

The social care needs of refugees and asylum seekers



SCIE's aim is to improve the experience of people who use social care services, by developing and promoting knowledge about good practice in social care. We pull together knowledge from diverse sources through working with a broad range of organisations and people. We share this knowledge freely, supporting those working in social care and empowering service users.

The social care needs of refugees and asylum seekers

Introduction

People with social care needs are some of the most vulnerable people within refugee communities and their needs are frequently overlooked. This discussion paper attempts to describe the specific experiences of refugees and asylum seekers with social care needs. It also makes a series of recommendations for services to meet their needs more effectively. This paper also highlights how the terms 'refugee' and 'asylum seeker' are often used interchangeably, suggesting that they refer to the same people. This is not the case. In law refugees and asylum seekers are very different.

The experience of exile is what distinguishes refugees from migrants and from other groups in society. Refugees may have experienced traumatic events such as detention, torture and/or the death of loved ones, and once in the UK, refugees and asylum seekers often face poverty and acute anxiety about their legal status. They also experience racism, social exclusion and isolation, all of which is compounded by language barriers and the absence of existing social networks.

A number of environmental factors shape their social care experiences. First, within the context of UK policy and legislation, the provision of social and welfare support for asylum seekers has gradually been removed from the mainstream framework. Additionally, frequent and high-profile changes to legislation have generated much confusion about entitlements, creating further barriers to accessing services.

With about a third of refugees and asylum seekers arriving in the UK without any English language skills (the proportion is even higher for women) language and communication are major barriers to accessing social care services. The disapproving tone of public discourse about asylum contributes to an environment in which negative public attitudes to it exist, even among service providers. Finally agencies' lack of information about the numbers, characteristics and needs of local refugees and asylum seekers is a significant barrier to appropriate social care provision.

Against this policy and practice backdrop, social care providers have responded by treating refugees and asylum seekers as part of the larger generic 'black and minority ethnic' category without appropriate regard for their distinct experiences and needs. This is also apparent in service planning, where decisions are often made on the basis of data collected according to existing ethnic monitoring categories.

Good practice in service provision to refugees and asylum seekers includes effective partnerships between the statutory and voluntary sectors and an holistic view of individual needs, which takes into account practical, legal and social issues. Beneficial partnerships could be formed with refugee community organisations in the planning, design and provision of social care services, yet their potential remains untapped. This discussion paper concludes with a number of recommendations, including:

- As part of planning and designing services, social care agencies should carry out local mapping and consultation exercises to collect data and information about refugees and asylum seekers. As those with social care needs are likely to be the hardest to reach, innovative methods should be used.
- The social care needs of refugees and asylum seekers cannot and should not be met by local authority 'asylum teams'. Instead, specialist teams and services should plan and deliver services that meet the needs of service users who are refugees or asylum seekers. Consultation and feedback with refugees and asylum seekers would be a good basis for doing this.
- The refugee community and voluntary sectors should play a far bigger role in the planning, design and delivery of social care services.

Black and minority ethnic service users' experience of direct payments

Despite the hopes of the Department of Health, black and minority ethnic service users are faced with considerable barriers to accessing direct payments.

They include:

- confusion over the meaning of 'independent living'
- assessment processes not taking account of black and minority ethnic service users' backgrounds and requirements
- service users being unaware of how to access important information on direct payments
- lack of support for people to use the available information
- difficulties in recruiting personal assistants who can meet the cultural, linguistic and religious requirements of black and minority ethnic service users
- failing to consider using direct payments in more innovative and creative ways
- a shortage of appropriate advocacy and support services
- lack of resources for local schemes

- variable levels of commitment to direct payments among local authorities, and the possibility for confusion over the relatives' rules.

All together these barriers present a considerable challenge to local authorities. They require them to use imaginative and original methods to attract hard-to-reach groups. Training programmes for care managers need to reflect the socially inclusive goal of direct payments. The barriers also require local authorities to look carefully at the kinds of advocacy and support and services they have in place and to ask whether they represent the interests of all local users.

Local authorities have an opportunity to deliver innovative and flexible services to groups they have traditionally been unable to assist with direct services. There are going to be problems reaching some service users within this group. However, if the message – that direct payments can make a massive difference to the lives of service users and carers – is made to reach the target audience, then overcoming these problems will have been worthwhile.

Related publications available from SCIE

WILL COMMUNITY-BASED SUPPORT SERVICES MAKE DIRECT PAYMENTS A VIABLE OPTION FOR BLACK AND MINORITY ETHNIC SERVICE USERS AND CARERS?

Dr Ossie Stuart, Diversity Consultant

July 2006

Ordering code for summary: DP 1

Full report: online only

THE SOCIAL CARE NEEDS OF REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

Bharti Patel, former Head of Policy, Refugee Council
and Nancy Kelley, Head of UK and International Policy,
Refugee Council

July 2006

Ordering code for summary: DP 2

Full report: online only

ARE WE THERE YET? IDENTIFYING THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SOCIAL CARE ORGANISATIONS THAT SUCCESSFULLY PROMOTE DIVERSITY

Jabeer Butt, Deputy Director, REU

July 2006

Ordering code for summary: DP 3

Full report: online only

DOING IT FOR THEMSELVES: PARTICIPATION AND BLACK AND MINORITY ETHNIC SERVICE USERS

Nasa Begum

ISBN 1 904812 37 6

July 2006

Ordering code: REP14

The full reports and other summaries are updates of the Race Equality Discussion Papers published in July 2005. This summary and related publications are easily downloadable from SCIE's website.

SCIE

Better knowledge for better practice

SCIE works with people and organisations throughout the social care sector to identify useful information, research and examples of good practice.

Using this information, we produce resources which evaluate practice in a particular area of social care, draw out key messages for good practice and identify areas where more research is needed to inform good practice.

Practitioners, researchers, service users and policy makers rely on SCIE's resources as a central and trusted point for evidence-based good practice guidance.

SCIE's work covers the breadth of social care including services for adults, children and families, participation, human resource development, social work education, e-learning and the use of knowledge in social care.

All our resources are available free of charge. For details visit www.scie.org.uk where you can view or order our resources, and sign up for a regular email alert about future activities.

To order additional copies of this summary, please visit SCIE's resources and publications section on the website.

JULY 2006

The social care needs of refugees and asylum seekers

This summary and the full report are available on our website. All of SCIE's publications and resources are free.

This publication is available in an alternative format upon request.

Social Care Institute for Excellence
Goldings House, 2 Hay's Lane
London SE1 2HB
tel 020 7089 6840
fax 020 7089 6841
textphone 020 7089 6893
www.scie.org.uk