

An evaluation of befriending at Leeds Asylum Seekers' Support Network

JULY 2015

Jon Beech

LEEDS ASYLUM SEEKERS' SUPPORT NETWORK | WWW.LASSN.ORG.UK

Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Overview of Leeds Asylum Seekers' Support Network	2
Outcomes in 2014/15	2
Evaluation methodology	3
The befriending service	3
The befriending model	3
Findings: Clients	5
Where are befriending clients from?	5
What's the immigration status of people who are befriended?	6
Age profile	7
Gender Profile	7
Household composition	7
Dis/ability profile	8
Sexuality Profile	8
How many people does the service support?	9
What kind of help are people looking for?	9
What happens as a result of befriending?	11
Findings: Befrienders.....	12
How many befrienders does LASSN support?	12
What are the backgrounds of the people who volunteer as befrienders?	12
What kind of support do befrienders offer?	13
Findings: The need for the service	15
What clients say – key themes	15
What befrienders say – key themes	17
What referrers say – key themes	18
Learning, developments and recommendations.....	18
What works	18
What doesn't work	19
What will be different	20
Conclusions	21
What we've learned	21
The difference we have made	22
Key changes we hope to make	22

Introduction

Overview of Leeds Asylum Seekers' Support Network

Leeds Asylum Seekers' Support Network (LASSN) is a registered charity set up in 1999 to respond to the pressing unmet needs of refugees and asylum seekers living in Leeds - most of whom experience acute isolation, mental health issues, language difficulties and huge uncertainty over their asylum claim. Our key strategic objectives are to support, empower and integrate refugees and asylum seekers into life in the UK.

LASSN aims to meet the social needs of refugees and asylum seekers by reducing isolation, providing advocacy support, helping people to learn English, providing food and shelter, and by encouraging self-help. The three main volunteering projects provide accommodation, food and support to destitute people (Grace Hosting); help people make friends and social contacts (befriending), and help people who are prevented by illness, disability or childcare difficulties to learn English (English at Home).

Outcomes in 2014/15

LASSN has three main strategic objectives: to support, empower and integrate asylum seekers and refugees into life in the UK. Significant progress has been made against these objectives in the last year.

Supported

LASSN wants asylum seekers and refugees to be supported and relieved from hardship and distress. LASSN wants local people to support asylum seekers and refugees.

- 280 asylum seekers and refugees received one to one support from LASSN. If the total number of children and dependents in these households are included, LASSN supported a further 382 people (a total of 662).
- 3806 nights of accommodation were provided by Grace Hosts to 96 guests
- 268 people volunteered with LASSN
- £2,230 was distributed in hardship grants to 60 households

Empowered

LASSN wants asylum seekers and refugees to be empowered to rebuild their lives and fulfil their potential. LASSN wants individuals and refugee communities to have a voice and influence.

- 1527 hours of lessons were delivered to English at Home students
- As a result of befriending, 64 people reported a significant increase in their emotional wellbeing, and 45 people reported stronger social networks
- 10 English at Home students successfully enrolled on a college ESOL course, and 19 now attend weekly free classes outside their homes

Integrated

LASSN wants asylum seekers and refugees to feel settled and safe in their new environment in Leeds. LASSN wants Leeds to be a place of welcome and understanding for asylum seekers. LASSN wants the public, organisations, politicians and policy makers to understand the needs of asylum seekers.

- 161 people developed a sense of belonging and being cared for through befriending
- 8 exiled journalists produced articles, interviews and radio programmes for onewordleeds.org

- 65 posts on leedsmultiagency.wordpress.com helped keep people abreast of the changing face of asylum services in Leeds and beyond
- The new LASSN website has doubled its reach with more than 1400 visits per month. LASSN's Facebook page has over 300 likes and LASSN has 668 Twitter followers.
- LASSN has been able to influence thousands of local people to help them develop a greater understanding of asylum seekers and refugees.

Evaluation methodology

This evaluation took place in July 2015. It draws upon evidence from

- 11 in depth interviews held with heads of 11 key referral agencies in October 2014
- Demographic and outcomes monitoring for the period 2010-2014
- 5 annual reviews of the befriending service 2010-2014
- a postal survey of 41 existing befriendees – quotes from this can be found throughout the evaluation in blue
- an electronic survey of current befrienders
- focus groups held for both befrienders and befriendees – quotes from these can be found throughout the evaluation in green
- in depth interviews with current befriendees

The befriending service

The befriending service aims to reduce isolation, improve well-being, and encourage integration and greater self-reliance among asylum seekers and refugees. It also provides citizens of Leeds with a chance to get to know asylum seekers and refugees, and to welcome them and help find their feet in a new part of the world. Referrals come directly from individuals looking for support, from other specialist refugee and asylum support services (e.g. Manuel Bravo, British Red Cross) or general support services (e.g. Health visitors, Housing support workers, Children's Centre staff).

The befriending model

Volunteers are recruited and trained, before being matched with an asylum seeker or refugee on a one to one basis. Considerable effort goes into creating a diverse pool of volunteers with a wide range of interests and backgrounds, in order to make matches more effective. Matching involves finding out the interests and requirements of both the volunteer and the person looking for a befriender, and attempting to find a shared point of reference or area of interest.

"It was a great match through similar experiences – [she] knows what I am talking about"

A summary of the befriending journey

At assessment, clients are asked how they feel about

- how connected they feel to their communities, how much they feel they belong, the extent of their social networks
- their health and wellbeing,
- how self-confident they feel, their levels of English, and connection to learning or employment

These self-assessments are then used to help guide the kind of support offered to the client and the kind of match that is made. They are then revised and updated at six monthly intervals to help work out if support is being effective.

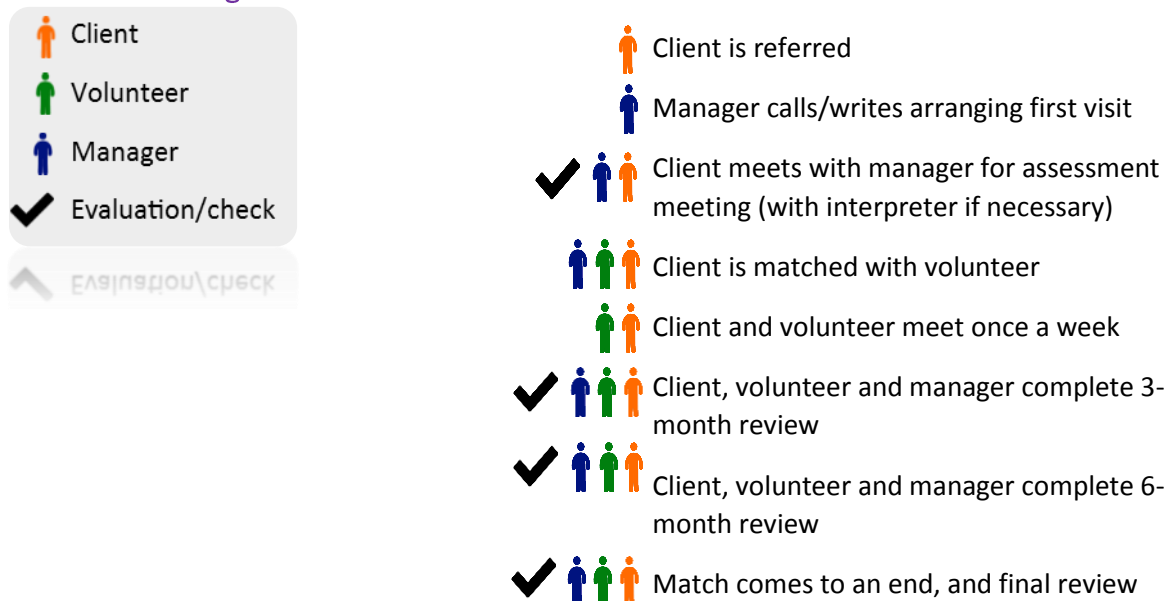
Support consists of a mixture of practical and emotional support, and is focused on helping someone become more socially active and connected with his or her community.

"It gave me a sense of purpose to look forward to the next day"

Volunteers visit clients once a week, usually in their homes, or at a mutually agreed venue. Their initial focus is on forming a supportive relationship. Within this is a flexible spectrum of support, ranging from practical to emotional, depending on what the client is looking for. Practical support may be a one-off thing, for example finding someone a solicitor or helping with a housing difficulty, whereas emotional support continues. As the relationship develops, the volunteer will encourage the person they are befriending to meet them outside their home – perhaps accompanying them to an antenatal class, or to a football match.

Although befrienders are matched with an individual, it is increasingly common for that individual to have a child or partner.

How befriending works for the client



How befriending works for the volunteer



Findings: Clients

Where are befriending clients from?

Leeds is one of the most diverse cities in the UK, hosting people from at least 130 different countries¹ with over 170 languages spoken².

In the last 5 years, the befriending service has helped people from over 50 countries.

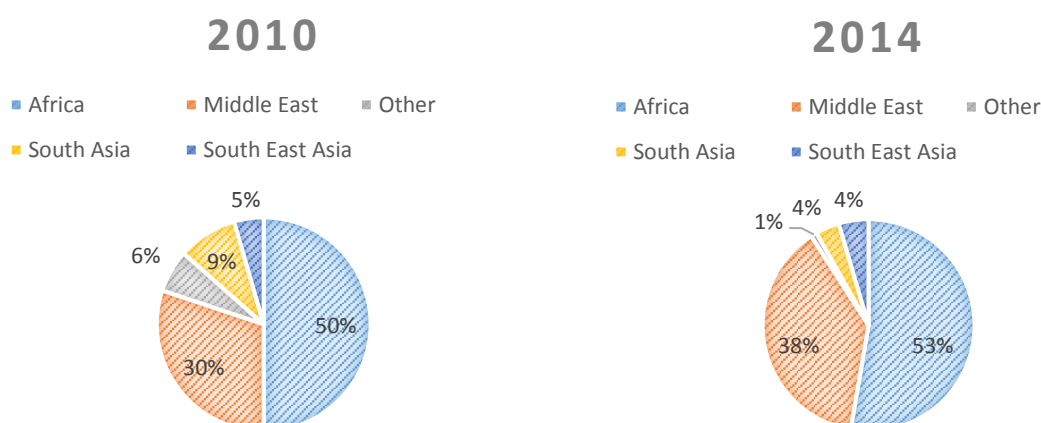
In 2010, LASSN befrienders helped people from 38 different countries (top 4: Iran, Eritrea, Afghanistan, and Ethiopia). In 2014, befrienders helped people from 29 different countries (top 4: Iran, Eritrea, Nigeria, and Afghanistan). The nationalities of the people befriended by LASSN reflect the Refugee Council's review of Asylum Trends in the same period:³ *"Pakistan, Iran, Sri Lanka, Eritrea, Afghanistan, and Nigeria have been in the top ten in every one of the last five years"*

¹ <http://www.yorkshireeveningpost.co.uk/news/latest-news/top-stories/leeds-a-city-with-130-nationalities-1-2201235>

² <http://westyorkshireobservatory.org/resource/view?resourceId=1009>

³ http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0003/3935/Asylum_Statistics_Annual_Trends_Feb_2015.pdf

Where befriending clients came from 2010-2014



What's the immigration status of people who are befriended?

The befriending service works with people at every stage of the asylum process.

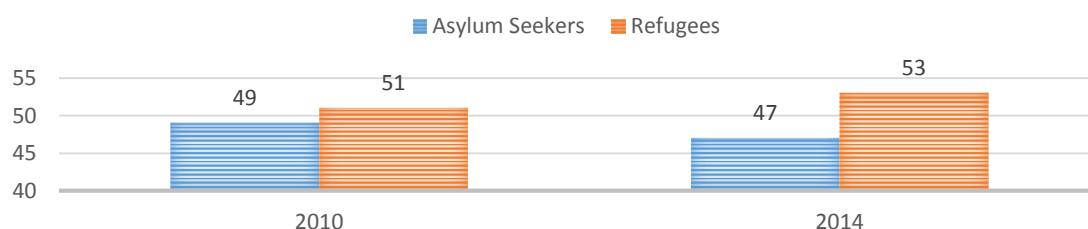
2010 marked a ten year low in in the number of asylum claims to the UK⁴ although this number has risen from 18,000 to just under 25,000 in 2014.

During this same period LASSN volunteers have worked with fewer asylum seekers and a greater number of refugees – continuing a trend that was first spotted in 2010, when the numbers of refugees being referred for befriending increased, following the closure of local mentoring and integration programmes.

At present, 584 asylum-seeking households receive Home Office Support in Leeds – 344 families and 240 single people⁵.

The number of refugees in Leeds, continues to grow, year on year. Once people have leave to remain in the UK, they can live where they choose, rather than being “dispersed.”

Immigration status of befriending clients (%)



Referrals to the befriending service for asylum seekers usually come at the point at which they are being dispersed – when they leave initial accommodation at Urban House in Wakefield and find themselves in accommodation provided through the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) contractor G4S.

When demand for befriending exceeds the numbers of befrienders there can be a waiting list of up to 3 months. Although asylum-seeking households are usually prioritised, some clients can wait

⁴ http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/latest/news/4259_2014_asylum_trends_and_facts

⁵ G4S internal figures, shared with Leeds Multi-Agency Meeting July 2015

several months before a match is made. G4S accommodation has a turnover of about 15-20% a month, meaning that keeping in contact with asylum seekers in receipt of NASS support can be difficult.

LASSN befriending is the only service of its kind, providing informal support to isolated and lonely asylum seekers and refugees in Leeds. There are no other befriending schemes left in Leeds after major cuts to support services in the asylum and refugee sector.⁶

Age profile

The majority of befriending clients are under 40, with a significant proportion of these people under 25. Without friends or family, clients can find themselves without someone to discuss things or weigh options. LASSN supports some clients that may be under 18 but whom the Home Office has assessed to be older. The proportion of very young clients has markedly decreased since the creation of a specialist befriending service for young asylum seekers and refugees (LEAP)⁷.

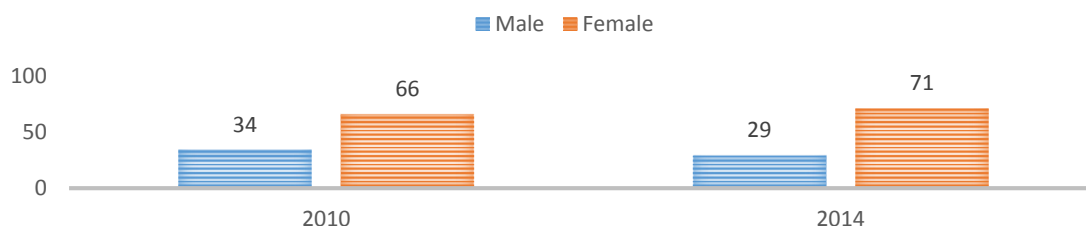
Age of befriending clients (%)



Gender Profile

LASSN befriending volunteers have historically supported more women than men, and this gender gap appears to be widening. Many women have escaped trafficking or survived violence and abuse. LASSN's focus on providing independent, consistent, and confidential support helps women to feel safe and secure. When one partner in a relationship is referred, they are usually female. Many women also have childcare responsibilities – and so can find it hard to leave the house, or make friends.

Gender of befriending clients (%)



Household composition

There has been a marked change in the types of household being referred for befriending, with fewer single people and more families. Many people are referred shortly before or after giving birth, with befriending being seen as additional support for parents under pressure. Specialist midwives, health visitors and family support workers recognise that claiming asylum is particularly difficult for

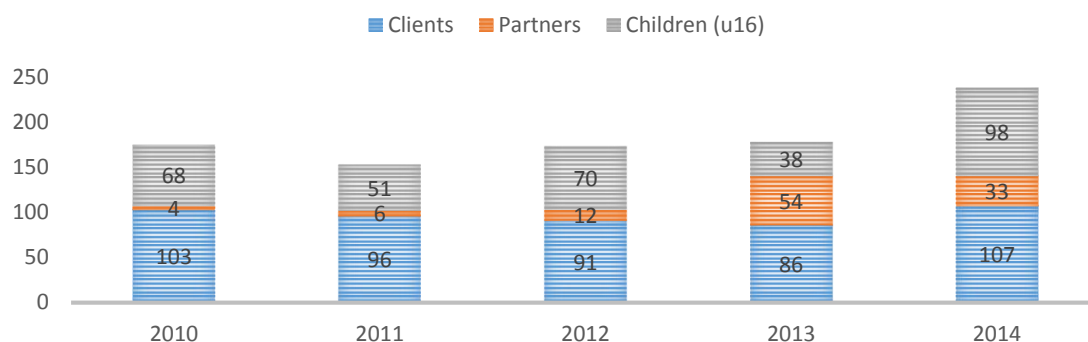
⁶ <https://doinggoodleeds.org.uk/news/2014/04/03/state-of-the-migrant-third-sector-201404031007/>

⁷ <http://www.childrensociety.org.uk/what-we-do/helping-children/our-services/advocacy-services/childrens-society-leap-programme>

parents and their children and there can be huge benefits from befriending⁸. Parents are often under extreme pressure and have lost their usual support mechanisms (e.g. their family or extended family). Many befrienders bring experience of raising children as part of their life experiences.

“Lots of emotional support and simply you made me happy”

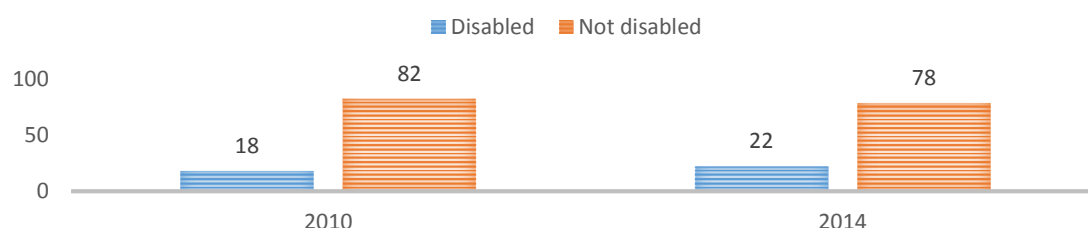
Household composition



Dis/ability profile

Despite high levels of self-reported mental distress, and chronic pain, the question of “disability” makes little sense to many asylum seekers and refugees, outside the context of physical or sensory impairment. The proportion of clients identifying as having a disability is broadly in line with that of the wider population of Leeds.⁹

Befriending clients identifying as dis/abled (%)



Sexuality Profile

The following data reflects changes to the way in which sexuality has been discussed and recorded within the befriending service. The 2010 statistics reflect the many instances in which staff had not asked or recorded people’s sexuality, because of cultural sensitivity, and a concern not to offend people. All those whose answers were recorded “declined to respond.” No one identified as either gay, straight or bisexual.

In 2014, 97% of people declined to answer questions around their sexuality, with 2% identifying as gay. No one identified as straight or bisexual. This suggests a change in the way the question has been both asked and recorded.

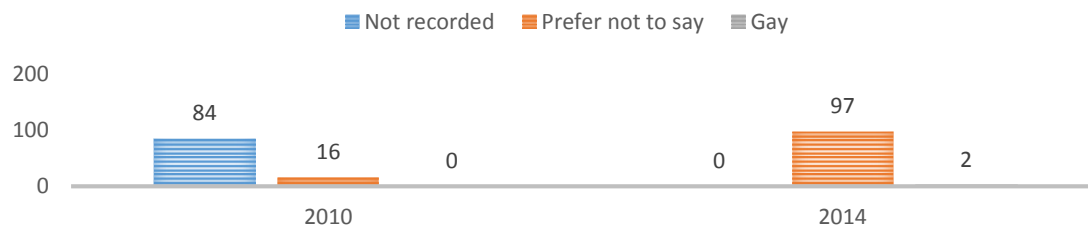
⁸ https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0002/8418/BJM_21_6_404-409_refugees.pdf

⁹ 17% of people in Leeds identify as having a disability, or life limiting illness
<http://observatory.leeds.gov.uk/resource/view?resourceId=3759> p4

In the anonymous postal survey of clients held in July 2015, 82% of respondents identified as straight, and only 18% of people declined to answer.

Many people seek refuge in the UK on grounds of their sexuality, and because of the fear of violence and persecution in their countries of origin. Increasing numbers of asylum seekers and refugees identifying as LGBTQ has led to specialist support growing up in the city, and LASSN is keen to support people to access this support.

Sexuality of befriending clients (%)

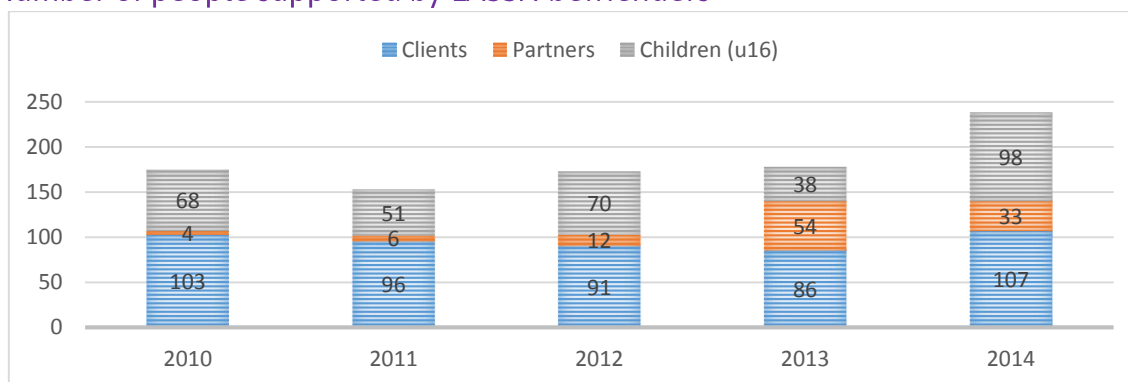


How many people does the service support?

In 2014, the befriending service supported 107 different people, compared with 103 people in 2010.

Although this may appear to be a decline in the number of people supported, Figure 4 demonstrates a 30% increase in the numbers of people in households matched with a befriender during this same period. There has been a marked increase in the number of single parents, couples, and couples with children supported by the service meaning the total number of people supported via befriending has risen from 175 in 2010 (103 clients, 4 partners, 68 children) to 238 in 2014 (107 clients, 33 partners, 98 children).

Number of people supported by LASSN befrienders



The type and composition of a household significantly affects the kind of help they require – and the kind of befriender that would be suitable. A single parent will have significantly different concerns to those of someone without children; the dynamics of assisting a person in a relationship to increase their social connections are very different to someone who lives alone.

I can't believe when come to a strange country that someone will help you for free. Makes you believe in humanity again."

What kind of help are people looking for?

People claiming asylum are often coping with trauma and distress following their flight into exile from these countries. Many have experienced imprisonment and torture and therefore may have

a fear of other people from their own country and a lack of trust in authorities. People frequently have no support structures in this country to help them deal with their physical and emotional distress, and often do not know if families and loved ones left behind are still alive.

"I have a friend I feel confident to talk to. She helps me to cope with day to day stress"

In the UK, asylum seekers are sometimes met with suspicion and hostility from the media¹⁰ and in the communities in which they are housed. They struggle to find their way in a new country, to learn English, and to cope with the asylum process. Isolation, leading to depression, is a major concern amongst refugee communities.

Over the last five years, Government funded support to asylum seekers and refugees has decreased. Asylum support payments have remained frozen for single people, and have recently been cut for households with children.¹¹ Legal Aid restrictions mean that people often struggle to get the help they need to make their case for asylum effectively¹². A reorganisation of Home Office Support contracts meant that the face to face support and casework provided by the 30 Refugee Council staff in Leeds ceased in April 2014, and was replaced by a telephone helpline and website provided by Asylum Help. An Asylum Help worker now runs an outreach session in Leeds each Thursday morning.¹³

"Supporting me with benefits/housing/immigration advice"....

Specialist support to refugees has also declined, along with increased expectation that refugees will access mainstream services. In addition, the change of Government in 2010 saw a shift away from the position of "integration begins on day one" resourced by central government¹⁴ to the expectation that integration starts at the point of receiving a right to remain in the UK, and would be the responsibility of local authorities¹⁵ with no additional resources.

Most befriending referrals now come from staff in specialist services (Children's Centres, Community Mental Health teams, Housing Offices) who recognise that their service cannot be effective without additional support. This can sometimes lead to a tension between what a client has been told by the agency referring them ("this person will help you with practical tasks and help you come to appointments") and how LASSN and the befriender sees the primary focus of their role – as companionship and helping people to make social contacts.

¹⁰ http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_237469_en.pdf

¹¹ www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN01909.pdf

¹² [http://www.refugee-action.org.uk/assets/0000/8391/Interim external evaluation of Refugee Action s Access to Justice project.pdf](http://www.refugee-action.org.uk/assets/0000/8391/Interim_external_evaluation_of_Refugee_Action_s_Access_to_Justice_project.pdf)

¹³ <https://leedsmultiagency.wordpress.com/2015/04/07/updates-from-migrant-health-april-2015/>

¹⁴ http://www.manchester.gov.uk/rsmp4/download/downloads/id/106/integration_matters_a_national_strategy_for_refugee_integration

¹⁵ www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN05829.pdf

The nature of difficulties experienced by households also reflects this change in family composition: befrienders are now much more involved in assisting isolated parents with the practicalities of school and health appointments for their children.

Over 60% of LASSN’s clients experience mental health issues, ranging from full-blown mental illness and psychosis, maybe needing hospitalization, to general depression, including symptoms like low mood, sleeplessness, emotional distress and anxiety. Many of these conditions are the result of past trauma and upheaval; but many more are the product of the isolation encountered here. People report they go days without speaking to someone who treats them like a human being and it is easy to see how depression and paranoia take hold.

“For the first few weeks it was difficult: I wasn’t sure who this woman is coming to my house? – What interest has she in me? Why would she help someone from across the world? But she seemed nice and my daughter liked her, so asked her if she would help to explain the letters the council were sending me”

Befriending clients are live in the most deprived areas of Leeds like Harehills, Chapeltown and Beeston. (90% live in the 20% most deprived areas of the UK and 75% in the 10% most deprived). Whatever their standard of living in their country of origin, many asylum seekers come here penniless and without possessions. They have often spent some time being destitute. A large proportion of refugees live in social housing and about 8% of befriending referrals come from housing associations, which offer supported tenancies to people with various problems.

What happens as a result of befriending?

Although befriending support is largely unstructured, some general goals are identified at the start of support and matches are reviewed every 6 months, where clients talk about how they feel: what has worked for them and what is still left to achieve.

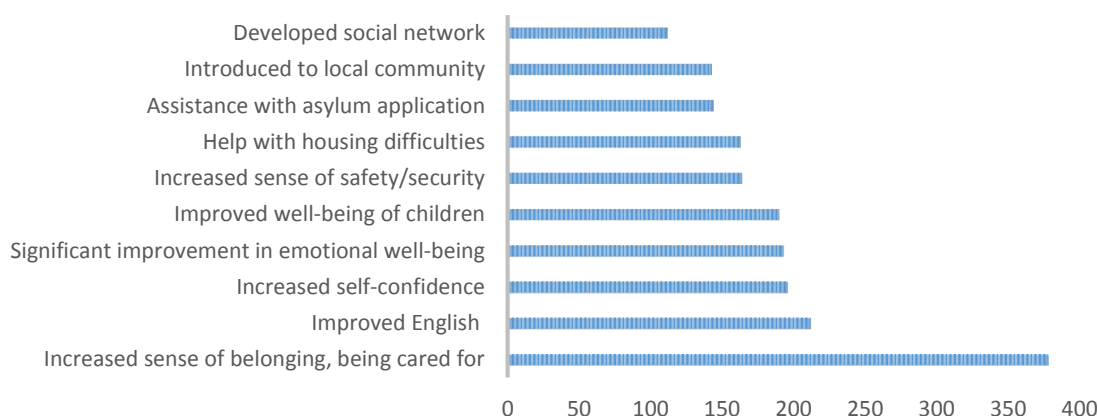
Reviews can be a source of frustration as celebration, as they can highlight the lack of support available with complicated and time-consuming tasks.

Staff have reported that some clients do not find the process of review helpful – saying that they do not see their befriending as a series of goals or outcomes to be achieved. This has occasionally made collecting monitoring information difficult. Consequently, some staff have felt it easier to complete the outcomes on behalf of the client, based on their own observations and conversations with befrienders, rather than on what has been said by the client. This has now stopped.

The largest single outcome of befriending is that refugees and asylum seekers experience an increased sense of belonging and being cared for. It is the power of the relationships they have built with others, which underpins all other outcomes.

“It reassures you that you've got someone”

The top ten outcomes achieved by befriending clients 2010-2014

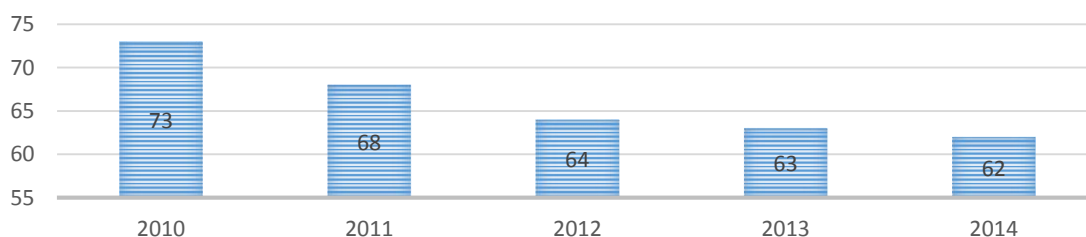


Findings: Befrienders

How many befrienders does LASSN support?

The number of befrienders supported has reduced over the last 5 years from 73 to 62, even though the number of people supported has increased (see p9 “Number of people supported by LASSN befrienders”)

Number of LASSN befrienders



What are the backgrounds of the people who volunteer as befrienders?

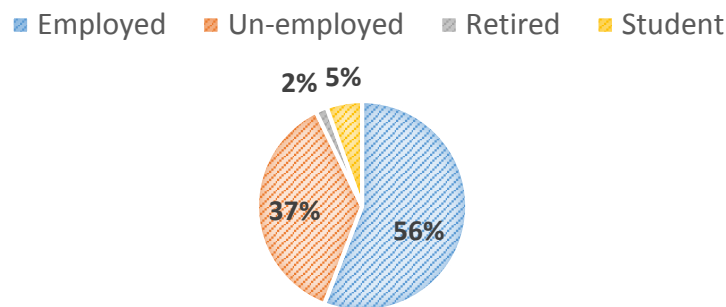
Volunteers are recruited – as far as possible – to reflect the requirements and interests of the clients. 77% of befriending volunteers are women – which roughly matches the gender profile of 71% female and 28% male clients.

At present 20% of befrienders started as befriending clients, and this number needs to increase.

75% of volunteers are British, the other 25% represent over 50 different nationalities. Volunteers have used 42 different languages – from Afrikaans to Zulu – to help and support others.

Most befriending volunteers (56%) are in employment although almost 2/5ths are not. Befriending is a route in to work for many volunteers, and more than 30 references were provided for former volunteers over the last 5 years.

Befrienders by employment status



What kind of support do befrienders offer?

As well as social contact, befrienders often find themselves being asked to help with practical difficulties – be it reading or writing, filling out forms, or explaining the role of various services and organisations.

“She helped me go out and have coffee” ... “she helped me find social places e.g. Leeds Museum, seaside”

It is crucial that befrienders know their limits. The volunteers manager assists befrienders to establish their boundaries at the start of support, and then help with queries or difficulties as they arise. Training is provided to volunteers at the beginning covering

- the experience and process of seeking refuge in the UK.
- building confidence and self-esteem by focusing on someone’s strengths and interests.
- tactics for reducing isolation: increasing independence and helping people to contribute and connect to their communities where appropriate.
- maintaining boundaries & organisational policies.

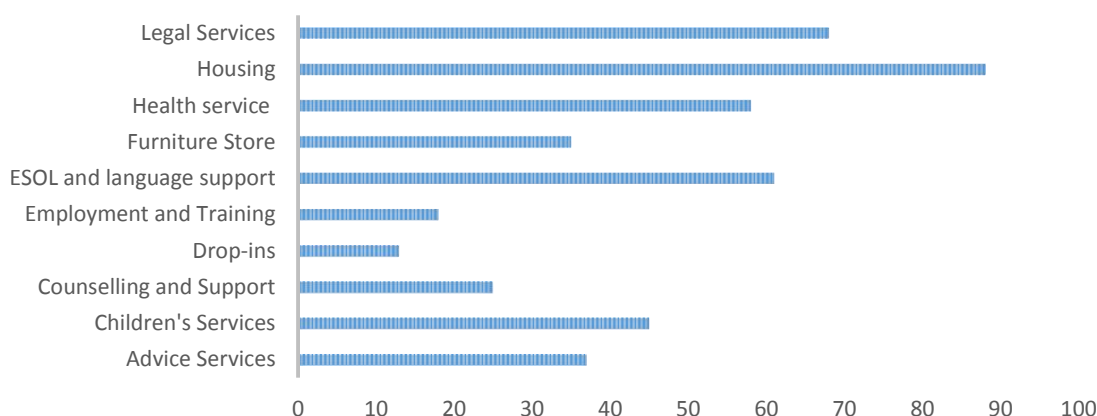
Additional training is provided in a variety of ways – from structured courses on financial literacy to one-off information sessions covering topics such as how to “help in a mental health emergency” or “recent changes to asylum legislation.”

Many volunteers have become very confident and proficient in signposting and referring clients elsewhere. Befrienders also help people to build the confidence to speak up and speak out about things that concern them.

“It has given me confidence and peace of mind knowing there is someone to lean on”

Clients often benefit from having an English speaker in their lives. Although keen to learn, many clients have not experienced learning in a classroom setting, and lack confidence or learning skills to engage with even free, informal conversation clubs. Volunteers help clients with conversational skills, supplement and reinforce what is learned in classes and boost confidence.

Top ten referrals made by befrienders 2010- 2014



Clients are often overwhelmed by a sense of 'new culture' and the life-experience of volunteers is particularly beneficial when explaining how systems work. Often, the experiences of volunteers acts as a touchstone for clients, as they try to work out what's normal and what's not, and how they can expect to be treated in future. This is of enormous benefit in helping people to adapt and integrate.

"I had a good vibe with my befriender because she was more experienced"

Many clients particularly value the fact that they have a 'British friend', not a worker who is paid to support them or a stranger who may exploit them or fail to understand them. One of the greatest barriers for asylum seekers and refugees face is the struggle to form trusting relationships. Asylum seekers and refugees are often scared to trust and are not used to being trusted by others. One of the key benefits of befriending is linking them with someone from their adopted country who values them and really wants to get to know them.

The befriender bought my daughter a strawberry plant and now we are eating them and water it every day. It put a smile on my daughters' face. It's a big thing for me as I want my daughter to be happy.

A friend who lives in and knows Leeds is helpful for anyone moving to Leeds. Someone who knows and understand the way things work, and where to find things makes a huge difference to how well someone settles, and gets their life together again.

Befrienders also say they derive significant benefit from their volunteering in the form of raised awareness and knowledge of other cultures, as well as gaining a new perspective on the cultures and communities they attempt to explain.

Many volunteers stay in touch, or become permanent friends with clients after the official befriending has ended.

Findings: The need for the service

Asylum seekers and refugees frequently struggle to adapt to a new home, in a new town, in a new country. Unable to work, living on 55% the level of income support¹⁶, and prevented from attending free language classes¹⁷, many asylum seekers struggle to integrate.

The isolation and lack of integration exacerbates the physical and mental health issues they experience¹⁸ and therefore more than half of referrals come from statutory and community health services – and mental health services in particular. The regular informal support offered by befrienders enables the development of self-esteem and self-confidence, increases engagement with services (befrienders gently remind people of their appointments, and help them to understand their post)¹⁹. Health services in particular recognise that the relationship built up with volunteer befrienders offers great benefits to mental health that cannot be achieved otherwise.²⁰

[Befriending] makes you believe that life can get better again"... "It has given me confidence and peace of mind knowing there is someone to lean on"

Befrienders are of critical help when asylum seekers finally receive leave to remain in the UK. This can be a very difficult transition with people given only 28 days to find housing, accessing housing support, change schools, arrange benefits and seek employment. Befriending volunteers have produced a transition guide to help this process²¹, which is currently undergoing revision and expansion by the Leeds Migration Partnership. No other practical support is available in Leeds for people undergoing this transition.

Not every client who is referred is matched to a volunteer. Following a referral, the manager meets with the asylum seeker or refugee and attempts to explain the kinds of things befriending can and cannot help with. If someone does not want the kind of support offered by befriending, they are not matched and are usually referred on to another agency.

Increasing the number of matches is difficult, without compromising the quality of support offered to volunteers. Volunteers benefit from 1:1 support, group supervision, as well as training and social evenings. LASSN's training programme is based on the key issues reported by clients and volunteers – for example advocacy skills and financial literacy.

What clients say – key themes

In July 15, a simple postal survey was sent out to all 41 clients currently matched with befrienders, asking for feedback on the way the service is currently delivered. We received 11 responses – a 27% return rate, which were unanimously positive about the current model. Quotes from this feedback appear throughout this report in blue.

¹⁶ www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN01909.pdf

¹⁷ https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/l/6/ucu_esolbriefing_nov07.pdf

¹⁸ <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3874845/>

¹⁹ <http://www.scie.org.uk/publications/briefings/briefing39/>

²⁰ http://www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/library/Resources/BCC/Befriending_Works.pdf

²¹ <http://lassn.org.uk/refugees-transition/>

"I believe the befriending is already amazing" ... "I think they are already good in what they do, thumbs up"

This postal feedback was augmented by findings from focus groups, facilitated by the Director of LASSN with assistance from five asylum seeking or refugee women who had previously volunteered for the Refugee Council's Women's Health Befriending Network.

What difference does befriending make?

- **Befriending helps people connect with their local communities** – *"if I am dispersed they will help me find schools/surgery and the whole area where to go to"*
- **It helps build hope and trust** – *"makes you believe that life can get better again" and "helps you to start trusting people again"*
- **It helps build motivation** – *"it has boosted my desire to help to get from where I've been to where I am" "it gave me a sense of purpose to look forward to the next day"*
- **Having someone on your side matters** – *"befriender goes through the tunnel with you", "It has given me confidence and peace of mind knowing there is someone to lean on"*
- **The strength of relationship is not to be underestimated** – *"it has given me a family... my daughter calls my befriender grandma"*
- **Befriending combats isolation** – *"I felt isolated on my own, looked forward to volunteer coming" "don't normally have someone who would be there for me"*
- **The quality of the match is crucial** – *"it was good that coordinator spent time with me so that she could find a good match for me"*
- **Befrienders also offer practical help and refer people on** – *"the befriender helped do research and find out using telephone or computer - helps reduce stress" "[they] helped take me to the children's centre" "they helped me find a solicitor"*
- **The connection is emotional as well as practical** – *"I can't believe when come to a strange country that someone will help you for free. Makes you believe in humanity again"*

What could befriending do better?

- **Checking that things are going okay** – *"LASSN could follow up more on how friendship is going" "weekly check ins at the start"*
- **Managing the expectations of the client** – *"I don't know how long each time the befriender would stay" "I want to know how long befriending lasts" "I would have liked to spend more time but understand volunteers has other commitments"*
- **Making sure relationships remain empowering** – *"instead of doing things for the client help them to do things themselves"*
- **Make it clearer how to raise concerns or to complain** – *"I don't know who to complain to" "it would be good if you could complain anonymously"*
- **Greater clarity on what is covered by expenses and what is not** – *"[they] should state clearly what can be paid for and what can't e.g. bus fares, coffee" "I don't know what the befriender would pay for" "it can feel bad if volunteer pays for you herself"*

What else could befriending do?

- **Social activities could be arranged to help clients meet others people** – *"Activities for the children" "Social activities e.g. swimming, gym" "a Social day out for family (me and my daughter) - my befriender did this"*
- **The way clients might start volunteering** – *"I would like to volunteer as a befriender once my child starts full time school" "I want help finding volunteering opportunities"*

What befrienders say – key themes

All existing befrienders were invited to attend a focus group. Sadly, only three were able to turn up on the night. Their comments have been augmented with comments taken from telephone interviews with three other befrienders.

What difference does befriending make?

- **Volunteers get as much as they give and get a strong sense of achievement** – *“It’s great when they no longer need me” “I get to learn about different cultures” “it gives you increased tolerance to certain kinds of groups” “it makes you feel useful” “I get a sense of giving back and sense of satisfaction” “I have supported 17 people over the last 11 years and no-one has ever been sent back.” “there’s a real sense of achievement when they sort something out”*
- **Befrienders enjoy the practical aspects of befriending** – *“in the end I helped her to find the right place and make another appointment”*
- **Volunteering can be emotionally draining** – *“it’s difficult sharing the experience of people with long term intractable problems” “you share in their anguish: how **do** you get control over life when all the systems are against you?” “there are long periods of waiting with nothing happening, and then lots all at once”*
- **Befriending gives a new perspective things** – *“I’ve been surprised at how helpful front line people are: Doctor’s receptionists are nice sometimes” “I’ve not been impressed by the Utility companies” “In Leeds people go the extra mile”*
- **Befrienders can see immediate benefits to befriending** – *“Having someone alongside or hanging around makes a difference” “Their attitude is different when someone is with you”*
- **Befrienders are not always aware of how much practical assistance may be asked of them** – *“I wasn’t really prepared for what befriending would mean”*
- **Sometimes the pressure to get something sorted means volunteers are less empowering than they want to be** – *“I need to leave her to panic whilst I sort something out and make the phone call”*
- **Befrienders are usually very aware of their boundaries, although they draw them differently** – *“All we can do is offer possibilities” “All you can do is point out consequences”*

What could befriending do better

- **Training could be more comprehensive, with chance to catch up on things if they are missed** – *“you need more than 2 days” “need to cover more practical skills in training” “I missed out on one of the trainings”*
- **Befrienders could be briefed better at the start of matches** – *“Lack of information has sometimes led to communication and cultural difficulties” “the only thing I learned about her was from the referral form”*

What else could befriending do?

- **Make it easier to find out other befrienders with experience of difficult things** – *“We need to match expertise with experience”*
- **Give a little more structure to the befriending relationship** – *“it always feels quite reactive”*
- **Befrienders would value more information on local activities** – *“we should be updated on college courses, children’s centres and libraries”*
- **Befrienders would like more activities to be laid on** – *“it would be great if we could access to funds for activities” “we could visit the City Farm” “What about things to do during the Holidays? Christmas parties?”*

What referrers say – key themes

Although no specific feedback from referrers was sought from referrers in July 15, a series of 11 in depth interviews were conducted with senior managers of key referrers, to ascertain how LASSN and the befriending service in particular were perceived.

Comments from referrers largely echo those to have emerged from the findings from befrienders and clients.

- *“The befriending service is inspirational”*
- *“High quality service, with uniquely high numbers of dedicated volunteers”*
- *“I’ve never seen a leaflet explaining what it is you do, that I could give to clients”*
- *“Waiting lists can feel a bit long – we’d like to refer more people if we could. More of both please.”*
- *“Do you explain to clients that the services are provided by volunteers? We’ve had a couple of clients who seem a bit unclear about the boundaries and what they can expect from your volunteers”*
- *“Why are we all training our volunteers separately? Why don’t we see what we can share?”*
- *“It would be confusing if you started to do casework”*
- *“LASSN (and our organisation) should make sure support is offered around what the clients need, not the services you can provide”*
- *“There has been some research done which shows that asylum seekers and refugees are the least likely people to become volunteers BUT the most likely if asked. The reason being that they don’t think they are wanted. In order to recruit, asylum seekers and refugees need to be asked and often the best people to ask them are other asylum seeking or refugee volunteers. Once asylum seekers and refugees volunteer, they tend to give many more hours than asked for.”*

Learning, developments and recommendations

What works

For clients

- The quality of befrienders and genuine support they are offered – it is different from the professional distance offered by many support workers.
- A relationship without a fixed agenda: befrienders are not trying to persuade people to do one thing or another and the relationship is not based on a particular set of tasks, or specific outcomes.
- The open-ended nature of the befriending relationship, which is not time limited.
- Support with practical tasks with which other services do not help.
- The ability to learn about British culture.
- Low-level support with understanding things like letters or finding their way to/from appointments.
- The ability of befrienders to help to make new connections – e.g. with people they know in places of worship, cultural associations, shops.
- Volunteers are crucial to helping asylum seekers who finally receive leave to remain in the UK with the practicalities surrounding the process of transition.

For befrienders

- The ability to make a difference through only a small investment of time.
- The flexibility of when/where/how they can befriend.
- The initial training and ongoing support.

- The level and range of support offered by the volunteers manager.
- The ongoing opportunities to learn and develop (e.g. through training, volunteers' socials).
- The siting of befriending in an organisation that does other things – like teaching English and helping with housing.
- Linking new befrienders with more experienced befrienders for informal support and troubleshooting.

For both clients and befrienders

- Matching volunteers with clients according to by interest/area and availability enables strong relationships to be forged.
- Where matches are not working for whatever reason, both befriender and client can trigger a review, and potentially a new match takes place.
- Both volunteers and clients report how helpful it is to have a relationship that is not about being asked questions or having to explain yourself.
- The nature of befriending enables reciprocal relationships which develop between volunteers and clients both get something valuable from the relationship – e.g. where someone is able to share an Iftar meal with a befriender and a befriender can give a small Eid present to their son.
- Not too much emphasis on "care planning" or formal planned care - very loose and organic - going at the pace of the client.
- The amount and range of support offered to volunteers seems to work and is appreciated.

What doesn't work

For clients

- Waiting times – it can sometimes take months for a referral to turn into a befriending relationship.
- At the start of support, some clients are still not clear on the nature of the relationship being proposed, or for whom the befriender works.
- Many clients are not sure how they can complain or raise a concern, and it appears that when things aren't going okay, people disengage with the service rather than complain.
- Clients often want more of befrienders than befrienders can provide - especially when other forms of support is not available (e.g. specialist legal advice).
- Not enough feedback from clients - people vote with their feet.

For befrienders

- Some volunteers would like more structure or guidance on how to build a relationship - especially at the start.
- Some volunteers express some concerns about how to end a match. Often when big issues have been overcome - such as a house move takes place, or the children get into school - the client can start to prioritise other things.
- Some befrienders are hard to match – and can get a bit bored waiting for a suitable match to take place.
- Befrienders often feel under pressure to be on top of changes in policy and the law on migration, benefits, housing, health etc. and can sometimes feel overwhelmed when they don't know the answers.

- Some befrienders feel obliged to take on advocacy roles they are uncomfortable with, or in areas they do not feel capable/equipped.
- Befrienders can find the experience of being alongside people living in limbo very challenging and emotionally exhausting.

For both clients and befrienders

- Some matches go on for a long time (2 years plus), which affects the number of new referrals that can be taken on.
- Some agencies are not clear on the nature of the relationship, and mistake volunteers for caseworkers.

What will be different

For clients

- Better information will be given to clients at the start of befriending – a clearer idea of what to expect, how to complain etc. This document will also be revisited at reviews, to ensure everyone is clear.
- Reduction in waiting times.

For Befrienders

Volunteer Recruitment

- A greater number and greater diversity of volunteers - more people with a background of seeking refuge.

Volunteer Training

- Encourage greater understanding of advocacy, and how to hold a line between befriending and advocacy. This will ensure the focus of support remains on enabling clients to speak up for themselves.
- Invest more time in helping people know what effective referral and signposting looks like.
- Encourage more experienced volunteers to train new volunteers
- A greater focus on the cultural awareness of volunteers, and in particular, where volunteers can find more information and resources for themselves.
- Provide regular updates about changes to asylum and benefits legislation.
- Review information needs as well as emotional needs at reviews.
- Make sure volunteers feel more confident about recognising and drawing attention to safeguarding concerns – with clearer guidelines on how to seek support.
- Continue to emphasise the importance of consistent boundaries, and produce short descriptions of the befriending role for other agencies, so they understand the role of volunteers.
- Short "how to" guides for common difficulties will be developed, for those times when more structured support might be helpful– e.g. sharing/addressing safeguarding concerns, negotiating with utility companies, helping someone find a dentist.
- Greater sharing of peer produced knowledge using Q&A Board, including things like religious and cultural awareness.

Record keeping

- Befrienders who are providing practical help will be encouraged to provide brief updates of what has been attempted/achieved to ensure all work is documented, linked to our database.

For both clients and befrienders

Getting a befriender/making a match

- Reduce waiting times.
- More background info when introducing clients - better cultural information.
- Greater emphasis on goal setting: what has to be achieved through the match, with better records of what has been achieved.

Befriending Activities

- Greater structure to support – linked to setting goals at the start of support.
- More information about leisure activities - especially free and family friendly events during holiday periods; volunteering opportunities; and free classes

Making friends and connections

- Greater opportunities for clients to meet people other than their befrienders - not just 1:1.
- Provide group activities where befrienders and befriendees can attend together (e.g. day trips in summer, picnics, social evenings).
- Greater emphasis on linking in to group activities within RAS sector.

Reviews

- Reviews will be essential to ensure safety and support of all concerned.
- Increased focus on what is to be achieved by befriending.

Conclusions

What we've learned

About what it's like to be a lonely asylum seeker or refugee in Leeds

- Loneliness and isolation are commonplace, and can be a risk factor in the development of physical and mental health difficulties.
- Lack of money, and transport are key factors in people becoming isolated – making the importance of *local* connections even more pressing.
- Being part of a numerically large community is no guarantee against loneliness.
- It should not be assumed that a person from a particular background wants to make contact with other people of similar backgrounds.
- Getting a befriender can sometimes be challenging and unsettling at first: it can take months for trust to build, and for people to accept that befriending support comes with no strings attached.
- A lack of support from elsewhere can lead to befrienders being asked to be informal support workers. Clear boundaries should be set, and monitored, to ensure there is no confusion.
- Regular contact is mutually rewarding and beneficial, and challenges both client and befriender to think differently about their own experiences, and the city they live in.

About what it's like to volunteer as a befriender

- Volunteering as a befriender is rewarding and enjoyable: volunteer retention rates are good (50% of LASSN volunteers have volunteered for 2 years or more), and LASSN continues to recruit a wide range of excellent volunteers.

- The training and support provided to volunteers is felt to be sufficient – although there should be regular updates on specific skills, areas of knowledge and awareness (e.g. financial literacy, safeguarding).
- Befriending someone in a relationship, or who has children is very different from befriending a single person – and requires different kinds of support, knowledge and skills.
- Befrienders want support and guidance the most at both the beginning and end of matches.

About how LASSN organises befriending

- The informal nature of befriending is important – there is great value in not being overly structured or expecting everyone to have a “support plan.”
- Matches are generally successful, although regular reviews help to ensure a good fit between the skills and interest of both parties, and keep the relationship focused.
- LASSN’s approach to safeguarding is adequate, but in need of review in light of the Care Act 2015.

The difference we have made

- The Befriending service has been very successful: in the last 5 years LASSN has supported more than 150 volunteers to befriend and support 483 people directly and 917 indirectly.
- The outcomes achieved by clients have been considerable – our annual returns to Big Lottery for the last 3 years have shown clients reporting
 - significant improvements in both physical and mental health, spoken English, and self-confidence
 - better connected to their communities, and better able to cope on their own and
 - more productive relationships with services and agencies – they understand them better, and interact with them more effectively.
- The support offered by the Volunteers Manager to workers in other agencies has helped to increase their knowledge and confidence in dealing with issues of immigration, asylum and refuge.

Key changes we hope to make

Referrals

- Waiting list management is needed to ensure the service responds more quickly to people who are most isolated.
- Better information about befriending is needed for referrers and potential clients. Although a document of this kind can be found on the LASSN website²², it is clearly not reaching the people it should. Alternatives may also include a short printed leaflet or a video explaining how befriending works.

Matching

- Volunteers may benefit from better briefing at the start of a match about some of the issues the person they are befriending may encounter – e.g. the situation in the clients’ country of origin, some key religious/cultural knowledge that will help in building the relationship.

Ongoing Support

- A greater focus on ways LASSN can bring people together – by arranging regular group activities for clients and their befrienders (trips, picnics), and ensuring they know more about the social and leisure opportunities across the city.

²² <http://lassn.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Befriending-Guide.doc>

- More training for befrienders e.g. in how to support self-advocacy, and how to help people on low incomes – following further reductions in asylum support rates.

Involvement of people with lived experience

- A greater focus on involving clients and befrienders in planning, reviewing and evaluating the service – by ensuring annual reviews of the service, and by devolving a small activities budget to befriending clients, and supporting them to research, decide and organise the kinds of group activities available.
- LASSN should encourage more people with experience of seeking refuge to become befrienders themselves. This will require targeted recruitment, and may require a different approach to supporting volunteers – but it will enhance and enrich the quality of befriending offered to clients.

Supporting other projects

- Befriending will work more closely with other agencies and voluntary groups providing peer-support to asylum seekers and refugees. LASSN will offer training and development opportunities to their volunteers, and learn from their experiences.

Staying Safe

- Safeguarding and safety procedures (including complaints procedure) are adequate but could be better: clients and Befrienders should feel more confident in reporting and discussing concerns they may have.
- LASSN should review its safeguarding procedures in light of the 2015 Care Act, and the possibility that befriending asylum seekers and refugees may not be considered a “Regulated Activity” - meaning staff and volunteers may no longer lawfully apply for DBS checks²³.

Better ongoing evaluation

- Evaluation of the service needs to be woven into the day-to-day delivery of the service, and linked to wider quality assurance mechanisms within LASSN.
- Ongoing feedback from clients, befrienders and referrers should be solicited in a variety of ways.
- Better recording of activities and achievements will allow for greater, more consistent outcome monitoring, and will always be based on the views of the individual.

²³ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2012/9/section/6Better 5/enacted>