I tried to go and see them. So when I went there I gave them my problems and they told me we cannot help you in that way because you are not legal here yet so they just told me the places they had at that time were for people with drink problems. I said I don't really need that because I didn't have a drinking problem...they gave me the address to the Copleston. I was in the Church in Tower Bridge...no in Caledonian market and I told them about my situation and they gave me advice to come here

First time it was through my key worker as I was in a refuge for women.

Yeah...when I first came I was pregnant...that was back in 2004...my midwife brought me here to Southwark Day Centre.

Provision of English

Fortunately I am in London and there is the mix of people and a mix of religions and languages and people here understand each other.

We asked clients a range of questions about their fluency in English. We asked them to rate their spoken English when they first arrived in the UK and now and what use they had made of the English provision within the centre. Interviewees were aware of the English classes available at the centre and were positive about the provision. However, most of those we interviewed spoke reasonably fluent English. A few needed some translation at times. Some were graduates with excellent spoken English. We are conscious that this may not be totally representative of the whole client group as they were self-chosen or recommended by our co researchers and it may be that the level of spoken English was an implicit part of the selection.

It wasn't too bad because I studied before as well at school. It has improved coming here and talking, especially as there are not many people from my country so I always have to speak English.

At first I needed help to interpret and somebody was here to help me ... He knew Arabic and Persian language and so helped me so much in the beginning. After that there were the English classes and day after day my English has improved

Fortunately I am in London and there is the mix of people and a mix of religions and languages and people here understand each other. Maybe in another city I would have many problems because the accent and language is different. Here fortunately everybody understands and are considerate to each other. It is a big chance for me.

We asked clients to rate their spoken English. Even those who's English was very fluent said that they still wished to go on improving their English.

1 to 10 – I'm a graduate and I am not 10 but I am still learning. I would give myself 8.

I think my English, as far as I know...I think I'm ok...although I haven't got the accent as I wasn't born here....because I'm a graduate in my own country...so as far as I am concerned I'm ok. Between 1 and 10, I would say 8.

I should say I became better and better as time went on because when I came here I was not speaking that fluent English as such....but I come from an English speaking country so everything was done in English...you wouldn't speak any other language in school except English or our national language which is Swahili...but it was not really still allowed for the national language.

Actually I've studied English back home before I came here so I didn't have problems with the English. But still it can improve.

Immigration issues

I don't know how to explain in English...but I think here I've learnt about my rights...

All those interviewed either had or still were facing immigration issues of some kind. The centre was clearly hugely important in relation to helping clients to try to resolve their immigration problems. All those interviewed had made use of solicitors working at the centre, the advice and support given by centre workers and the referrals and communication with the home office made on their behalf by centre staff.

We asked clients about the situation they faced in terms of immigration issues, how well they understood their rights and what they needed to do, the help they needed to try to resolve the issues and whether they knew where to get help from. We also asked them how effective the advice and support from the centre had been.

This centre has sent me to the Law Centre in Peckham. XXX is doing everything for me now. She calls the Home Office and they will let me know if I have any appointments.

The centre helped me in the beginning as I didn't know how to contact the Home Office. They advised me in the beginning and helped me with more than my refugee status.

I've seen the solicitor...so he explained the way things work out...he advised me but it is not for me to decide if I want to proceed or not with my issue...the advice he gave me then was to give more time and then start with the case.

(interviewer) was that arranged through the Centre?

Yes

I don't know how to explain in English...but I think here I've learnt about my rights...because before I didn't know anything...because I feel before in my country I don't have any rights...I feel bad...and I feel there is no place to go but here I learn I have rights, I have value, I have many things, I have a place to go and they supply my needs.

Yeah the immigration...for example it's...you don't know nothing when you come to the case and you don't know where to go...the lawyer...free lawyers...you don't have money...as soon as I came they found for me the lawyers...they got advice...they choose which one is good...which one is nearest for me because of the transport...those things they help a lot.

Housing and finance

I know that the Centre cannot meet every need...but at least help is there.

We asked clients what financial support and housing they are entitled to and who they go for help and advice. All clients said that the centre provided good advice, made appropriate referrals and worked closely with housing agencies on behalf of clients. However. All those interviewed had different needs and were at various stages of their 'journey' and thus used the centre in a range of ways.

At the moment I'm in the woods about that to be honest...and that's an area that I've been suffering a lot...because I pay for my own accommodation...I don't get any benefits from the state and it's tough....very very tough...and I have to try and get a job from somewhere in order for me to pay my rent and sometimes it proves very very hard because if I go for a week or two without a job or something I end up having difficulty with my rent....and that results in me moving from place to place...cos I want to stay in one place...like the place I am

staying now is too expensive...when I have my pay I'm left with nothing almost....so that's how tough it is.

(about the centre) Well...excellent work...excellent work. I've seen so many people come in crying...I have seen so many people. There was a woman, I remember, can't forget that one... it was late in the afternoon and there was this woman...and she had a very serious problem because she...where she was living she was being evicted that night...that very very night...and she had 3 children...so she came to the Centre with the children still in their school uniforms. I said no this is not good...the woman is crying and crying and she doesn't have nowhere to go...but by the time we left...because it was...we always left that place around about six o'clock...the Centre has worked and hard enough to secure her a place for her and her children to sleep that night. I have seen that all the time...you know...desperate people. I know that the Centre cannot meet every need...but at least help is there.

With my housing I am bidding for a flat and I can do that myself because it is very easy. But in the future if I need more advice I know they can help with furniture in the flat as well so I would come and speak to XXX

Therapeutic services

If it was depression or stress then I would go to XXX. She told me the first time I went for counselling....the door is open...I'm here...as long as I have time I will see you.

We asked the clients about the support the centre gives to clients who have physical or mental health needs. Clients were aware of the range of expertise available in the centre including doctors, therapists, counsellors and a range of therapeutic activities including massage , gardening and music therapy though some of these services have now been withdrawn due to cuts in funding. All clients interviewed were extremely positive about the work that the centre does in this area.

I have had a massage before and it was really good because we talked as well. She has gone but there is one in Crossway. If she comes back though I would do it again, as it was very good. I think they stopped her funding.

If it was depression or stress then I would go to XXX. She told me the first time I went for counselling....the door is open...I'm here...as long as I have time I will see you.

Sometimes before I arrive to the Centre I text and she texts me back...so yeah and it was like very quick...if she doesn't answer me I know she is busy or something but she'll get to me if I can't come or do this journey because I have two kids....so yeah....yeah she is a good person and she helps and she always asks where your situation is and what you have to do.

Yeah... first I seeand then I talk to uh....I used to have like a.....stressing myself....and then she said to me there is counselling....you can see the counselling.....I said okay, is it going to help me...she said yes it will relieve you. Then I start seeing XXX and then...oh my lord....I become better and always every week she sees me and then I finish last year October....and then she said you are okay? And I said to her I am okay now....whenever I want I will see you again. It helped a lot.

Local Authorities

...sometimes you need like a letter from an organisation or centre that makes your case strong...

We asked clients how much they knew about what local Authorities can provide in relation to housing and what help and support the centre gave clients in seeking council support for housing. Some clients were unaware of what local Authorities do and this may reflect the stage of their journey. Others were dealing with Local Authorities and all were appreciative of the support given by the centre particularly the liaison role played by the centre. Clients were aware that the interventions provided by centre staff often prevented them from being lost in Local Authority bureaucracy.

I can go to my housing officer or I can write emails....I'm good in that....very good...but still sometimes you need like a letter from an organisation or centre that makes your case strong...

I live in social service accommodation. When I get my paper they said to me to leave the house to go to the council. I speak to xx and she called my social worker to speak to...to help me out

they wrote letter for me to the Council...because of my housing problem I felt a bit stressful....I feel down...yeah the Centre helped me...they sent them letters for the council.

In addition to these findings as we probed deeper, for example during the visualisations, we uncovered a consistent emerging theme around the ethos and culture of the centre as perceived by the clients.

Ethos and culture

When I come and my immigration problem...they were there for me...when I come with financial problem they were there for me...when I feel stressed they were there for me...and still they are there for me

Throughout the interviews the ethos and culture of the centre emerged as the most dominant theme. On the interview schedule we asked clients a direct question relating to ethos and culture

If you had to describe the centre and what it does for the clients what would you say?

But clients also made reference to ethos and culture throughout their interviews. We also used the visualisation exercise to help clients identify and express their initial and more recent feelings about, and experiences of, the centre.

Close your eyes. Think back to when you first came to the centre- which words would you use to describe your feelings, thoughts, fears and hopes (could be recorded through drawings or colours)

Close your eyes again. How do you feel now- what words would you use to describe how you feel? What things have made the difference? (could be recorded through drawings or colours)

A number of interrelated themes around ethos and culture emerged. These were:

- The empathy and sensitivity shown by all the paid staff, professionals acting as outreach workers and volunteers

- The ability of the centre to provide opportunities for clients to gain confidence, whether in relation to skills or self-esteem and self-worth
- Clients commented regularly on how the centre provided a place of safety which was clearly very important as many were both isolated and fearful. Clients described feeling safe enough to 'open up' to staff and each other.
- The atmosphere within the centre made clients feel valued and equal members of the community. The commitment to equality and inclusion was clearly one that was lived in practice.
- Clients told us that they felt positively welcomed on arrival at the centre and that this sense of welcome was apparent in volunteers and centre workers alike. As a result clients felt able to engage in activities and form relationship with staff and other clients.
- The atmosphere of the centre provides a place where clients can build and sustain longer term relationships with staff and other clients. This includes clients taking on responsibilities either formally as volunteers or informally. Some clients have been coming to the centre for many years and contribute to the successful running of the centre. This included clients whose immigration had been resolved in a positive way.
- Clients indicated that centre staff were responsive to their needs and would 'go the extra mile' to help clients. They told us that this was not always the case in similar organisations where a less holistic approach to the needs of clients prevailed. Care was a word used often by clients in relation to staff.
- The ethos of the centre encourages clients to take ownership of support and activities where appropriate. In practice this means that many clients are engaged in the life of the centre and are not passive recipients of help and support.
- Many clients come to the centre to escape the isolation of their daily lives. Some clients told us that it is the only place where they can meet others in similar situations in an atmosphere of acceptance and safety. The centre provides therefore a situation in which people can develop friendships and give and receive support.

- The centre provides a real sense of purpose for many clients. It is where they feel they are doing something of value for themselves and others and is akin to going to work for some clients. It provides a structure to the otherwise often uncertain and isolated existence.

...they thinking and they asking about you. They care about you...they help me with food so anything like that I feel okay. They care about people. It's not only the job it's...they do this job with all their heart.

The extracts from client interviews below illustrate these themes within ethos and culture and reflect the interconnected nature of the themes.

I always say to them there is something to relieve you...I always put...I say come...it's good ...you can enjoy...Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday...they can't wait...they call it office...are you going to office...are you coming to office...you know I can show you the text even when I came here I texted my friend...I said to her come...I'm going to the office...so they all enjoyed it...the children even...and they are there for all of us. Our indefinite leave to remain we get because of the Centre...our housing problems because of the Centre...all of us...I've brought more than eight...nine friends...all of us get good things.

When I come and my immigration problem...they were there for me...when I come with financial problem they were there for me...when I feel stressed they were there for me...and still they are there for me

I don't know...how to explain it...friendly and they see you kind of as quick as they can...and if it's urgent things they see you first place. They are everything

This centre is the best for me. I used to be here every week. I see somebody and talk with somebody, any person, every time. I had a lot of problems at the beginning. I feel I am relaxed here.

When a person has any problems I see everybody trying to solve the problem - everybody. If someone has a financial problem everyone knows before that person has told xx- they can see it in the face - it is important for people who come here, for foreign people, for those who find it strange in this country - it is really important for them to know that this centre helps people.

I felt so happy. Honestly. It makes me express my mind and at least to talk to someone ... It's not everything but just express your heart to someone and be happy which goes a long way.

First of all it is an open place and everybody is welcome. Secondly you get advice about immigration kind of stuff whereby you don't have to pay like going to solicitors outside where they will be demanding money. This is free. Thirdly, they help in terms of vouchers and food – lunch – they make people welcome and you relax and interact and have some food packs as well which goes a long way as well as not everybody works, so even the food pack means you have something in the house for the kids and yourself. And clothes, which the other day I picked some, which I hope, fit.

Yeah...the Centre is a homely place where everyone is welcome in respect of your nationality...and I think we are all treated equally...equally in respect of your nationality...it's a good place...it's a place one needs to be when you are down...and they encourage you...and it's very very helpful I must say...if I come here once a week it means I get things for my kids and for myself...food for my kids. It's ok...it's fine...it's a welcome place...it's a nice gesture here.

I was in another centre and they say okay you don't have any...you don't have any chance...your case is not strong and no back...but here you come back and socialise with people and you feel okay...maybe it's true but here it's not like that, they help...they really help...they are interested...they looking for another way to help a bit.

I feel good. I feel fantastic...even, for example, today I don't have nothing but when I came here...when I come here I feel like I release something...I throw something from my head...I feel happy...then have lunch and meet friends and chat and go. My days are becoming easy and joyful days. I wish the Centre is week to week for me. My friends too they like it...their children...

My mind was very closed...as you can imagine depression, stress and all those things added together. I'm a very sociable person but at that time I was struggling with socialising...I never even wanted to talk to anybody...so when I came to the Centre I started opening up and all of a sudden...now everybody, the clients and the staff...I became a bit more popular especially when I started the gardening.

For me the people is very kind and nice, you feel close...they are really interested in your case...because two weeks ago I don't have a job or no place to go and they help me they was worried about my situation...XXX when today she saw me she asked how is your situation...it's not just in that time...they thinking and they asking about you. They care about you...they help me with food so anything like that I feel okay. They care about people. It's not only the job it's...they do this job with all their heart.

And now I'm with xx and she helped me to heal my heart and I feel more comfortable...I feel more valued like women...and also with XXX (the solicitor) she helped me with that. But XXX is a really good woman who helped me with this because I felt really bad because I felt okay my mum doesn't help me, the police doesn't care about anything...I feel alone and I'm in a new country but I feel that somebody cares about me

Some of the interview data on ethos and culture came from the visualisation exercise we asked interviewees to do at the start of the interview. At this early stage of the interviews it became obvious that the holistic nature of the centre's work embodying a very particular ethos and culture was of paramount importance to our research.

The extracts below from some of the visualisation exercises demonstrate the centrality of the ethos and culture of the centre for clients.

The first time I came here I was 1% but now I'm like 70%

Can you both close your eyes and think about when you first came to this centre and the way you felt

I've been coming for many years so when I started there were very few clients and we did not have as much as we have now. I didn't know the people so I felt a bit shy. My friend introduced me to some of the people and I started to get advice on my immigration case.

Can you both close your eyes and visualise how you feel now. Think of the difference.

I feel happy when I come because I see friends here. I don't use the advice anymore because my problems with immigration have been solved. The food is really good as well.

The first time I came here I was 1% but now I'm like 70% because I'm receiving my counselling, my immigration is going fine. My counsellor is helpful: if I have any problems I will ask her how to do it and she will tell me to do this and to do that and it is very very helpful to me because before I always did something that was not good – the depression was not good.

The very particular culture and ethos of the centre is a demonstration of the holistic nature of the provision offered by the centre and would seem to be a crucial factor in why clients feel so positive about the support and care they receive from the centre.

Reflections of co researchers

There are a number of strands within the reflections. These are:

- **Developing research skills** – this included how to listen without judging and jumping to conclusions, digging deeper by asking further questions and probing sensitively and being aware of the body language of the interviewee, developing empathy with the interviewee, identifying people’s strengths, relating to people outside of your own experience

Being a researcher is not what one single person can do. It’s like working on a project to understand people’s needs from different backgrounds, from different social life.

It makes me not to quickly make conclusions and have a good – not just listening, a good listening and thinking skill to feel for others.

If you don’t research about human beings you don’t know what they have. You can just see people as a displaced people. They may be refugees and asylum seekers and destitute you know but you don’t know what they have until you dig into them.

- **Developing confidence and transforming self-esteem, validation of own skills and strengths and expressing who they are**

I’m a shy person but since I have started this project ... this course it gives you confidence, then using the confidence as a researcher. It makes me to regain all I’ve lost. If there are things that I need to know about myself because to me that’s how it is. There are some things I don’t even know about myself yet.

It makes me to rediscover what is in me because it is going very deep and it’s building my confidence on how to talk to people. Even to know how to deal with myself and my home, it awakens my inner being

There is some self-esteem that is in the inner being. That is the uniqueness about a human. But if there is nobody, it’s like a plant planted on the wrong soil, it will not bring forth fruit. A plant, planted on the right soil germinates by watering it. It’s like what you are doing to me is like watering me and it’s like I’m germinated. I think the research has done a lot of things in me. Boosts the way I deal with people, boosts my confidence, makes me to know more about people, and there are a lot of things that I gain in the project and I don’t want it to end.

When I told those who are very close to me about my own situation, what I have experienced but have had to put behind me to enable me to move on I think by talking to them, by researching into their own experience has made me to think about my own (experience) ... but look I still have hope, something I can feel comfortable with and these are the rights I am entitled to. So definitely it has helped.

- **Developing what we call a charitable heart , a feeling for others**

It's while you have your own situation, having to deal with that alone, makes you to have passion and charitable heart for the other people. Because, I think to me, that's what it's really to me. It enables me to put myself into other's shoes.

- **Developing team work**

It's like, it reflects on working as a team. Being a researcher is not what one single person can do. It's like working on a project to understand people's needs from different background, from different social life. It's really; it's really very complex, being a researcher

Being a researcher or co-researcher you need a lot of stuff and energy so that you will be able to cope with the task ahead of you; to enable to cope with the challenges that surround the project if positive outcome is your watchword. Working as a team makes things better, reliable and positive – you will meet different people with different ideologies that you can gain a lot from. Apart from that seeing people from different backgrounds working towards the same goal will rekindle your enthusiasm, in most cases it's a problem shared that is a problem solved when working as a team

- **Appreciation of diversity and the different strengths of clients**

I think the project has gone beyond what I thought. Initially when you, I mean, when the two of you came I thought it was just a joke to be honest, not until we started to see people. If you don't research about a human being you don't know what they have. You can just see people as a displaced people. They may be refugees or asylum seekers or destitute. You don't know what they have until you dig into them. I realised many times that doing the research does, I felt they are very, very well educated. Many of them have a lot of strength in them. Without that research we wouldn't have known.

I realise that doing the research I came across many people that are very intelligent simply because they don't speak good English does not make them illiterate as many of them are professionals in one field or another but because of the situation they find themselves (in) does not make them illiterate

- **Realisation that the particular position of being both a client and a researcher enabled a unique perspective on the position of refugees and asylum seeker**

Me and XXX are just like a door. We can see both in and out of the room

We spoke to them confidentially. Called them one to one and made them to understand that just because we are doing this research we are all more or less the same. Some of them said "I don't want this" but you cannot force them. They knew what we are really doing. Some of them went back and told the rest of the people "look, there's nothing there, they are just trying to help us" because without our research others will not know what they are

facing. Because, let somebody come from Home Office, they would never talk to them. Just like that – they know us, we knew you, we trust you, and they trust us.

Some of them believe that we were just, “You are here, here we go again, they have come and just to listen to our story and at the end of the day nothing will come of it”. But at the end of the day they have now discovered that we are trustworthy people that they can talk to. And that was the reason why so many of them came and they opened up. We should remember we got more than what we were really prepared for.

Conclusions

1. The findings demonstrate that the centre’s provision in relation to advice and advocacy is much valued by clients who experience the centre as their first ‘port of call’ when they experience issues in relation to e.g. immigration, housing, finance and health issues. All the clients we interviewed were very positive about the support and advice they had been given, sometimes over a number of years.
2. The quality of the provision is evidenced by the fact that clients direct others in difficulties or isolated to the centre even though some of them live some distance away.
3. Interviewees consistently praised the care and persistence of those who work at the centre. All the clients we spoke to felt welcomed and valued by staff and expressed confidence in how their concerns and problems were being addressed.
4. The co-researchers proved to be invaluable, building trust and confidence in clients and mediating the interview situation. They also developed a range of skills during the training and the research process. These included transferable skills that can and are impacting on other aspects of their lives. These include self-confidence and self-esteem, empathy, respect for and appreciation for diversity, teamwork as well as more clearly defined research skills. Their development demonstrates the possibilities of using projects such as this to build knowledge and skills.
5. Perhaps the most important finding of the research is the overriding importance of the manner in which the centre operates in providing advice and advocacy. The holistic approach to support derives from a strong culture and ethos which involves a welcoming atmosphere; empathy and sensitivity; opportunities for clients to gain confidence and self-esteem; provision of a place of safety and friendship; a lived commitment to equality and inclusion; care and responsiveness; enabling engagement

and ownership; and a sense of purpose. It is these things which together give the centre a unique identity for clients and maybe distinguishes it from what might appear to be similar provision elsewhere.

6. In common with many similar organisations the centre runs on small amounts of funding which means that staff work long hours to try to meet clients 'needs. There is increasing concern about future funding which the clients as well as staff are concerned about. This research has demonstrated the high quality of advice and advocacy work provided by the centre. Some of this is provided by professionals on a voluntary basis. If this work were to be lost through lack of funding then the implications for refugees and asylum seekers are massive and would indicate a bleak future for many people in this position.

Reference

Ellis, J Parkinson, D Wadia, A (2011) A Making Connections: using a theory of change to develop planning and evaluation, Charities Evaluation Services

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Pauline Nandoo for inviting us to undertake the research and supporting us throughout the process, Thanks to Bettina Dreier for her help and support and for giving us some of her valuable time. Thanks to Gillian Reeve for her encouragement and support. Thanks to Nella Buisson for transcribing hours of interview material so brilliantly. Thanks to Judith Ahikire for all her help. Thanks to Renae Mann for collaborating with us and developing the outcomes, which form the basis of the research.

Thanks to Chovan Ali for his engagement in the research. Finally a huge thank you to the clients who gave their time so generously and were so open and honest with us.

Appendix 1

Training programme for volunteers

Session 1- what is research, how can we best research the impact of the advice and advocacy service on clients?

1. Ice breaker – working with a partner to find out 3 things that the partner would like to share with the group (try to ensure that this brings out skills and past occupations) (15 mins)
2. What is research? What are we trying to find out? The staff have defined the outcomes of the advice and advocacy service- how does this relate to the understandings and experiences of clients? (10 mins)
3. What do we already know about what clients think of the service? Share some of the survey with the group e.g. who are the clients, which services do they attend and which are most important to them? (20 mins) (use flip charts to record)
4. Talk with the group about how this data from the survey was what we call quantitative research- the usefulness and drawbacks of this kind of research (5 mins)
5. Looking at qualitative research methods – interviews, observation, writing and drawing exercises, visualisation, stories, hypothetical situations etc. Give examples for the group to explore may include video clips of research in action. (35 mins)
6. What methods should we use for this research? Get the group to undertake one of the methods we might use as a way of introduction

Close your eyes. Think back to when you first came to the centre- which words would you use to describe your feelings, thoughts, fears and hopes (could be recorded through drawings or colours)

Close your eyes again. How do you feel now- what words would you use to describe how you feel? What things have made the difference? (could be recorded through drawings or colours) (20 mins)

7. How could we share this information? (5 min)
Allows 10 mins leeway

Session 2 – Developing skills for qualitative research - this will be a practical session focussing on semi-structured interviews etc – we will use the outcomes as the basis for the interviews. We may film some of the practice interviews.

Appendix 2

Interview Schedule

Introduce yourself; explain about the research and why we are doing it i.e. to find evidence of impact of the centre's advice and advocacy service on clients. May be used in funding bids. Explain that the data will not be used without their permission.

Background questions

Name or chosen name for the interview or initials

How they came to come to the centre e.g. through friends or relatives, referred by local services etc.

Visualisation

Close your eyes. Think back to when you first came to the centre- which words would you use to describe your feelings, thoughts, fears and hopes (could be recorded through drawings or colours)

Close your eyes again. How do you feel now- what words would you use to describe how you feel? What things have made the difference? (could be recorded through drawings or colours)

1. *How would you rate your spoken and written English? How has the centre supported you in improving your English?*
2. *If you need help in, for example, presenting your case or getting the right help do you know who to go to? Describe how you would go about it and what kind of help you would receive*
3. *Who do you go to for help in addressing immigration issues? What kind of help have you had so far, what is the next step*

Do you think you know what your rights are? (Push for examples from clients)

4. *Given your status what financial support and housing are you entitled to? Who do you go to for help and advice?*
5. *If clients are ill or depressed how does the centre help clients in this situation?*
6. *What kind of support can you expect from your local authority (council)? Does the centre help you to access this help? How does it do this?*
7. *If you had to describe the centre and what it does for the clients what would you say?*