

AVAIL project: Co-production in service design and service delivery with people seeking asylum in Wales

The project

AVAIL (Amplifying the Voices of Asylum Seekers and Refugees for Integration and Life skills) is a project led by the British Red Cross (BRC), in partnership with the Italian Red Cross, Irish Red Cross, Latvian Red Cross and International Federation of the Red Cross. It aims to support the integration of refugees and asylum seekers through participatory, peer and community approaches.

A co-produced and co-facilitated Life Skills course in Wales forms one part of this project. A Peer Educator model has been employed to enable people with lived experience of the asylum process to co-design and co-deliver an orientation and Life Skills course for at least 60 newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers. The course delivered is 6 weeks long and includes ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) lessons, classes about life in the UK, including rights, responsibilities and cultural orientation, cultural outings and visits from external speakers on relevant topics.

Why a Peer Educator model? Arguments for co-production in service design & delivery

- Asylum seekers in the UK often experience discrimination, and can struggle to understand and influence decision-making processes that directly impact them. Their experiences in the UK can leave them feeling voiceless on matters affecting their lives. Despite this, people with lived experience of arrival in the UK and navigating the asylum system have unique insights into what is needed to inform, support and integrate other newly arrived asylum seekers. With the right support, they can play an equal role with professional in meeting the needs of asylum seekers in their communities. The Peer Educator model capitalises on these assets, directly challenging a view of asylum seekers as passive and in need of support from 'expert' professionals.
- Peer Educators should actively shape the content of a Life Skills Course, so that it provides the information and orientation required for newly arrives asylum seekers in Wales. The teaching methods also need to work for Peer Educators and those accessing the course, and to be culturally sensitive.
- To identify what a Life Skills course should cover, it is vital that we connect with communities who have lived experience of being newly arrived in Wales.

Recruiting people with lived experience

AVAIL project staff connected with people with lived experience of the asylum system, including those who had accessed BRC Refugee Support services in Newport as well as people who were referred from other organisations. The project staff introduced the Programme Designer and Peer Educator roles, highlighted how they might benefit, and answered any questions.

Co-production in designing and delivering a Life Skills course

Co-design of the course: Programme Designers

BRC's Innovation and Co-production teams worked with the AVAIL project team to involve people with lived experience as Programme Designers to shape the Life Skills course.

Programme Designers participated in two design workshops alongside project staff run over two separate days. Interactive activities, discussions and techniques such as journey mapping and personas were used to identify course content, delivery methods and who the course should be aimed at. Fictional characters were used to exploring common experiences for new asylum seekers, without participants feeling obliged to share their own personal experiences. By depersonalising, it allowed people to contribute fully and safely within a group setting.



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Peer Educators

Programme Designers and other refugees and asylum seekers were invited to become Peer Educators to continue designing and delivering the course. We held a training day, focused on skills needed and facilitation essentials, including professional boundaries and safeguarding. We have since provided further training in workshop facilitation, psychosocial support, active listening, 'Train the Trainer' and working with interpreters.

Designing the curriculum and sessions

Further meetings between Peer Educators and staff planned themes for weekly Life Skills course sessions and decided the order for topics. Sessions were planned collaboratively, with our AVAIL Group Worker sharing power over decision-making and encouraging Peer Educators to take as much control as possible.

Delivering the course

Peer Educators co-facilitate specific Life Skills sessions and deliver elements of the sessions, including running activities and facilitating discussions.

Support and preparation provided

Initial training for Peer Educators was complemented by additional 'bite-sized' learning based on skills required in the role, since they often found full-day trainings difficult to attend. We meet with each Peer Educator to explore how they would like to develop and agree individualised training plans to support them in their role and develop professionally.

Key insights gained

- People with experience of the asylum system have been very **keen to be involved** in designing and delivering the Life Skills course, and are passionate about the project's aims
- **Co-production workshops** offered an effective environment for people to safely draw on their own lived experience to make recommendations for the Life Skills course
- Some **excellent resources** have been produced by Peer Educators drawing on their lived experience, e.g a 'simplified housing contract' for Home Office accommodation for people on the Life Skills course

- The **photo diary technique** generated valuable insights, allowing people to reflect on what a Life Skills course should cover between design sessions and out of a group environment. Photos taken enabled people to lead the conversation and agenda.

Challenges and key learnings

Challenge: Sharing power consistently when developing the Life Skills course. It was not possible to leave course design entirely to Peer Educators and there were times when staff played a bigger role than intended. It took time to find the best methods for staff and Peer Educators to contribute equally.

Action: Based on ongoing feedback and review sessions with Peer Educators, we amended the process for the second Life Skills course to allow more time for Peer Educators to contribute to session design. We also introduced monthly meetings to plan upcoming sessions and jointly develop content further ahead.

Challenge: the need for time to apply learning and insights arising out of co-production workshops. You can learn so much through co-production and innovation techniques, but there is a next step in turning that learning into tangible actions.

Action: Keep in mind during the co-design activity what we need to learn to deliver the service or project, and ensure regular feedback to Programme Designers on their influence.

Challenge: supporting Peer Educators to feel confident in planning elements of course sessions independently and offering ideas on learning and development.

Action: We offer further 1-1 meetings with Peer Educators to establish their strengths and any additional training and support they need. We distinguished different Peer Educator roles, enabling people to contribute to course sessions in ways that utilise their strengths - one is a facilitator role, another leads small group discussions, and a third welcomes learners, and sets up resources, equipment and refreshments.

Challenge: managing differing availability of Peer Educators, with some available every week, and others less frequently because of other commitments.

Action: We changed sessions to be more flexible and 'bite-sized' in format, rather than traditional models of all day training. We checked more regularly with Peer Educators when and how they wanted to be involved and whether they were gaining what they hoped to from the role.

Challenge: Creating safe and meaningful opportunities for people to support new arrivals from their own experience. Peer Educators are keen to talk about their experiences with new arrivals but unsure how to do this most effectively.

Action: We put in place psycho-social training for Peer Educators (an internal BRC team), to help Educators navigate this safely.

Experiences and impact:

'I have loved working with the team of Peer Educators. We have more confidence as we deliver the sessions together that the content is relevant as the educators are speaking from experience! This has helped people who attend the course to relate and feel listened to in the workshops. It has also created an atmosphere where people can chat through topics without feeling judged as we are all discussing topics and people's experience rather than teaching a set curriculum.' (AVAIL Groupwork Coordinator)

'I'm an open person and I always give a welcoming hand because I have been welcomed, I have been helped, I don't want to keep myself, I give a hand to others. I have gone through a lot, I have suffered a lot, I don't want to see anybody suffering. Any little help I have, I give. I give.' (Peer Educator)

Expanding this model:

Based on the success of this Co-design approach and Peer Educator model, BRC has introduced this within other Refugee Support Services.