

EST 1892
LSBU



SDCAS

Southwark Day Centre
for Asylum Seekers

Asylum Seekers as experts by experience: a case study from Southwark Day Centre for Asylum Seekers

Living through war, persecution, exile and the asylum system gives people an insight and knowledge that cannot be otherwise learned. As a sector and movement, we must recognise the value of this expertise and not view it as secondary
<https://refugeeweek.org.uk>

Sally Inman and Maggie Rogers with contributions from Ali Amoosa, Adel Maraghi, and Godfrey Warui

Foreword

Southwark Day Centre for Asylum Seekers (SDCAS) has been providing holistic services for over 25 years to reduce poverty and distress and promote health and wellbeing for asylum seekers, refugees and migrants.

This year we welcomed the opportunity to revisit how SDCAS operates by conducting a piece of research exploring different ways in which the perspectives, skills and expertise of people with lived experience i.e. our clients could be better used and represented within our organisation.

This research is of particular value because we were able to involve clients with lived experience as co-researchers on the project. SDCAS plans to build on the report's conclusions and recommendations to eventually point towards a better way of working.

The research report details how we can become more empowering of our clients across a wide range of our work. This should enable clients to take more action for themselves. The research forms an important strand of our broader Experts by Experience project which in turn is part of an Early Action programme involving agencies across the country led by Refugee Action.¹

Asylum seekers continue to bring a unique experience to our understanding and we need to continue to shape our services to reflect this.

Pauline Nandoo

Director Southwark Day Centre for Asylum Seekers

¹ <https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/about/>

'Refugee Action does not exist to work for people, but to work with them and to empower them to take control of their own lives and to influence the issues that matter to them. We want to do far more to shift power to refugees and people seeking asylum'

Introduction

The project seeks to

- Develop possible models of how, by using an experts by experience (EbE) approach,² Southwark Day Centre for Asylum Seekers (SDCAS) can make better use of the experience of clients in the day to day support and advice work, educational activities and management and organizational structure.
- Build on and further develop the self-esteem, confidence, and skills of clients through our work with them both over the course of the project and through the development of an experts by experience approach within SDCAS

Aims

- To understand the knowledge and skills clients bring to SDCAS –both through their experience as asylum seekers and in their lives before seeking asylum in the UK
- To work collaboratively with a small number of clients to develop proposals as to ways in which the knowledge and skills of clients can be built into the daily work and management of SDCAS
- Through this work to enhance the self-esteem, confidence and skills of clients with whom we work, to enable clients to realise their agency

Methodology

The project could be best described as a research and development project in that through an analysis of the literature on EbE, interviews with clients, staff and volunteers we aimed to come up with a set of practical proposals about how SDCAS might best embed EbE into its work. Thus, the research aimed to be part of a

² Using expertise that is acquired informally by a person's experience rather than formally by achieving a formal qualification

process of change for SDCAS – change whereby SDCAS developed new ways of working with its clients, ways which recognized clients as experts by experience and built this recognition into the structure and daily practice of the organisation.

Given the aims of the project it was important that we worked with a group of clients and ex-clients as co-researchers. Three came forward, initially as interpreters in group sessions with clients. This was followed by a research workshop and their agreement to work as co-researchers on the project. They were able to help us focus the project, interpret where necessary, undertake interviews with clients and work with us on the findings and proposals. Throughout the project we met regularly with our co-researchers to discuss the methodology, check on progress and agree on the next steps.

Participants as co-researchers refers to a participatory method of research that situates participants as joint contributors and investigators to the findings of a research project. This qualitative research approach validates and privileges the experiences of participants, making them experts and therefore co-researchers and collaborators in the process of gathering and interpreting data. In traditional research, the researcher is assumed to be the authority figure who will collect, interpret, and situate the findings while the participant (or “researched”) merely represents the community being investigated. (Boylorn 2008)

We undertook semi-structured interviews with individuals and with groups. All interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants. As in previous projects for SDCAS (add references) we adopted a qualitative methodology with an emphasis on understanding and honouring the participants’ own words as generative of meaning and knowledge. The methodology attempted to be participative in that the focus and methods were partly shaped by the participants’ perceptions and understandings as the research progressed.

The elements of the project were:

- 1. Developing the focus-** this comprised a preliminary literature review to set the context for the project. To establish how experts by experience has been developed in work with asylum seekers and refugees and in other areas such

as mental health. We also held initial meetings with the Director of SDCAS and a member of staff with knowledge of an experts by experience approach to agree the focus of the research.

- 2. Developing the scope of the research** – this comprised two meetings with small groups of clients and ex-clients to explain the project and try out the potential focus of the research.
- 3. Establishing the methodology** – comprising a meeting with a small group of clients and ex-clients to determine the methodology and seek their agreement to become co-researchers. This was followed by a research workshop with them as co-researchers.

4. The interviews

Client interviews

The client and ex-client co-researchers led many of the interviews.

- We interviewed clients from a range of countries - Iran, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Eritrea, Brazil, Kenya, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone.
- We held two initial group meetings with two different groups of clients to establish their skill sets from their home countries and from their journeys – these interviews were used to check that our questions were useful in getting at the experiences of clients.
- We ran five group interviews with different groups of clients coordinated and largely run by the co-researchers. The interviews were recorded. The interviews were concerned with establishing:
 - the knowledge and skills they brought to the UK from their home countries
 - the knowledge and skills they developed on their journeys to the UK
 - the knowledge and skills they have developed during their time living in the UK

- their views on how clients' knowledge and skills could be better used by SDCAS through, for example, offering activities for other clients, mentoring new clients, representing clients at staff and trustee meetings etc.

Staff and volunteer interviews

These comprised

- One to one interviews with the Director of SDCAS, the coordinator of volunteers, the centre coordinator, the staff member who coordinates work with children of clients and a member of staff with experience of using the experts by experience approach
- A focus group interview with SDCAS community volunteers ³
- One to one interviews with clients and ex-client volunteers

We held meetings with the co-researchers at each stage to summarise progress, discuss emerging proposals and plan the next steps.

5. Analysis of interviews

We transcribed interviews and analysed them in relation to the key areas we were concerned to understand. These were:

- For clients – countries of origin, knowledge and skills from home countries and their journeys to the UK, in what ways they could contribute to the work of SDCAS.
- For staff and volunteers - how the knowledge and skills of clients could be built into the structure and practice of SDCAS and the strengths and challenges of developing an EbE approach.

6. Drawing up proposals for developing EbE within SDCA

³ At SDCAS the term community volunteers is used to refer to volunteers who are drawn from the community. They apply to become a volunteer and are interviewed by the Volunteer Co-ordinator.

Setting the context – experts by experience

Defining the term

There has been a growing interest in the positive gains that can be made by recognising that clients, patients, etc (users of a service) have knowledge and expertise developed through their experience as asylum seekers, patients etc . Traditionally the term expert has been used to describe somebody who has successfully completed a training or education programme and been awarded certification from a recognized authority. This is usually continued in practice by learning from more senior professionals. The Oxford Dictionary online defines an “expert” as:

A person who is expert or has gained skill from experience. A person regarded or consulted as an authority on account of special skill, training, or knowledge; a specialist.

In more recent years the notion of ‘experts by experience’ has been introduced – a view of “client” or “service user” that recognizes the value of expertise that is acquired informally by a person’s experiences rather than formally by achieving a formal qualification (McLaughlin 2009). Experts by experience are ‘clients’ or service ‘users’ who have developed knowledge and skills both through their experience as, for example, asylum seekers, being homeless or people with mental or physical health issues and as users of services.

Pioneering experts by experience approaches

Areas of the UK National Health Service (NHS) have pioneered the development of EbE, especially in mental health services. Research on the potential benefits and barriers of using EbEs within the UK NHS has provided evidence of positive results. When EbEs were involved to try to improve / develop mental health services, research showed a positive impact on the service, future service users, and the EbEs themselves; using EbEs was also shown contribute to the provision of more person-centered and generally improved outcomes. Further research also focused on involving the EbE in the provision of the services they experienced. This research suggested that involvement of EbE in co-production of services could impact positively on the mental health, self-esteem, and life skills of users

of services. For example, studies on involvement of EbE in youth mental health services showed that the EbE development provided an

organisational approach that prioritised empowerment, agency and equality between experts by experience and 'experts by qualification', leading to a positive impact on their self-efficacy and self-esteem.' (Mayer and Mckenzie 2017)

A mental health service user describes the difference that an EbE approach made

Being an Expert by Experience acknowledges that lived experience is as valuable as clinical/ professional expertise. It provides me with the opportunity to use my experiences to improve services and feel support, respected and listened to as a person. This has had a massive impact on my recovery, my confidence has grown, my skills improved and I now have hope for the future. I feel empowered to make a difference with a job that I love and positive personal relationships. I truly believe that becoming an EbE saved my life. I am seen as Sarah NOT my mental health problems
[\(<https://www.pathway.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/EbE-Involvement-Handbook.pdf>\)](https://www.pathway.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/EbE-Involvement-Handbook.pdf)

Practitioners in the area of health service provision for homeless people have also noted the benefits of working within an EbE model.

Our definition of an EbE is someone who is able to articulate lessons and suggestions from their own 'lived' experience of homelessness and health challenges. Their expertise is based on their own individual experiences, enabling them to speak with authenticity. EbEs can also be in a unique position to connect to others with similar experiences, bringing a wider range of 'lived' experience views to partnership working. Our ability to listen to individual and collective EbE voices gives greater power to Pathway and the Faculty for Homeless and Inclusion Health to identify failings within healthcare provision for homeless and excluded groups, as well as suggesting areas where there is room for improvement or to celebrate good practice (Pathway Healthcare for Homeless 2017)

Experts by experience in the field of asylum seekers and refugees

In the field of refugees and asylum seekers an EbE is able to articulate lessons and suggestions from their own 'lived' experience of being a refugee or asylum seeker in the UK. Their expertise is based on their own individual experiences, enabling them to speak with authenticity. EbEs can also be in a unique position to connect to others

with similar experiences, bringing a wider range of 'lived' experience views to working within agencies for asylum seekers and refugees. As one refugee going through a resettlement programme remarks

Most of the time, we – refugees – came here with empty pockets, but not empty minds. If we get a lot of support and opportunity, we can deliver a lot as well. (Collyer, Brown, Morrice and Tip 2001)

The organisation Refugee Action has pioneered an EbE approach to policy and practice within the fields of asylum seekers and refugees. They define EbE leadership as

....people with first-hand experience of seeking sanctuary or migration getting involved in the organisations who are supporting other people experiencing similar issues. "Leadership" doesn't just refer to people being in senior staff roles, it also means: having your expertise and knowledge recognised, having a voice in an organisation and being heard, getting involved in delivering and designing services, being involved in governance, influencing decision making or policy and advocacy work.(Refugee Action)

The work of Refugee Action has been central to the development of EbE in organisations working to provide services for asylum seekers and refugees. Refugee Action has pioneered an EbE approach and produced resources to help organisations develop an EbE approach to their services. See <https://www.ragp.org.uk/programmes/EbE-group-pilot> for an example of the work. Refugee Action has also developed a EbE planning programme to support organisation in developing projects that include people with lived experience.

Bristol Refugee Rights is an refugee organisation that is developing an experts by experience approach to their work. They have worked with other organisations to produce a toolkit to help build an EbE approach. The Toolkit makes explicit the learning needed to develop such an approach.

We believe that organisations need to start making changes and accept there will be ongoing learning and reflection, and not let fear of doing it 'the right way' hinder change; any step towards inclusion of people with lived experience of the refugee/migration journey is a step in the right direction.(Bristol Refugee Rights 2022)

Analysis of the interviews

Skills and expertise identified by the clients

The clients we interviewed possessed a range of skills and knowledge developed in their home countries. These include professional qualifications at degree and postgraduate level in, for example, law, hospitality, mathematics, engineering, nursing, linguistics, and teaching.

Before I came to this country, I had a diploma and a first degree in industrial and labour relations from Nigeria, so I can work in any human resources office. But, even in my country, after I finished my BSc, I worked as an information technology (IT) assistant for some time. After the IT I couldn't get a job. It was even bad in Nigeria as well. I couldn't get a job, so I switched to work in the National Hospital, for some time. I was working there when I had to run away from domestic violence (Client A)

She was a teacher for 12 years in Persian language. And she study a little bit higher than what she was doing. She went higher than a teacher like a degree. And she passed that one. She finished the 'uni' (sic) and she have a degree. The qualifications she had as a teacher were more than enough. (Client B translated by co-researcher)

Some of the clients we interviewed came from countries where it was normal practice for people to need to have two occupations.

Before coming to this country, I am a teacher. A teacher of Maths and a tailor. People in my country have two jobs (Kurdistan region of Iraq) (Client C)

She graduated in Agriculture engineering – food science. She worked in the nursery in child care and she has worked in the salon, beauty. (Client D translated by co-researcher)

Before I came here, I have a Master's Degree. My main job is Educational Supervisor. I have a second job working in Network Marketing ... I was working with Dyslexia. I have a master's degree in this. (Client E)

I am a teacher for primary School. I make dresses as well. I am a dress designer. (Client F)

Other skills and knowledge identified in the interviews included tailoring, catering, choreography, driving (taxis), gardening, car mechanics, baking and joinery.

She was trying to tell me that back home in her house she used to cook for people and they would come around and buy the food that she is cooking. So, (Ivory Coast) that is called 'Caterer'. The cook for a lot of people as catering in my country services. It was good money (Client G translated by co-researcher)

We asked them about their journeys to the UK and any skills they developed during this time. Many were understandably reluctant to revisit the experience.

My experience was not that good ... like running away you know. So, my experience - I don't want to go through the story because it gives me flashbacks (Client H)

Those who were happy to talk more about the journey identified a range of practical and personal skills including:

- how to get information
- how to get food and shelter
- learning to care for one another
- an understanding that talking can be healing
- the power of exchanging stories
- not to judge others quickly
- having an open mind and patience.
- Being careful about who to trust

Her journey taught her that there is nothing impossible and she has to be strong. (Client J)⁴

He learnt how to be patient and not to trust all people because he trusted some people and he regretted it. This is what he learnt from his journey to this country. From Libya to Europe was a very difficult experience and he has to be very patient and not to trust people around him. Some people he considered them like friends during his journey but he just discovered they were using him so that's why he was talking about trust. (Client K)

⁴ Where quotations are in the third person it denotes that the co-researchers have translated the words of the client

My journey was traumatising, it was a difficult journey. I learnt a lot. First, I was afraid of people, and second, it was so tough for me. Because living without papers, going to the doctors, getting all the help, accessing everything was so difficult. And that's where I'm in the centre ... first you have to care for one another, caring and try to learn more about other people, by talking because I have come to know talking is like a heal. Someone, when you talk to them nicely, friendly they open up. When they open up you are able to get his problem, or her problem and you can help them a lot (Client L)

What he learned from his journey, he said that "I learnt how to be strong". So being strong, believing in God, trusting in God and not to trust things from the first sight. He said "Before this journey I was nervous. If someone asked me something I replied to them very shy, and now I became like a wise man. I don't judge things very fast, I just...Being patient, being strong, broad mind". This is what he learnt on his journey. (Client M)

We asked the clients about how they might use the knowledge and experience they had described in the day to day running and management of SDCAS. All the clients we interviewed agreed that it would be useful to have a client skills directory whereby the skills and knowledge of new clients are recorded on entry and could be developed into a skills exchange. Clients also discussed the benefits of offering classes for other clients and mentoring new clients.

People exchange skills and they know how to cook everything... It's happening but some people, they want to do something, but they don't know. But if you teach them, you give them the knowledge. (Client M)

We have people from around the world trying to learn Maths. She can teach it. (Client C translated by another client)

This lady she can cook so we can put her in the kitchen. Here as she knows, we have Arabic Day cooking, Iranian Day cooking. Now we can have Kurdish. We can arrange with the chef. (Client N translated by Co-researcher)

Buddying - It's happening, most of the people I have come across are socialising. So, it is happening without (formal structure) (Co-researcher)

Art group for children over five years old. She can help with that. Last week they cooked food, they cooked Syrian food. (Client J translated by Co-researcher)

The women quoted below talked eloquently about how her confidence has grown through her interactions with other clients and through sharing stories with other women at SDCAS.

Eventually they introduced the centre to me. I came in that day with no hope. I was helped, supported by SDCAS ... through my journey, everything that I passed through, I have my papers ... I lost my confidence throughout the journey, but I gained my confidence, and I was sharing my story with everyone, especially women, because we think back home that only men can be our whatever. So, it is only what they do or what they say that we can follow. But the power that we have when we have that confidence, we believe in what we can do. It's even more than what they can do for us. It actually helped me, it empowered me. (Client P)

Some clients described how they are using their skills in SDCAS and in the wider community

I was thinking, there are some women, some men who want to paint ... in my mind I say I'm a professional decorator, and I can teach them how to do decoration ... It's not a lot of things (tools needed). Even on Wednesdays, at the back ... you can do just some basic ... It's just basically DIY things (Co-researcher)

Giving your skills back is so important. I have seen it. Sometimes I'm so stressed and when I go there (a voluntary gardening project I make my mind positive. (Co-researcher)

In the garden - somebody come and bring this new thing and you say you know but you can learn from others. A lot of people, when we are exchanging skills, we learn from others. (Co-researcher)

I used to teach them how to dance. I'm a handyman here. I have given a lot like building this oven (in the garden at Peckham. So, I give my experience but I have a lot more to give but no access because of the Government. On the other side I go to the homeless houses, I paint them for free because when I came here, I learn about decoration - I went to school. (Co - researcher)

We also talked with clients about how they could be more engaged in the day to day running and management of SDCAS. For many of the clients we interviewed this was a concept that was initially difficult for them to visualise but when we discussed what this could mean in practice e.g., being involved in staff and volunteer meetings and the board of trustees they were interested in exploring what the possibilities might involve.

The Trustees Board, they know us and everything but in a deeper way, we know ourselves... People talking about the things they are facing, it's better to have one who have experience ... you can advise which can help. (Client H)

Not all clients feel able to contribute regularly to the work of SDCAS due to their immediate needs in relation to their immigration status.

Using these skills is not the priority for the time being. They are waiting for their interview, they are worried about a lot of things, the Home Office, their lawyer. They are holding themselves back keeping this for later. Later means after getting their refugee status, they have the right to work and after that, their skills become one of their priorities, but as long as they are waiting for the Home Office, they are in Limbo and their skills are not their priority. We will use our skills one day but now we have a lot of stress waiting for the decision from the Home Office (Co-researcher)

Others are prevented from contributing as they would like due to the fact they speak little English when they first arrive

They ask, if there is space for them to volunteer, Sometime people who speak very little English, they come and ask for having something to do, there were like two women, they are coming every week and then in the kitchen, the tea and coffee table, they help even without having good English. (Co-researcher)

Current practice at SDCAS

The impetus for this research came from the Director's concern that the current practice in working with clients at SDCAS is 'problematic' in that it doesn't easily enable clients to use and further develop the knowledge and skills they have in the daily work of SDCAS.

Other organisations work in a 'softer' way and you get a sense that clients are part of the structure and discussion but because we are based on what we need to do for clients everything else can take a back seat. Getting to a point

where we have equality with clients, it's kind of changing the way we operate
(Director)

The interviews we did with the staff, community volunteers and client and ex-client volunteers about the current practice at SDCAS confirmed this but also provided insights into ways that this practice could be modified to enable a more EbE approach to the services and day to day management of SDCA

Staff

Staff raised several difficulties with their current approach in relation to clients with the latter feeling that their skills and experience are restricted to their persona as asylum seekers. Staff interviewed were conscious that clients were sometimes 'over protected'. They talked about how they sometimes 'held client's hands' when they (clients) may be able to deal with situations and issues themselves. Examples given included making telephone calls on behalf of clients, rather than empowering the clients so that they can make calls for themselves. Staff described what they call a 'saviour complex' which could be disempowering for clients. One staff member suggested that the carrying of clients doesn't allow them to find their resilience and skills which staff could be encouraging and supporting.

and many clients would want to move it forward a little bit more (Director)

We might hold their hands too much.....some things they come back here for which they could do for themselves, we can take away their power and make them feel helpless (Staff)

Sometimes we don't really see them, to get here they have had to have had resilience so we should support it and let it grow (Staff)

The way the structure of how we run creates that kind of atmosphere because it is a case of 'you are a client and I'm a staff member' there are loads of good reasons for that. It is a service and so people are going to use it as a service as well. We talk a lot about dependency and there are mixed approaches to trying to support people to tackle their issues as best they can themselves where possible... advice is good but narrow, so education, training we are not dealing with that. (Staff)

Developing EbE would require a different kind of delivery... at the moment focus on this is what we need to do, everything else that happens is great, it cushions everything...we are getting to the point where much more equality with clients is developing

One member of staff talked about the need to ask ourselves whether we do some things for the client or because it makes staff feel good. Staff also talked about how currently they don't celebrate enough the achievements of clients who move on so that other clients can witness their development and see the possibilities for themselves. However, staff we interviewed were sensitive to the added value that client and ex-client volunteers bring to SDCAS.

We have got several volunteers on the team that used to be clients with us or have never been clients but have been through the asylum system... that's invaluable. They are very, very valued volunteers because they have got language skills, they know how things run, but I don't think that it is necessarily tailored to their professional skills but a lot of our volunteering isn't tailored to professional skills, for example, giving out food and serving on reception. (Staff)

You have people who are just desperate to get their issues addressed ... and then looking beyond that they are skilling themselves up to deal with their issues but also think about what they could do for the centre. (Director)

Community volunteers

We interviewed a group of community volunteers. They shared many of the concerns expressed by staff. They also talked about the danger of over protecting clients in the way that SDCAS currently operates. One volunteer expressed the very real dilemma of the 'need to know how much is needed and when to let go'. They discussed the limitations of the current information gathering on new clients at reception in that it doesn't include education level, skills and qualifications and the languages spoken. They expressed a good deal of enthusiasm for some kind of skills register but raised the important issue of when was the right moment to ask new clients about qualifications etc and who are the right people to ask these questions.

When do we find out about professional qualifications, skills, experience etc, when is the right moment and who is the right person to do it? (Community volunteer)

If we had a second page to fill in at reception this could be the next step really it would be useful to record other languages spoken, educational levels, skills this could help to do buddying; we could match people? (Community volunteer)

They also discussed how clients are very different and not all would want more involvement. As one volunteer put it

All clients are different some want to be out if here as soon as they have got what they need and that's fair enough really (Community volunteer)

They raised the difficulties of doing more within the current structure. As one volunteer put it

It (EbE) needs space and time, and lots of time its dealing with crises and the whole day just goes and it's really busy and to be honest I wouldn't have the opportunities, it's so sad often I don't see the person behind the problem.
(Community volunteer)

The volunteers discussed how we might firm up the procedures whereby clients are asked to translate for other clients, maybe by initiating a list or pool of potential interpreters who could be available and whether it might be possible to organise a small group of clients who are prepared to undertake a range of support jobs during the day. The volunteers also discussed the idea of developing a client advisory group which would meet regularly with staff and volunteers. Another was to develop focus group meetings on a regular basis to enable clients to give feedback and make suggestions.

As things stand as a volunteer you would need a space and a time to deal with this aspect ... after the emergency stage where we can ask, "Now we've got to here, is there something you want to bring to us, to give back to us?"
(Community volunteer)

Client and ex client volunteers

The client and ex-client volunteers we interviewed echoed the comments made by staff and community volunteers. They were concerned that they were not always as involved as they could be in terms of the reception for new clients and echoed comments by community volunteers about the need for SDCAS to review the reception process so that it involves gathering information about the knowledge and skills the clients already have.

I think it is very important we not only talk to the clients but also encourage them to speak, to tell us about their skills, their abilities, how they can help ... either to the day centre or we can refer them, through the day centre to other places and organisations. (Ex-client volunteer)

In a very short period. If we encourage people to come forward, and talk about their profession and skills, some skills we need. Like we have now in the kitchen ladies who help the chef. We have some people who are helping us in manual handling but also there are people who are professional, they have very high qualifications. Now we have people who were clients who now have very professional jobs outside. Because they have abilities, they have a level of English, but they didn't know what to do. As soon as they came to us, (client and ex-client volunteers) they talked. (Ex-client volunteer)

I don't give advice, but I like to use my experience. These people might be quickly out of this immigration system because the skills and professions are needed in the job market (Ex-client volunteer)

(Clients and ex clients on the trustee board) a good idea, we know the problems. You can tell them in a different way, better to have someone who knows it from experience market (Ex-client volunteer)

Our discussion with client and ex-client volunteers reinforced the idea that they were both able and very willing to contribute more substantively to SDCAS. As one of them said '*I have a lot more to give*'.

Moving forward – embedding experts by experience into SDCAS practice

Whilst staff, volunteers and clients are keen to develop EbE at SDCAS they recognise that there are a number of challenges ahead. In general terms they recognise that successful EbE at SDCAS would require a change of culture for a very successful charity that has been in existence for 25 years. Staff and volunteers would need to feel OK about 'letting go' in a context where current practice has successful outcomes. There will inevitably be resistance as there are a number of challenges embedded in this change of culture. These include:

- Constraints of time and resources, bids for funding may need to take account of the additional cost of working in this way
- Issues of confidentiality for clients who, especially in the current political climate, may be fearful of any change that includes wider access to their situation
- Rethinking the nature of staff and volunteer meetings if clients are to become members of the meetings
- Ex-clients working with clients can bring back bad memories for the ex-clients so additional support may be needed
- Working modelling EbE would require changes to the recruitment of staff and volunteers and training for all who work there
- May require additional staff and volunteers as working in this way may be more time consuming
- The client population can be fluid as some move on or are relocated and this may be difficult to factor in

Whilst recognising the challenges involved the staff, community volunteers, client, and ex-client volunteers plus the clients we talked with were all very positive about finding ways for clients to become more engaged in the day-to-day activities and management of SDCAS. From the interviews we conducted with all these groups a range of positive suggestions came forward.

If you had a planning group that involved clients that would go a long way towards people feeling like they can input even if they can't do their professional stuff at the time... it does seem a shame to say that the only

thing that you are expert in is being an asylum seeker. Before the pandemic we had an informal women's group giving peer support, what came out of that was massive supporting each other practically and emotionally so I think running groups by ex-clients with a refugee background would be good (Staff)

I think a scheme where we can offer a rolling programme when clients first arrive which tells them what will happen when they arrive, how do they keep going when there's no end in sight ... a programme of information, stabilisation and relaxation run by clients or someone who has been through the process ... informing people about the system sort of welcome to the UK (Staff)

Think maybe do a different kind of survey for clients to say what has helped and what wasn't there and whether they could help with setting up things ... (Staff)

I'm very keen on groups like a newly arrived group, a women's group, a mentoring scheme... (Staff)

Trustee recruitment open to clients to apply - one of the concerns is that we don't attract much in the way of diversity on the board (Director)

In my head I am looking at advocates on the board and elsewhere. Want to get to a position where I'm not speaking on refugees but there can be a pool of people we can call on (who are clients or ex-clients) (Director)

We have taken the suggestions from the interviews and grouped them into a formal set of proposals for embedding EbE into SDCAS. It is important to recognise that these proposals come from the data from interviews with clients, volunteers and staff.

The proposals

Reception for new clients

- Develop a mechanism at reception to record skills, qualifications, and education for new clients. Create a 'skills register' of clients
- Use the skills register to develop a skill exchange within SDCAS
- Try to ensure that a client with experience is present at the interviews with new clients
- Develop a system of client-to-client mentoring or buddying from reception

Using client's knowledge and skills

- Find mechanisms whereby staff and volunteers 'step back' more to encourage clients to use their knowledge and skills and to try out new situations
- Develop more ways of supporting clients in furthering their knowledge and skills
- Build in more support for ex-clients undertaking advice work with clients
- Develop ways in which the knowledge and skills of clients can be used to develop group-based activities that are client led. For example, initiate more activities such as gardening and storytelling that enable clients to be teachers as well as learners
- Look at providing small amounts of funding for client lead initiatives
- Initiate a client advisory group which would meet regularly with staff and volunteers.
- Develop focus group meetings on a regular basis to enable clients to give feedback and make suggestions.
- Put together a list of clients who are prepared to interpret for other clients and also a list of clients who are able to undertake support jobs during the day.

Supporting the personal development of clients

- Explore bringing in more external expertise to work with clients on specialist areas such as jobs, education etc. Develop more partnerships with other agencies to support this work
- Develop a programme of training and support for those clients who are keen to become experts by experience at SDCAS
- Develop a register of 'successful' ex clients who are willing to talk with current clients about moving on
- Develop a system whereby clients are used as advocates for SDCAS externally – develop a pool of clients and ex clients who can be asked to talk at external events based on their experience as asylum seekers.

Building EbE into the management and structure of SDCAS

- Provide EbE training for all staff and volunteers. Create a person specification around EbE for all SDCAS posts
- Create an advisory group of clients to meet with staff and volunteers
- Develop client focus groups
- Build in mechanisms for client engagement in staff, volunteers and trustee business and meetings
- Client involvement in selection of new staff and volunteers
- Take on more client and ex-client volunteers

Reflections

The research has been challenging in that we have been involved in asking clients about their experiences as asylum seekers which inevitably resulted in some clients talking about extremely painful and frightening situations. We could not have done this without the help of our co-researchers who not only arranged and conducted interviews with clients and translated but also most importantly made clients feel safe and knew when to put boundaries around the conversations. This research project has been a true partnership between us and the client and ex-client co-researchers and was made possible by their willingness to give their time and skills to the work. It was exciting to be able to model this way of working in doing research in which EbE was central.

The interviewing had to take place in all sorts of environments including church halls with clients, staff and volunteers in the background and occasionally in the garden of a church hall and an allotment. This was also challenging at times.

Thanks

Our thanks to Pauline Nandoo, Director of SDCAS for inviting us to undertake the research and for her support throughout the process. A massive thank you to our co-researchers - Ali Amoosa, Adel Maraghi, and Godfrey Warui - without whom we would have struggled to persuade clients to talk with us and who conducted many interviews and interpreted for clients who spoke in their home languages. Thanks to Alessia Cogo for her contribution to the report and to Pip McCormack for her input in the early stages of the project. Thanks to the staff, community volunteers, client and ex client volunteers for giving up their time to talk with us and for sharing their experience and knowledge so freely. Finally, huge thanks to all the clients of SDCAS who agreed to be interviewed and shared their stories with us.

References

Boylorn R 2008 Participants as Co-Researchers The SAGE encyclopaedia of qualitative research methods, ed. by L. Given. Sage . Ltd, California, chap. 15, pp. 600-602.

Bristol Refugee Rights toolkit <https://www.bristolrefugeerights.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/TOOLKIT-FOR-SMALL-REFUGEE-AND-MIGRANT-ORGANISATIONS.pdf>

Collyer M, Brown R, Morrice L and Tip L Resettlement in Forced Migration Review February 2017

McLaughlin H. 2009 What's in a name: "Client", "patient", "customer", "consumer", "expert by experience", service user"—what's next?, The British Journal of Social Work, 39/6, 1101–1117.

<https://acamh.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/camh.12603>

Mayer, C. and McKenzie, K. 2017. '...it shows that there's no limits': the psychological impact of co-production for experts by experience working in youth mental health. Health and Social Care, 25/3, 1181-1189.

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/hsc.12418>

Pathway Healthcare for Homeless People 2017 Pathway Experts by experience involvement handbook <https://www.pathway.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/EbE-Involvement-Handbook.pdf>

Refugee Action guidance on setting up experts by experience
<https://www.ragp.org.uk/guidance/experts-by-experience/home>

Refugee Action planning project <https://www.ragp.org.uk/programmes/expert-by-experience-project-pilot>

The authors

Sally Inman is an Emeritus Professor in Education at London South Bank University. She has published widely on personal and social development, citizenship, democratic schooling, sustainability and equality and diversity in education and has directed a number of national and international research projects. Sally is a co-author of a number of research reports exploring aspects of practice at Southwark Day Centre for Asylum seekers.

Maggie Rogers was a teacher and teacher educator at Goldsmiths University. Maggie was also a research associate in education at London South Bank University. She has published on global citizenship and sustainability through design and technology education and has been involved in national and international research projects. Maggie is a co-author of a number of research reports exploring aspects of practice at Southwark Day Centre for Asylum seekers.

The co-researchers

Ali Amoosa, Adel Maraghi, and Godfrey Warui were involved at every stage of the research. Between them they conducted all the interviews with clients and interpreted where necessary. We discussed and agreed interview schedules and outcomes at each stage of the project. Their knowledge of the asylum system, the clients, the cultures from which they came and the workings of SDCAS made this research possible.

Past research reports for SDCAS

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 (2015)

Beneath the surface: How asylum seekers understand and evaluate their well-being Alessia Cogo, Sally Inman, Pip McCormack and Maggie Rogers (2017)

Building a Future ... An Exploration of the Contribution of Education Provision to Clients' Well-Being Alessia Cogo, Sally Inman, Pip McCormack and Maggie Rogers (2019)

Stories from Lockdown: the impact of the Covid19 pandemic on the well-being of clients at Southwark Day Centre for Asylum (SDCAS) Alessia Cogo, Sally Inman, Pip McCormack and Maggie Rogers (2021)

Research Reports for SDCAS are available online at <https://sdcas.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/our-publications/>