

## Co-Production case study - RSRFL Glasgow Peer researcher project

This case study was created by BRC staff and the Peer researchers from the project.

### The project

The project looked at the extent to which asylum-seekers, who are destitute and Appeal Rights Exhausted, can exercise their rights and access support mechanisms in Scotland. This involved looking at whether people were able to access accommodation and financial support from the Home Office, as well as services like healthcare, social work support, and education.

Peer researchers worked with me to develop the research project. This involved drawing upon their personal experiences to give their opinions on the best way to carry out research with people who are currently destitute. The Peer researchers then undertook interviews and group discussions with other people experiencing destitution in the asylum system.

We kept the volunteering light touch, simple and easy. Because of the nature of the peer researcher's lived experiences and current circumstances, we had to ensure that the project was flexible/ responsive/ adaptive to facilitate their involvement. As the staff member, I had to balance this with the research brief. This was sometimes challenging, especially around the timelines and in meeting organisational research/ policy priorities and balancing them with the Peer research identified priorities.

### Why we involved people - expected benefits?

We felt that it was a more ethical way to conduct research. Evidence suggests that people are more willing to be open and share information with somebody they regard as a peer, rather than someone who has not shared their life experiences. There is also lots of evidence to suggest that being involved in peer research is a positive and empowering experience for people in the asylum system or with refugee status. It can offer a sense of agency and control, within a context where people often have very little opportunity to make decisions about their lives. We were also keen to engage with people who may not be in contact with any formal services, and knew that participatory action research could potentially facilitate this.

That gave us the opportunity to really showcase the benefits of peer research to BRC, the research audience and the peer researchers themselves. Both peer researchers shared that they very much enjoyed being involved. They found it helpful in their own journey as it helped take their mind off of their own circumstances.

### How were people engaged and supported?

We recruited the peer researchers during June 2017. The project was led by the Destitute Asylum Seeker Service (DASS). DASS is a partnership project led by Refugee Survival Trust with the Scottish Refugee Council, British Red Cross, University of Strathclyde Law Clinic, Glasgow Night Shelter, Fasgadh and Rehoboth Nissi Ministries. This partnership was helpful as it gave us more opportunities to reach out to people to be peer researchers. We made up an informal role description, which explained what

people would be doing and the benefits of the role. We were clear about issues such as not being able to pay people, as asylum seekers are not allowed to work.

We had originally hoped to recruit four to five peer researchers, but in the end we were only able to recruit two people. If there had been more people we would have carried out more formal training and induction. Instead, we kept the training and induction informal and on a 1:1 basis. We covered the basics of research methods and ethics, and then the specific details of this project.

### How people were involved and influenced the process?

The peer researchers led interviews and focus groups to run the research. We collaboratively analysed the results. Staff led on the write up of the findings and the final report, although it was noted that the peer researchers would have liked to have done this as well. They edited and refined the final report and wrote the introduction.

### Key insights?

The richness of data is evident and has been hugely insightful for the project. Both peer researchers were involved in the analysis of themes and topics, and gave feedback and input on the report drafts. As peer researchers they have had the chance to meet local MPs, which was a really interesting power dynamic to witness – they were there as the experts. They will be part of any research launch activities, again to highlight their influence and expertise in the research. The Peer researchers got a lot from being involved – one of the researcher's children has said how they are proud of them to being doing something so valuable and worthwhile.

### Challenges?

The vulnerability of clients throughout the project was a constant challenge. They were sometimes dealing with difficult personal circumstances and so there was an open dialogue between myself and the peer researchers about managing wellbeing, safeguarding, safety, de-briefing and boundaries. The advice I would give is to constantly refer back to this. There was no distinct answer or solution, rather it was about challenging our assumptions, reflecting on our research ethics and finding the right balance.

### Key learnings

There were various things that we learnt through the course of the project:

- If possible we would have recruited more peer researchers. This would have allowed us to carry out a more diverse range of interviews.
- We would have emphasised the broad nature of learning and development (including, mentoring, reading, shadowing etc.) and included a more formal training element. The peer researchers identified that they would have liked more formal training on certain topics.
- We would have been clear and strict on contact check ins and de-briefs after the peer researchers did interviews.
- As there was limited internal BRC experience to draw upon, we had to look externally for best practise and guidance and there are some great resources.
- We need to constantly challenge ourselves around working collaboratively to find themes, trend and priorities from the research and share power in the process. It is not about

researchers asserting what to do. We have to challenge ourselves to make their involvement meaningful so we have to carefully manage everyone's priorities and expectations (e.g. this research will help my personal situation, this theme isn't what the organisation wants to focus on). Set expectations and areas of influence honestly and openly right from the beginning.

- When working with asylum seekers we need to be careful as to the work they do. While doing *volunteering* is encouraged, doing *voluntary work* can affect their asylum claim. Here's a useful resource: <http://www.sheffieldvolunteercentre.org.uk/asylum-seeker-volunteering-legislation>
- There is benefit of having peer educators from different genders. For some groups and on some topics the gender dimension in interviews is likely to be of high importance.
- Because of the significant role a Peer researcher will have played – it is important to formally recognise both the contribution made by the peer researchers and the skills they gained – a certificate can be a really good way to do this.
- There are different ways we can work with Peer researchers. As well as this example we could also have a “supervision” model. The supervision does not need to be hugely formal in tone, but marking out the time ensures care is taken during the busy phases of a research project.
- It can be important to reflect on ways to encourage Peer researchers to make use of their new skills after the project has come to an end, whether by linking them into another project or (if they are eligible) seeing what sort of free/ subsidised courses are on offer that would help them make the most of what they have learned. This ensures we are supporting their next steps and continued learning.