RESEARCH INTO REFUGEES & ASYLUM SEEKERS (RAS) LIBRARY/INFORMATION NEEDS

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CONTENTS

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1.   **Introduction**

The Welcome to Your Library (WTYL) Tyne & Wear (T&W) consortium is comprised of the library authorities in Newcastle, Gateshead, North Tyneside, South Tyneside and Sunderland. The consortium has identified the need to establish evidence based information around RAS' access to libraries and their information needs, and feels strongly that the information should come directly from RAS themselves (i.e. not to make assumptions). As all the library authorities in the T&W consortium had time/capacity constraints, they approached colleagues from the School of Computing, Engineering & Information Sciences at Northumbria University. This research was carried out under the PEARL (Partnership in Education, Achievement, Research, and Learning) consortium agreement which facilitates joint endeavours between the relevant PLAs and Northumbria University. Colleagues from the Information and Communication Management subject group within the School agreed to undertake some research with RAS on behalf of the consortium. It is hoped that this research will benefit Library Authorities by providing information they can use to consider their services in relation to RAS. Also, because an independent organisation is conducting the research, it will be objective and more credible than if it had been carried out in-house. This research study focuses on T&W and will concentrate on responses from RAS.

2.   **Aims**

●   to establish evidence based information around RAS' access to libraries and their information needs
●   to find out what RAS see as being the barriers to using the library
●   to establish a methodology for engaging with and involving RAS in the development of services and in order to build trust and good relationships

3.   **Methodology**

The research took an interpretivist approach to investigating the library/information needs of refugees and asylum seekers in the North East of England. The purpose of the research was to gain insight into the attitudes and opinions of this group to library services within the region. In order to avoid making assumptions about possible needs of the group it was decided to allow the data to emerge naturally rather than design an a priori framework that could potentially restrict the discovery. The interpretivist paradigm demands the harvesting of rich, detailed, descriptive qualitative data that allows for insight and discovery. The emergent design of interpretivist research does not allow for a detailed plan before the research begins 'the research design must therefore be 'played by ear'; it must unfold, cascade, roll, emerge' [Lincoln and Guba, 1985 p.203]. However, it is possible to develop a design which allows for the iterative nature of the study. In this investigation an initial plan was constructed which allowed the researchers access to appropriate groups in appropriate locations and provided an open structure to facilitate open sharing of the research participants' personal views on the central issues of this research.

Taking into consideration the nature of the research participants it was decided to arrange focus groups in locations within each Public Library Authority (PLA), it was important that participants felt comfortable and familiar with these locations to encourage open discourse. Powell [et. al.] define a focus group as, 'a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research' [1996, p. 499]. The focus group technique has been used in social research since the late 1930's [Kreuger,1988], but possibly the most obvious use of the technique has been in market research where it is applied to investigate consumer preferences and habits. Focus groups were chosen as the most appropriate data collection technique for a number of reasons, focus groups allow 'a variety of perspectives and explanations [to] be obtained from a single data-gathering session' [Gorman & Clayton, 1997, p.142]. This meant that optimum levels of data collection could be anticipated within the very limited time frame for the actual fieldwork. Because of the circumstances of this research community it was also thought that they would be more willing to share their views if they were in a familiar space and surrounded by familiar faces. It was important to recognise the cultural factors which could so easily have influenced the data collection in this investigation. 'The purpose of focus groups is to enable a range of perceptions, feelings and attitudes from participants across a range of issues to be explored. It is possible to conduct relatively in-depth discussions with a small group of participants who may be only a small proportion of the target population or the entire target population. They have the potential to allow for a wide range of views, beliefs and perceptions to be generated in a single data collection exercise.' [Pickard, 2007 p.220] In this research it was necessary to keep the data collection as open as possible to allow the participants the freedom to voice whatever issues were important to them without being restricted by preconceptions of the researchers.

In this investigation focus groups were arranged in Sunderland, Gateshead, Newcastle and South Shields. For all of these researchers were accompanied by a member of library staff. For all groups but one, established drop-in sessions were used where the RAS communities felt comfortable and were surrounded by familiar people. In one location it was necessary to use a designated space in the central library but the members of the focus group were all familiar with the space and the meeting was also attended by an objective observer known to the group. Due to the number of different native languages of participants in one of the groups it proved much more useful to sit with a range of very small groups within a large communal room, and to engage in group conversations with a maximum of 4 participants at a time. Where language was a real barrier an interpreter was used for clarity. In 3 of the 4 locations all focus group participants were female, in the 4th location all participants were male and, as not all were willing to take part, it was decided to use individual interviews.

4. Key Findings

The findings of this research report are structured around five key themes and where appropriate recommendations have been made within the discussion of these themes. It should also be noted that all RAS interviewed as part of this research used a library service but this should not be taken as meaning that this is 'usual'. It is likely that on being approached as regards their willingness to participate in focus groups or individual interviews that they opted to do so purely because they were users and felt that they would have something to say, knowing something about libraries. We must ask ourselves if one does not know about, or use libraries, is one likely to volunteer to participate in research about libraries?. This research cannot

answer that question but does provide some points for consideration by PLAs in reaching RAS.

4.1 Finding out about Libraries

4.1.1. Libraries are potentially used more where they are situated around sought after amenities. For example, people who live in one area did not necessarily use the library in that area preferring to use those close to where they did their shopping. Some RAS clearly preferred their branch library to use of a central library. However, the branch libraries were often spotted as a result of, for example, visits to doctors or when shopping, suggesting their closeness to amenities. For some people branch libraries were perceived as more accessible, where central libraries were viewed as 'big' and 'difficult to go into'. For others, however, use was made of a central library as they were not aware that there were such things as branch libraries.

4.1.2. RAS in discussing how they became aware of the library service highlighted the following scenarios:

- Support Workers (some RAS were also shown where the library was by support workers)
- By chance, where on speaking to his landlady about paying for access to the Internet, being told 'why pay? Go to the library'.
- It was found that children were often the ones who introduced adults to public library services. Children had been made aware of public library services though school.
- Some RAS were studying and found out about libraries from their place of study
- Found it by themselves. (Walking along – oh! there is a library)
- Asked neighbours
- Nobody told me, I have been in (town) for 18 months and did not know about libraries
- Community group drop-in sessions (held in local churches and largely staffed by volunteers)
- Told to ask in library for help about something
- Refugee Centre
- ESOL

It is clear from the above scenarios that schools, refugee centres, ESOL, community support workers and drop-in sessions are key links for this particular group and there is the potential for PLAs to work more closely with these groups to promote their services. Furthermore, it was recognised by the researchers during the data collection process that local churches and their volunteers play a key role in supporting RAS and as such could provide a valuable link to RAS and their potential needs.

4.2 Need for increased participation by Libraries?

4.2.1. Asylum seeker groups would welcome an increased participation and representation from libraries at their drop-in sessions (highlighted by volunteers/workers and also evidenced in authorities where this did happen).

4.2.2. The majority of people we spoke to were women, many who had children, and as a result valued a library service. However, because they were extremely busy

they were often only able to visit the library occasionally or at the weekend. We would suggest therefore that there is the scope for libraries to become more active in the drop-in sessions and to consider taking certain library services out to the RAS. In addition, through library staff being present at these sessions, they will be increasing awareness of the types of services on offer in the library, and, at the same time, becoming familiar faces to the RAS and thereby potentially encouraging future visits to local libraries. Library staff, once known to the RAS, could also arrange to take groups to the library (volunteers/workers thought this would prove useful to RAS who attend their drop-in sessions).

4.3 Impression of Libraries

4.3.1. Libraries, where used, are considered welcoming, comfortable and nice places to be, with friendly staff. However, the first visit for some RAS to a library can be daunting. Factors mentioned included the look of the building, not knowing what it would be like inside, what to expect, and a lack of confidence in English. For some RAS, accessing a library was new to them, not having the same facilities in their previous country. For one RAS, on entering the library and being met by a fellow language speaker, expressed huge relief at this encounter. However, once in the library many RAS mentioned that they felt comfortable asking questions and seeking help.

As language is an initial barrier to RAS there is the potential for PLAs, once regular and consistent contact has been made with refugees, that the refugees themselves are encouraged to act as volunteers in introducing RAS to the library and its many services.

4.3.2. One or two people mentioned that they had not opted to use the library earlier because they thought that they would have to pay. Linked to 4.3.3 below, this suggests that information surrounding access to the library being free needs to be emphasised.

4.3.3. Libraries offer a lifeline in enabling communication with friends and family through the use of their Internet facilities. Some of the RAS also suggested that it would have been useful if they had known about the library and this service on entering the country and on being re-located. Although some people mentioned that library information was provided in the information pack that they were given on entering the country, we would suggest that this perhaps did not always stand out or perhaps the information that is provided is not around the types of services that would immediately attract them to use the library, e.g., does the information provided highlight free access to the Internet or even free access to the library? Of course there will also be the problem of limited English on arrival for some people and hence why the information provided would perhaps not initially stand out. Many RAS expressed a preference to have someone explain any information to them. Taking this point into consideration, there is the potential for PLAs to look to providing information on the library and its services in visual formats in addition to printed materials.

4.4 Services highlighted as being used

4.4.1 The main service highlighted as being used was the Internet for communication with family and friends and to keep up-to-date with happenings within their original country. Libraries were also seen by some as social places, a place where they can

meet up with friends or just to be around people. Additional services highlighted were:

- Borrowing Books (for children mainly but also some adults mentioned borrowing books for themselves)
- Borrowing books to help with English Language
- Photocopying
- Use of computers for homework and use of computers while children play
- CDs

4.4.2 Reasons given for not using certain services included:

- Use of Internet but not books as there were few books available in their native language. However, many mentioned that as their English improves then they will borrow books in English

4.4.3 The majority of RAS interviewed did not highlight any items or services that they would like to see provided by the library service, being very happy with what they have access to. But one needs to bear in mind that for many RAS this is the first time that they have had access to a library and as such are they not likely to be impressed with what is provided? The few examples that arose out of the conversations held included:

- Scanner
- Dictionaries covering native language
- More computers
- Being shown how to use the Internet (not only access to written help as preference was to be shown)
- Wider choice of materials in native language
- Activities for 5-8 year olds (perceived activities held in libraries as being for younger children)

4.5 When is the right time to find out about Library Services?

Clearly from what has been discussed above, many felt that they would like to have known about the library from day one, particularly in relation to Internet access. A few people also highlighted its value as a place to go, somewhere to meet people and importantly, somewhere to see people! Only a few people suggested that knowing about the library services on arrival was too soon.

What also emerged from the conversations held was that for some people it was not until they had a specific need, e.g., transport details, that they then identified that the library held this type of information. Linked to the Internet point discussed above, perhaps in promoting its services to RAS libraries need to place more emphasis on the day-to-day types of information, focussing on specific types of information, in addition to providing an overview of the services offered.

5. Key issues for consideration by PLAs.

- Local churches and their volunteers, Schools, Refugee Centres, ESOL, Community Support Workers, and drop-in sessions were identified as key links for this particular group of RAS.

- RAS groups would welcome an increased participation and representation from libraries at their drop-in sessions.
- Libraries are potentially used more where they are situated around day-to-day amenities such as shops and health centres.
- Branch libraries are often perceived as more accessible than central or larger libraries, however, not everyone was aware of the existence of branch libraries.
- Majority of RAS interviewed were women with children who felt that they were too busy to visit the library on a regular basis.
- Libraries, where used, are considered welcoming, comfortable and nice places to be, with friendly staff.
- First visit to a library can be daunting for RAS.
- Many RAS have no experience of libraries prior to entry into this country.
- RAS felt comfortable asking questions and seeking help from staff in libraries.
- Not all RAS are aware that they can access a library free of charge.
- Libraries can offer a lifeline in enabling communication with friends and family through the use of their Internet facilities, but RAS need to be aware of these services and, importantly, any charges for these services.
- Information on libraries provided to RAS on arrival needs to be highlighted and explained through a range of mediums.
- The RAS who used libraries were very pleased with what the libraries had to offer. However, Library Authorities need to bear in mind that the RAS had no expectations, many having no prior experience of libraries and therefore nothing to measure current services against.
- Main services used by RAS include, use of PCs, books, CDs, photocopying
- Services requested by RAS include access to; scanner, more PCs, language dictionaries, native language materials, and activities for 4-8 year olds.

6. Lessons Learned

This was a small scale research project and this section considers points that could prove useful to the authorities forming part of this research who wish to expand upon this research, and to other authorities looking to carry out their own research into the needs of RAS.

- As a small scale research study the findings identified above cannot be generalised across library authorities but serve as an indicator as to potential areas for consideration in terms of library service provision to RAS.
- Informed participation. We cannot emphasise enough the need for any groups being visited for the purposes of data collection to be aware, in advance, of the nature of the research, how it is to be carried out, for what purpose and by whom. Leaders, volunteers, and RAS within the drop-in sessions need to be made aware. Where they are not fully aware then much of the time allotted to gathering data from RAS can be lost.
- Through exploring the idea of the research with various potential sites prior to the research being carried out, there is also the possibility of identifying additional or more appropriate sites with a larger user group of RAS and thereby affording the potential to gather more in-depth data.
- If you have any language speakers of the RAS' native tongues within your authority it could prove useful to have them accompany the researchers to act as translators. There might also be volunteer language speakers supporting, for example, drop-in sessions. It is worthwhile identifying these people in advance and seeking their assistance.

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