

West End Refugee Service

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An Independent External Evaluation

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

1.0 Background aims and objectives

1.1 Commission

This study was commissioned from tender by WERS

1.2 Focus of Independent External Evaluation study

- ✦ Effectiveness of support to the existing and potential client base
- ✦ Unique features of the service effective for building the client base
- ✦ Position of the service within Newcastle's support network
- ✦ Suggested areas for improvement and development

1.3 Stakeholders

Stakeholder groups' perspectives, opinions, and experiences captured were those of clients, team members, and relevant external agencies:

Clients:

- ✦ Asylum seekers
- ✦ Refugees
- ✦ Destitute asylum seekers

Team

- ✦ WERS staff
- ✦ WERS volunteers
- ✦ Trustees

Others

- ✦ WERS partnership networks

1.4 Approach

Mixed quantitative and qualitative approaches consisted firstly of probability sampling surveys of all stakeholder groups, incorporating significant space for both specific and open comment; secondly, of the story-based purposeful sampling interview technique developed by BSA for the capture of social impact and social capital development; and thirdly of contextual research utilising pre-existing statistical evidence from WERS.

1.5 Acknowledgements

We are inordinately grateful to the staff, volunteers, trustees, and clients who were able to give up their valuable time to participate in the surveys and interviews. The thoughtfulness of responses received and conversations we have had indicates the seriousness with which stakeholders have approached their participation in this study.

Précis of Key Findings

2.0 Introduction

West End Refugee Service (WERS) is a registered charity (No. 1077601) serving refugees, asylum seekers, and destitute asylum seekers, many of whom have been refused leave to remain in the UK.

Based in converted domestic premises in an area of mixed housing in the west end of Newcastle Upon Tyne, WERS employs eight staff. Four of these are full-time posts, three of which are delivered as a job share. Overall, staff team hours amount to 5.3 posts supporting a team of some seventy inducted and approved volunteers. There is an experienced board of 8 trustees responsible for the governance of the charity. Collectively, Trustees, Volunteers and Staff are referred to by WERS Management as the “Team”. Unless otherwise specified, so does this report.

WERS’ range of integrated services aim to address - “particularly by the provision of practical support”¹ - disadvantage, exclusion and poverty affecting asylum seekers and refugees living in the west end of Newcastle.

2.1 Client base and finance

From modest beginnings in the late ‘nineties of volunteers collecting spare jumpers for unsupported asylum seekers, the charity currently turns over a balanced budget of charitable grants and donations matching expenditure of around £250k annually. As a team, WERS supports over 500 clients, over one third of whom (currently 191 or 37%) are classified as destitute or refused asylum in the UK and therefore denied citizenship status and state support. Of the remaining numbers, over 160 (31%) have been granted leave to remain, while 147 (28%) are currently seeking or appealing for asylum status.

- * Team members surveyed from a population of 87: 64 (73.6%)
- * Team members interviewed: 5 of 8 Staff; 5 of 79 Volunteers, including Trustees.
- * Clients surveyed from a population of 520: 89 (17.1%)
- * Clients interviewed: 11 of 520.²

2.2 A Journey through WERS

2.2.1 Access

Finding WERS in the first instance is predominantly through friends and formal referral, usually from the North of England Refugee Service (NERS) with which WERS has a mutually supportive referral partnership. Despite its modest public profile, those who need to find WERS do because of the excellent reputation of WERS within the sector and amongst informal communities of refugees who have been touched by, helped by, or have themselves helped the service over its lifetime.

“Quite a few of the clients have been traumatised by betrayal, so the confidential service offered by WERS support is crucial.”

- Male Volunteer Befriender

“Clients will not tell you anything without trust. Trust is here at WERS. We have made a welcoming, safe environment which allows clients to start their journey forward from their struggle; to become a normal person again is a difficult journey, and WERS is there to support them through it”.

- Ali, WERS Support Worker

¹ From the Charity Commission registration

² Although a small proportion, statistical reliability is less of an issue for qualitative, purposely sampled interviews

Above all, clients feel safe in coming to WERS. And having sensitive human contact and listening at the heart of its charitable model, the ability to address the differing linguistic needs of clients is central to providing an accessible service. Client countries of origin number more than 50, and of the 89 clients we surveyed, 62 did not have English as their first language. The range of first languages of just the clients we surveyed (17.1% of the total population) numbered 20. In meeting this huge linguistic challenge head on, the irreplicable assets of experience and skills developed over many years within the WERS Team of staff and volunteers show through very clearly.

2.2.2 Understanding clients' needs

Within its wider one-to-one support work, WERS uses the "WERS Scale" self-assessment tool to help clients to comprehend and communicate their needs. Of those surveyed, levels of comprehension of the WERS Scale were high, as were levels of being understood (slightly less). Most (56%) were able to complete the scale in their first language - quite an achievement given the range of first languages we surveyed (20).

Focusing on the immediate needs of new arrivals, WERS is able to provide a successful listening service through an open-door policy. All clients can be given practical support with donated clothing, and £15 per week hardship funding together with free toiletries are available to destitute asylum seekers. This is very important to them indeed although, in retrospect, many clients from all three stakeholder groups report the listening service as being crucial in addressing their isolation, poverty, helplessness and fears.

"The basic needs in the broadest terms haven't changed at all. People come. They've had a terrible time, and they find it hard because everything is unfamiliar. People are frightened and lonely at the outset. That's not changed..."

- Lindsay Cross, Project Director

Needs for accessible human contact, a non-judgemental listening service, and unconditional emotional support lie at the heart of WERS' charitable model. It has not been invented in a spirit of idealism; it has been learned from experience over the sixteen years since the charity's inception.

*"If we notice there is a trend, you never provide what you **think** people need. You jolly well ask them and find out what it is they want..."*

- Lindsay Cross, Project Director

"It is very difficult for me personally to ask for help and have confidence to let people know about my situation and needs. WERS helped with my emotional state and self confidence through their gentle approach and the open access to the service."

- Female Client

"The actions and support of WERS, through very difficult situations. And standing up for us. These are the things that really transform a person's life"

- Female Client

"On Wednesdays they have a talk time... They have food, you can have lunch as well... Sometimes you are very upset... You know you can talk with someone. You can talk with other refugees and get support from others in similar situation. It is a good place to have available."

- Male Client

"I had nothing, no support. I come here, get help with money and food parcel... I come here, get a cup of tea, meet people, talk... My problems are shared, I don't have to face things alone."

- Male Client

2.2.3 Approach

Backed by surveyed results, Clients and Team members are in much agreement over the charity's achievements in approach towards customer care.

"I am not made to feel any shame in asking for help with anything in my life."

- Male Client

"Its main strength is the open door policy to Asylum Seekers and Refugees. And people know they can come here and there will always be somebody who will try and help them with a problem. They may not be able to solve it for them, but they will listen to them and they will do what they can to try and help them".

- Female Volunteer Support Worker

2.2.4 Services

(WERS) "provides a very much needed welcome, a building that is modest, cramped, but full of life with an amazing atmosphere....The outreach work from their worker Ali is far reaching. This place is a haven".

- Male Volunteer Befriender

Both team members and clients surveyed appear in general agreement that the most helpful and successful services are the daily drop-in; the hardship fund (consuming 32% of turnover annually); and the clothing store. To these, WERS adds a range of support services The full list of currently available services include:

- ✦ Daily drop-in advice sessions
- ✦ Time to Talk listening service
- ✦ Home visits and outreach
- ✦ Befriending scheme
- ✦ Employability programme (Job Mentoring)
- ✦ Clothing store
- ✦ Hardship Fund
- ✦ Awareness-raising, education and training programme

Beyond the listening services and support for basic life needs for the destitute, staff and volunteer support workers deliver help and referral through the drop-in advice programme to a range of external support agencies for legal and immigration advice. WERS' mediating role for referrals is in great demand, not least for the listening skills, language and interpretation facilities, and a wealth of experience and knowledge of referral needs and resources throughout the sector.

The capacity, quality, range, and sustainability of external referral agencies, such as NERS and the Newcastle Law Centre for immigration advice, not to mention state sector services of health, education, and social care, are crucial for WERS and its stakeholders alike. If these begin to break down, as far as WERS' stakeholder groups are concerned, the hope nurtured by WERS' human and essential needs support could be jeopardised.

WERS support is largely at the level of humanity and fundamental human needs. Because their door is open, demand for advice and support is intense. WERS is very busy. For immigration advice, WERS has always referred out to legal and bureaucratic expertise. While innovating with the accredited voluntary Befriending scheme; and the Time-to-talk; and Job Mentoring schemes, clients' hopes of support for onward personal, social, community, and professional development are reliant on external agencies and the capacity of wider society to engage with them. In cases of external failures, WERS can only listen, advocate, and help with hardship support of clothing and £15 per week.

"A bit latent in lots of accounts of the experience of the people we see is that they might seem really cheerful out in the hallway, and often the most cheerful ones are the ones who have serious mental health issues; problems with depression and anxiety. That's a really common thing. Some of them just like to have a chat, just having the 15 minutes to have a chat is important".

- Female Volunteer

"The support that is currently given by WERS is very good. There are people who come here have no place to sleep, they have nowhere to go, and this organisation always tries to help them. The financial support they give is so important".

- Male Client

"The help they give me here might not be that obvious to some people. It might not be visible but it is very important. I really appreciate what WERS has done for me"

- Male Client

"I arrived from Leeds and my case was refused. I was initially referred to NERS. My medical conditions were aggravated. My heart. And a blood clot on brain. I had no support. I was introduced to WERS. My initial needs were mainly my medical conditions, then secondly financial. I received the Hardship Fund payments. I know a little English but when it comes to such things as forms I can't cope by myself. Ali and Helen have given me great support, they have been like a family to me. WERS arranged my travel to Sheffield for the surgery I had to receive, they pay for my return ticket . WERS organised it all for me, without them how would I have known what to do? Who would have helped me?"

- Male Client

"Its being realistic in what we can do, helping relieve what we can and working with the clients making them understand why we are restricted in what we can do. Being honest and open with people, you get a much better response than just saying we don't do something... We've always explained why maybe we can't do it, or what the restrictions are. That's always been our ethos, that's how we work, and I think that that has helped a lot in what we do"... "We are aware of the needs of clients presenting with Mental Health issues. WERS is presently working with Healthwatch, Newcastle looking at the needs of clients."

- Helen, Operations Manager

What happens if cut-backs and closures start to reduce the number, the diversity, and the quality of erstwhile effective outward referrals? In the case of a client not speaking English, how can external agencies such as law firms, or statutory services such as the NHS help them if they won't, don't have, or can't afford to hire, the language skills and interpreters required? In its rôle as mediator and advocate, demand may outstrip capacity, and this may be where WERS' survival strategy - an outward referral policy that has sustained the service for many years - could come unstuck. It is not the polar bear's fault that the iceberg is melting away, but melting away it is - an environmental, and a structural problem over which there is no localised control.

And 31% of WERS' client population have been granted leave to remain. Taken together with refused and destitute asylum seekers and those awaiting appeals, or even to have their case first heard, it's not surprising that some 61% of our surveyed sample have been with WERS for more than 2 years, nearly 26% of these having received WERS' support for more than 5 years. Even acknowledging that some communities of peer support have evolved locally, many remain as clients with WERS for considerably longer than this, and are not moving from the support they receive from WERS through to other support agencies, or into "the mainstream".

These are problems from which barriers and obstructions may be deduced. Seeing these instead as opportunities, there are challenges here for these clients, our social services, and wider society in terms of community development, engagement, education, awareness, creativity, co-operation and collaboration, professionalism, and social integration and cohesion.

"People often identify as refugees with WERS beyond their being granted leave to stay, as many mainstream services are either at capacity or have been cut - so people come back to what they know, and get their needs met."

- Sarah Smart, Volunteer Co-ordinator (also Co-ordinator Newcastle: City of Sanctuary and Newcastle City-wide Asylum Seeker and Refugee Support Group (NCASRSG) current Chair)

"Can we have more cultural activities - "I'd love more" - Getting out and enjoying British culture helped me to feel more welcome. Comfrey Project signposted me to ESOL - WERS could provide more information to ESOL".

- Surveyed Client

2.2.5 Position of the service within Newcastle's support network

With its welcome, listening services, clothes store, support worker language and referral skills and resources, befriending scheme, and even job mentoring for the minority, WERS is at the heart of Newcastle's support network for asylum seekers and refugees. For their essential needs, all partners refer clients to WERS. But there is more to the historic legacy that WERS has provided the refugee and asylum seeker support network in Newcastle. NERS, the Newcastle Law Centre, and Action Foundation all see WERS as having played a leading part in helping the development and improvement of the sector as a whole. Through WERS' work with the City-wide group, the sector has developed a unified voice from a successfully knitted informal and collaborative partnership of niche specialist organisations - from WERS' example driven by client needs. There is inter-dependence and inter-reliance within this partnership, but also a determination to find solutions to whatever external pressures may be thrust upon it. Importantly, WERS is capable of assessing complex needs for the benefit of partner support agencies. It has also led the sector in providing awareness-raising educational programmes in close communities over the last 16 years. Key to the wellbeing of refugees and asylum seekers are the means whereby they may regain control of their lives. WERS has hosted Newcastle: City of Sanctuary and has been a member of the working group since its beginnings in 2013. The initiative will continue to support the extension of awareness-raising into sectors of society heretofore untouched by the lives of refugees and asylum seekers.

2.2.6 Team induction and training

Both core and role-specific training for volunteers have been maintained at a very high level. Role-specific training covers Befriending; Listening; Support work; Job mentoring; and volunteering for the Clothes store. Once the volunteers have completed training they have a final induction.

2.2.7 Signposting to external opportunities

Clients' physical and emotional well-being issues are wider than their immediate problems, and taking control of participation in cultural, sporting, or social activities can be helpful to them. However, this is at one remove from WERS' core services of listening and supporting through facilitating access, arranging appointments, and accompanying or interpreting for clients outwardly referred to partner support agencies. Many clients surveyed found signposting to social and cultural activities inapplicable. Nonetheless, for those who didn't, there seems to be some room for improvement around educational and learning, and cultural and sports opportunities - resources permitting. Consistency around its core services is close to WERS' heart. But perhaps educational, cultural, and social signposting could be developed through City-wide and City of Sanctuary initiatives. English lessons are at a premium and related to employment opportunities, but so may be client-led social initiatives of craft, growing, and cooking, for example. Is there a wider range of semi-professional or professional skills that clients may find ways of sharing socially or in wider contexts (cf. the Crossings example), and are there ways that WERS' signposting could support this?

2.2.8 Barriers and obstacles

Most impediments perceived by clients and team members alike lie externally to WERS. Gaps in services across the sector locally can be significant, focusing on all services for the destitute; legal aid for asylum seekers and those needing to appeal refusals; help with state aid for anyone with entitlement; support through burgeoning accommodation issues; and interpretation and language issues.

"(There are) big gaps in English lessons. People are queuing. Especially where childcare is offered"... "

"City of Sanctuary co-ordinated an appeal for hosting through spare rooms which has led to Action Foundation employing someone to co-ordinate hosting of destitute refugees".

- Sarah Smart, Volunteer Co-ordinator (also Co-ordinator Newcastle: City of Sanctuary and Newcastle City-wide Asylum Seeker and Refugee Support Group (NCASRSG) current Chair)

"The weaknesses I see come down to things we can't control. Especially the issues that are faced by destitute people. External things aren't a weakness of WERS but are a difficult problem to solve. We are always looking to see if there are any problems to be solved."

- Helen, Operations Manager, WERS

Externally, it's a different and wide ranging story of frustration with a failing asylum system, bureaucratic intransigence, bad press coverage, legal and social impediments, poverty and isolation - and of course language barriers. Team members were vociferous in suggesting:

"Keep up the joint agency approach to challenging political decisions which affect our clients. Promote the need for a fairer asylum process, where clients are not made homeless & destitute"; "I would like more support to be given to those clients who are given 'Permission to Remain' during the period of transition when so many decisions have to be made regarding housing and employment found in a complex environment"; ... "there is a great need to constantly counter jingoistic material, particularly in some parts of the press, that plays on covert fears"; "Continue to lobby and raise awareness"; "Outreach events that involve locals who aren't aware of the plight of refugees"; "Case study feedback on time taken and process discrepancies for asylum process, lobby local MP's to get processes changed / better deal for our clients".

- Surveyed Team Members.

Internal hurdles are not entirely absent with a little confusion around perceptions of central staff roles and frustrations over outward referrals seeming to become more problematic. Administrative, communications, and IT systems continue to need rationalisation and renewal and communications with volunteers could be improved, notwithstanding an essential ethos of mutual support and frequent face-to-face meetings between staff team members.

2.2.9 Making a difference

In alleviating the worst experiences of destitution, disadvantage, exclusion, isolation, and poverty amongst stakeholders, the social impact of WERS is immense. It is hard to fathom what the impacts upon Tyneside and the North East might be in the absence of a service so rich in experience and rare skills. At least 191 destitute asylum seekers are clients of WERS. For what they tell WERS they need, WERS is there to help.

"I did not have any support. I couldn't work. I had nowhere to live, a difficult time... It was good help. It was very good help. I get support here and they contact people at Action Foundation for a place to live. Now, roof above my head. It is very good help".

- Female Client

Results show huge impacts, and Team members concur with clients across all categories.

2.2.10 Unique or particularly effective support received from WERS

Clients describe the WERS welcome, the friendly atmosphere, the meeting of their basic needs for clothing and hardship money, and the quality of listening services as unique. No other relevant service in the region carries the same qualities of experience, skills, and sensitive approach. It's a class act.

"Destitution rising will outstrip the Hardship Fund. We may need to pare back services to what was previously supported... WERS is doing what it needs to be doing. It's true to what the needs are, which is its strength; not simply reinventing itself to follow the funding" - Sarah, Team

"I would say that WERS strengths would lie in continuing to do what it does well and not try and branch out into other areas, because I've seen this happen in organisations before. You try to be all things to all people and it doesn't work. So WERS has its strengths. People out there know what WERS does and it seems to me carry on doing what we are doing" - Female Volunteer

There are perennial challenges to funding such an active charity, even one with so small and so productive a team supporting over 70 volunteers. WERS is secure for so long as the wider network of charitable and statutory sector supportive agencies is maintained and developed for outward referral to meet steadily growing demand from clients' diversifying needs. The informal partnership of WERS, NERS, NLC, Action Foundation and others, co-ordinated through the City-wide group is a proven success of inter-dependence of independent organisations. Inter-reliance may be the other side of the coin were this knitted network to falter in some way. Clients' lives would be the more restricted and their struggle even more challenging than it already is were this informal partnership to come under strain. However, while recognising the risk, WERS and other agencies believe they would be able to cope with such stresses, just as they always have.

2.2.11 The position of WERS within the Newcastle Support Network

WERS occupies a key, anchor, and pivotal position in the Newcastle support network for volunteers and asylum seekers.

At the centre of a knitted, mutually supportive informal partnership of WERS, NERS, Newcastle Law Centre, Action Foundation and others, through City-wide group, Newcastle's refugee and asylum seeker network can speak in unison to influence interests, local government and policymakers.

2.2.12 Networks, Forums, Community Development, Social Enterprise

Outward referral is essential to WERS' charitable model. It cannot expand too much or diversify its services too far from the core, qualitative needs it has met since inception. Refugees and asylum seekers - and WERS itself - rely on external agencies and wider society to engage with their personal, educational, health, social, community, and professional needs. Outward referral agencies - not just those addressing immediate asylum needs - require sustaining and developing alongside other integrational initiatives such as City of Sanctuary, with which WERS is taking a leading role. Outward looking awareness-raising is all-important. 1866 people heard a talk by WERS last year. But beyond what WERS has already achieved with local schools and networks over the last 16 years, ultimately it will be the responsibility of those outside the immediate sector to develop their interests in awareness and engagement. New interests and new possibilities in new areas of creative involvement in wider contexts of engagement is important for refugees and asylum seekers wishing to contribute towards, and join with wider society. It is as important a journey to undertake for wider society, its communities, organisations and networks in opening links and exchanges with refugee and asylum populations.

Knowledge and experience shared by WERS with the City of Sanctuary initiative could prove a creative and inclusive model from which day-to-day engagement activities, projects, and programmes can learn in the interests of all.

Such approaches offer hope to strategic planners in being extremely important for forward integration, reductions in dependency, and ultimately social cohesion. They do not, however mitigate the

foreseeable and growing need for the provision of sensitive essential services of the kind delivered by WERS alongside its awareness-raising programmes. One question for WERS strategists is whether it can adapt outward referral and perhaps some of its listening services in creative ways to mirror and engage directly with a City of Sanctuary model of external awareness-raising, co-operation, and involvement.

"A client who has now gained her status to remain told us the thing that kept her going was that when she came here it felt like home. We felt like family to her and she knew that no matter how she was feeling we would make her feel better. Even 'though we didn't solve her immigration problem, it was just knowing that somebody was there for her. It's the human side, the fact that we listened. We didn't judge. It was a friendly place to come to and they felt welcome"...

- Helen Wood, Operations Manager

3.0 Conclusion

The detailed study shows WERS to be an essential lifeline for hundreds of refugees and asylum seekers on Tyneside.

Exhibiting remarkably high qualities of service, the charity is well governed and directed, as it has been since inception over sixteen years ago. WERS offers leadership to an informal knitted partnership of specialist support agencies, and works very successfully on its own terms at the heart of the refugee and asylum seeker support sector on Tyneside and within the wider region.

WERS is a safe investment for leading Newcastle's informal partnership of support agencies in meeting the essential and basic life needs of vulnerable asylum seekers, refugees, - and destitute men and women with no legal status, ill-served by a failing asylum system.

Matthew Burge, BSA