



Investing in
People & Culture

Mend The Gap:

Over 50's BAME Communities perspective on isolation, how to identify and combat it.



Registered Charity 1070131

Contents

Aims of the project 3

How did the project gather information?..... 3

Perceptions and Experiences of Asylum Seekers and Refugees..... 3

 Community and Identity 3

 Distrust of the Government, the Local Authority and the Charitable Sector 5

 Immigration Status and being ‘Disqualified from Life’ 6

 Integration within the Wider Community 6

 Patriarchy and Group Dynamics 7

 Causes of Isolation 8

Good practice in working with Asylum Seeker and Refugee groups..... 9

Conducting the Research..... 12

Plan for Phase 2 of the Project 13

 Activities..... 13

 Sustainability..... 14

Summary of learning and phase 2 plan

Aims of the project

Investing in People and Culture (IPC) and Middlesbrough Environment City (MEC) set out to understand:

1. What the Asylum Seeker and Refugee community (50+) need, to live a fulfilling life in older age.
2. What difficulties and challenges this group face.
3. The BAME community's perspective on loneliness and isolation, including how to identify and combat it.

How did the project gather information?

IPC and MEC have spent the last six months building trust and conducting research with Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Middlesbrough, who are over 50 years of age. Data collection has been intensive and in-depth, involving:

- 18 semi-structured interviews
- 5 social activities
- 3 facilitated decision making sessions where participants contributed to project planning and decision making
- 3 focus groups (2 with beneficiaries, 1 with volunteers and staff)

In total, the project worked with around 20 people of mainly Middle Eastern and African background. There was approximately an even number of male and female participants.

Phase two of the projects will, based on the learning, implement action and activities that will reduce loneliness and isolation amongst this group.

Perceptions and Experiences of Asylum Seekers and Refugees

Community and Identity

Participants came from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. This makes 'identity' complex. Previous occupations include, Ambassadors, Teachers, highly skilled Oil Industry Workers, Lawyers, and Academics. Others were Subsistence Farmers with low levels of education (some illiterate). For those participants who come from the same country of origin, they have often been brought up in different social classes, religious groups, or cultures. This diversity, not just in country of origin, but status, wealth and education, results in a range of perceptions regarding identity, often prioritizing education, for example, before race or language.

Becoming distanced from your previous life and former 'identity' can result in low self-esteem. The strongest forms of isolation and loneliness that the project came across, was a sense of isolation from the person you used to be. This was not isolation from culture and

country, but instead from one's own identity. People felt that before, they had been a Woman, a Man, a Teacher, an Ambassador, a Wife, a Mother, or a Father. They no longer saw themselves in these roles and therefore, were no longer proud to be that role. Some participants said they were now 'nothing'. In interview, one woman cried repeatedly saying she was a 'carcass' and, even if her problems were solved she would still be just 'waiting to die'. A few described wishing, they had died proud instead of becoming an Asylum Seeker.

There was also a perception that people were not in a position to change their lives.

Having little English language, qualifications with no value here, no responsibilities, and no ability to send money home and be a provider, resulted in a feeling of worthlessness.

Asylum Seekers and Refugees that the project worked with described themselves as not being part of a community. Although the project aimed to engage various nation-of-origin communities (which in some cases do exist, for example the Egyptian and Sudanese groups that organise online and meet monthly), most people identified as not being part of any community. Some people displayed an aversion to meeting others of the same origin. Sharing a nationality was more often a barrier to taking up social opportunity. Explanations for this include:

- Suspicion of others from the same country.
 - People who have left their country due to fear and safety concerns are anxious about meeting other people from their place of origin, who may have connections to people/groups they fear.
 - Jeopardising their asylum claim/status is something that people are generally anxious about. They do not want to be seen to have good connections to people of the same origin in case the Government interprets this as having good relations with their home country and are made to return.
- Cultural reasons
 - Wanting to distance yourself from being an Asylum Seeker. Some people who have improved their immigration status want to 'close that chapter'. By not interacting with those of their origin, they can leave behind the past, including those who remember their past status and may still view or judge them in those terms. In addition, participants would chide each other if they referred to themselves as an Asylum Seeker, especially if their immigration status had changed, saying they were better than that now.
 - Some people described a 'negative culture' that exists whereby others from the same background have a social right to know about you. Not actively, declaring and sharing information about yourself is considered rude and secretive. This means for many people that they are obliged to share personal information about their history and background. People are put in a position of having to disclose information about, and justify, their current status. This is why we believe people do not want to engage in what they perceive to be an ethnic 'community'.

Relying on word of mouth to transfer information about events and activities can be problematic. Although some individuals knew about one or two organisations that could provide some help (for example, Open Door, MAP, Mary Thompson Fund, MIMA, IPC), without community, there was no mechanism for this knowledge to be shared. Interestingly, the same isolated individuals, voted 'word of mouth' as their top preference for how charities engage with them.

Distrust of the Government, the Local Authority and the Charitable Sector

There is a strong distrust of any organisation that is perceived as representing authority, including charities. These perceptions are based on the experience of being interviewed by the UK Border Agency and the subsequent immigration restrictions places upon people. Government is regarded as 'bigger' and 'overarching' in comparison to the Border Agency but their personal experiences colour expectation of all government. Trust is a huge barrier to engagement with charities. This distrust is part of a larger picture of feeling vulnerable and disempowerment when engaging with 'authority', including public services and the third sector. Distrust of charitable organisations is a huge obstacle. IPC's ability to engage the most isolated and disenfranchised individuals was due to an intense engagement strategy and the organisations existing credibility with Asylum Seekers and Refugees.

There was little understanding of how the charity sector works. There was a general belief that the Government or local council run all charities and that these organisations are interconnected, corrupt, and decisions are made by powerful individuals. People can become frightened to engage with a charity which is perceived as, part of a wider system, that they don't understand, but defines their life in terms of deciding whether they can work, where they can live, if they can afford to eat, or can travel. Some of our participants also believed charities to be a false 'front' to draw them in and trick them into saying something they don't mean, and what they say being used against them to take away or deny their immigration status.

When Asylum Seekers and Refugees do engage with charities, there are often unrealistic expectations. For those who do not think charities are government-run, they alternatively believe a rich benefactor runs them. This results in a belief that if the right person in the charity wanted to, they could help in any way without restriction. Not understanding how charities work has resulted in a feeling of betrayal when support has stopped, has been limited, or has disappeared. Understanding charities is important, otherwise expectations may be unrealistic and participants may feel exploited, cheated or a victim of corruption.

A further barrier to accessing support from charities was 'shame'. Some participants explained that they feel ashamed to engage with charities, as previously they had been a giver of charity, not a receiver.

Immigration Status and being 'Disqualified from Life'

Immigration status is very important in understanding the causes of, and everyday experiences of loneliness and isolation for Asylum Seekers and Refugees. In the most part, the more difficult people's immigration Status, the greater their needs. For example, you are not allowed to work if you are asylum seekers on section 4. You have no access to cash and you can only spend your allowance via an Aspen card to pay for food and sanitary items. Therefore, travelling by bus for example is not possible. Destitute or failed asylum are the most likely to be homeless, resulting in not having a contact address.

Not being able to work, not only causes poverty, but also low self-esteem and isolation.

Many people said that they lacked self-respect and that not being able to work was making them a 'beggar'. For those allowed to work, language barriers or non-English versions of qualification still disqualified people from working. They felt frustration that their hard-earned skills and experience were no longer valued. This adds to, not only a sense of isolation, but also a sense of disconnection from who you are/used to be (as described earlier). This form of isolated seemed to cause the most suffering amongst our group. Participants described themselves as becoming depressed or "having no enjoy". Some wished for freedom through work. This was why the idea of an escape in the form of a trip, being in nature, and having a break was so important to them.

A lack of agency because of immigration status results in feeling powerless. Some people felt lost with no understanding or perceived ability to change their lives. Most describe being bored, confined within a small home, not knowing anyone, not being part of a community, and not feeling financially able to socialise. You are effectively 'disqualified from life'.

Integration within the Wider Community

Integration was important to people. People showed a lot of interest in the culture of others within the group. This manifests in an interest in cooking, coffee, and horticulture. Participants have also shown an interest in learning about English culture. Due to a lack of confidence, at first, people wanted to learn small things such as food and local places. They want to learn these things so that 'we can learn to enjoy'. They want to integrate more so they can make the most of England and enjoy its culture.

Perceptions of English culture. Some of our participants felt that socialising is less important in English culture. They highlighted that in England people may not know their neighbours, do not see neighbours at Church and do not talk to strangers in Cafes. They stated that isolation must be harder for older English people, in some cases because children move away or people get divorced. Our participants felt that some of their own isolation was due to living within an English social culture that presents fewer opportunities for meeting people, alongside being unable to make friends through work and volunteering.

Attitudes towards interacting with 'White British' people. Although there was a feeling that British people can be uncomfortable interacting with non-natives, they also do not ask personal questions, as it is considered rude and invasive. Women reported that British men believe what they say, allowing women to talk more openly and not worrying about having to actively defend against false presumptions being ascribed to their motives. White British people are unlikely to be connected to others from an individual's ethnic background, so there is less worry they will tell others about their conversation.

There was also some concern about some aspects of British culture. Often, people with Middle Eastern and Arabic Muslim backgrounds perceive some people in the UK to be uncouth and/or have a 'debauched' interest in sex, drugs and alcohol. This is a particular concern for parents who want their children to integrate, but without exposure to these cultural facets. This perception reinforces the importance of discussing with participants their needs, as this demonstrates to BAME individuals that organisers are considering these sensitivities. Participants otherwise may have concerns of being in the vicinity of or expected to join in with activities like gambling (e.g. bingo) or drinking alcohol or talking to people dressed in a way that makes them uncomfortable.

Patriarchy and Group Dynamics

Issues around patriarchy can be problematic. The gender power dynamics in some families is a barrier for women, preventing them from socialising and engaging with the project. We found that some women who wanted to be involved found it difficult to get permission from their husbands. Some of these women have suggested husbands may be more likely to attend once their wives have attended and told them about the project, with the men often wanting to know if other males are involved. It may also be worth considering that gender segregated activities may be more accessible for those women who are restricted by their partners. We observed at one event that a woman brought her husband and during the voting process, he challenged her and became upset when she would not change her vote to match his. He then tried to prevent her attending the next event. Some women were prevented from being interviewed by their husbands.

For some women, British men can be easier to speak to than men from their own cultural background. Women will often speak to British men at greater length. British culture does not have the same code of behaviour governing communication between genders. Often women from Middle Eastern, Arabic and Muslim cultures feel that in speaking to men of their culture, they have to go to extended lengths to formulate what they say. This is to ensure they leave no space for the man to speculate or doubt the truth in what they say and distrust their motives.

Causes of Isolation

Most of the people who participated in this research identified as lonely and isolated.

Participants identified a lack of social opportunities as a main cause of loneliness. People felt unable to socialise because of a lack of money, poor health, and not knowing people in the local area. Many participants felt that they did not have a reason to leave their home other than to shop, although some did go for short walks. Nearly everyone wanted more social opportunities and to go somewhere pleasant to enjoy some social experiences, temporarily escaping their situation.

Confidence and low self-esteem is also a barrier to participation. Some participants have isolated themselves from social groups, ethnic groups, and churches because of feelings of shame about their immigration status and/or their health.

Asylum Seekers and Refugees are often disconnected from family. Our participants were generally isolated from family because their children were too old to be on their asylum claim so had stayed in the country of origin. Often, they felt guilt that they had abandoned them and feared for their safety. Some are unable to contact their children due to the financial costs of doing so. Others fear that contact would put their children in danger or undermine their claim by showing connections to their country of origin. Some participants had family who had claimed asylum in a different country. One man could not bring his wife as they were married in a rural area where Imams 'tied the knot' in an informal way meaning there was no paperwork. Others had friends and families who had died or had been killed.

Loneliness and isolation are not top priorities for Asylum Seekers and Refugees. Most participant's main concerns were poverty, transport, immigration status, housing and employment. The people we worked with had little energy to engage in provision that does not directly help them with these issues. Therefore, the requirements on people to access this and future projects, needs to be minimal and they need to be supported and encouraged to do so.

Lack of affordable transport is an issue. Asylum Seekers and Refugees have very little money. Those with immigration status 4 have no access to cash. One of the biggest barriers to having a fulfilling life is not having the ability to go somewhere, meet people and do something with the person you meet. Lack of transport is also a problem in bad weather. Many have medical problems, making walking difficult and they also feel the cold more than others do. Making transport available is necessary. Once bad weather or other obstacles interrupt regular attendance, without support people will lose confidence to continue attending.

Refugees and Asylum seekers are more likely to live in accommodation that perpetuates loneliness, isolation, and other mental health problems. Living in multi occupancy accommodation, many of our participants live with, who they describe as, 'unsympathetic young individuals' who make them feel oppressed and bullied. Our participants have described living with sex workers or people who have just been released from prison. In some instances, this results in people being scared to leave their room in case they encounter sex workers 'clients'. They are also more likely to make food in their rooms and feel pressured into cleaning the whole house. Participants said that no one listens if you ask for help from services, especially with issue related to housing.

Good practice in working with Asylum Seeker and Refugee groups

Patience and explaining the purpose of the project was very important. People needed time to consider and re-evaluate if it was in their interests to get involved. Some participants were initially aggressive to volunteers but by directly challenging them and explaining the project, those people decided to become involved later on. By taking a very personal approach that prioritised building relationships between participants, volunteers and staff, we overcame initial reservations about the project. As part of this approach, first contact with participants involved spending time with them, completely on their terms. No paperwork or intrusive questions. The next step was to listen to individuals and demonstrate the project valued their perspectives by interviewing them, usually in their homes. Group interactions revolved around activities and decision-making. Therefore, from the outset and throughout, we worked hard to define expectations of how people would be able to interact with the project and what they would receive back in return. This resulting in positive and enjoyable relationships between individuals and the organisation.

Social activities were integral to the project's success. Regular social activity facilitated MEC and IPC to build trust and raise confidence in the project, and the third sector as a whole. Participants became more aware of how their information was being used and over time became increasingly comfortable with this. Social activity allowed participants to make a clear association between the charities involved, volunteers, and staff. As the project progressed, the concept of charity became more tangible and enough trust was developed for people to participate without continuing apprehension. We also provided information and explanations at every event building up understanding of how charities worked and what to expect. During interviews, many people said that the activity itself was secondary in importance to socialising (though later in the project people became more interested in the 'What' as well as the 'Who').

Trust was further developed through older people's involvement in the decision-making process. For each social activity, we provided choice on the date, location and activity. We used a voting and veto system involving jars and pasta. As cohesion within the group developed, group discussions were used to make decisions. Later, confident members of the

group put forward their own ideas. We wanted to create ownership by providing choice so that the participants felt involved, valued, and active, as well as feeling they had a responsibility to attend because of their involvement in planning. In the interviews we conducted, lack of agency and responsibility was something often cited as a cause of depression.

Volunteers were helpful in building trust. Volunteers helped identify people for interview, gained trust and made participants feel comfortable on the day. Creating an environment in which participants were comfortable taking part in an interview was challenging. Most participants had previously experienced painful interviews, relating to their immigration status. Perceptions of an exploitative 'charitable' sector, based on some experiences in England but mainly in other countries, compounded this experience. Volunteers were an anchor for participants, helping to engender a feeling of belonging to the group. Volunteers also supported people to attend events.

Food is important. Many people struggle to buy food because of high levels of poverty within the group. Food became a social focus. Providing food to take home saved people money and acted as a reminder of the nice time they had.

Religion is important for many Asylum Seekers and Refugees and understanding people's needs can develop trust. Religious responsibilities affect which day's individuals can access provision. Monday to Thursday can be problematic. With Ramadan and prayer times, we found asking people about their needs enabled us to demonstrate that we valued their attendance. By taking this approach, you increase confidence that your invitation is genuine and you value their attendance. It means participants are less likely to worry about situations occurring that would make them uncomfortable. The main reasons people cited to self-exclude from activities were religious or medical. However, we often found that once engaged in an event, religious needs became more flexible. Increased flexibility demonstrated that participants felt more comfortable and that those emotional obstacles were being addressed.

Segregation for activities involving physical exercise is necessary. Any activity involving wearing sports clothes, sweating, and energetic movement may need to be gender segregated to ensure participants feel comfortable. Individuals may only feel comfortable attending if someone they trust has assured them the activity will be in a single gender group and not visible to members of the opposite gender. This was true to some extent for men too, though discussed less.

We also found a **mix of genders for non-sport based activities made events engaging**, with the advantage of higher numbers to achieve a social critical mass. In our experience, it was important to have both genders at events. However, it was not important for them to do the same activity; parallel activities like socialising over coffee and cooking in the same space worked well.

Our participants did not naturally gravitate to others with similar backgrounds. **People preferred to group with others who had shared interests and education levels**, rather than a shared faith, language or country of origin.

The project overcame language barriers by using a variety of methods. Activities were not rushed. Speaking slowly, in short sentences and repeating in the same words, was important. We used visual aids such as photos, string, sandcastles, words printed with a representative image to reinforce their meaning and we mimed how to do the activity as well. This worked because we created an atmosphere where we took time communicating, and we showed no embarrassment or awkwardness in our failed attempts to communicate.

A steep learning curve for those running sessions is to set a tone of behaviour by not having hang-ups about communication. Participants lacked confidence to break down language barriers, therefore emotional support was essential in encouraging people to try to communicate. Some people were in the habit of shutting down conversations because they were used to others getting frustrated if they continued to communicate without success.

Participants preferred communicating in person rather than receiving phone calls. Participants explained an unease with phone calls as they felt that low sound quality, and the absence of body language and ability to lip-read, significantly hindered understanding. Receiving letters, rather than a phone call, affords people time to understand the information and ask friends and acquaintances to translate. Researchers engaged in translating private letters, during this project. Some participants keep letters with them when they are out, in case they have an opportunity for translation. Although participants were against phone calls, the project found that calls were necessary to keep in contact with participants and keep people feeling engaged. Ringing them was difficult at times but essential because the low confidence of the group meant they needed reassurance and re-inviting to feel welcome.

People often translated for each other but we found this to be problematic. Cultural norms constrain the way some people interact with members of the opposite gender. Only polite conversation is permitted, resulting in an absence of depth to a conversation. This should be taken into consideration when organising events where people translate for one another. A Dari and Punjabi speaking woman may not feel comfortable translating for a man who only speaks Dari.

Volunteering is an unfamiliar concept. In countries without minimum wage and without strict financial laws, simple interactions often involve small amounts of money so you may pay someone for helping out. In addition, with large families and potentially no free medical care or pensions, people focus on helping family and friends, not on strangers, because people they know need their support. In one interview, a participant said, “Why would they help a stranger when they have family”? In countries of origin, volunteering may have been an activity of the elite. Therefore, it may take time and reflection to realise the benefits to themselves in terms of opportunity to socialise, meeting people, gaining experience, practicing English, feeling useful and busy, and other benefits. The group is very varied so perceptions of volunteering differ a lot. Individuals may also believe they are not allowed to volunteer or not have the paper work required.

Conducting the Research

Building trust was the first and most important step. Working hard to build trust in our organisation over time eventually led to us gaining enough rapport to be able to interview people. Often interviewee’s previous experience of interviews was with the Home Office, or with other charities who interviewed them and then did not have any further engagement.

Interviews in people’s homes worked well. The purpose of the home interviews was to provide an empowering, confidence-building environment. This enabled participants to share their views and experiences in more depth and in a less filtered way. It also enabled interviewees to disengage from the interview by making a drink or getting some food if they became upset. Their role as host enabled them to feel in control of the situation. Due to a strong cultural aversion related to experiences in the asylum process, we did not use Dictaphones.

Translators seemed to work well. Although some cultural issues (described above) came to the fore, generally volunteers would make best use of their languages or second language and English to translate. They were not trained translators, and in some cases, had limited English, so we provided training for them to make this easier.

Artistic methods were very useful in overcoming language barriers. At one event, IPC and MEC used sand on the beach to make a physical diagram. Laminates of logos, activities and string were used, along with sandcastles to represent charities and service provision. Stones were used to represent participants, with walls and ditches denoting barriers for the participants accessing services. People were asked to contribute to the model after its symbolism was explained. They were asked to tell us what the barriers and ditches could represent and how they thought they could be bridged or removed. This enabled the group to work together discussing issues and building understanding in a fun way.

Completing CMF forms was challenging. We knew participants would struggle with the language used on the forms and may object to sharing personal information due to a belief that charities are the Government. For these reasons, we did not complete forms until the third event of the project. This allowed us to build trust first. Completing the forms often took one to one support and a professional translator. We needed an ESOL teacher to lead the session and make the English understandable enough for the volunteers to be able to translate it. It was problematic, as the group had to go at the pace of the slowest person. As we completed the forms, as a group there was no privacy, which may have changed the way people answered some questions. Though we anticipated cultural discomfort in explaining questions to do with sexuality and gender at birth, it did not cause outward discomfort. The process took two to three hours with most of the forms completed in full. Several of the group left afterwards and all found the process difficult. They were accepting of it because it framed as 'ensuring all people benefit from Ageing Better'.

Plan for Phase 2 of the Project

Amongst our participants, there was a desire to engage more widely with the project and the programme, demonstrating that some people had overcome the barrier of distrust. With support, they wanted to engage with Ageing Better and for the project to continue. However, they did not want it to be 'boring', nor the same activity and place, week after week. This creates a dilemma. To engage people who are the most isolated requires regularity of place and time, something supportive and not challenging. Yet those who are engaged in the project and have become confident desire more variety. We suggest the following with the aim of providing both routine and variety for the group.

Activities

Continuing the work in Phase 1 a weekly "cafe" session will be held, the basis of the session will be for some of the participants to plan and prepare a shared meal, however other activities will also take place as directed by the group building upon ideas identified in phase 1 i.e. creative arts, board games, walking. The purpose of the weekly session is to provide a regular venue, a place for routines to develop and for ideas to be explored and confidence to grow.

The weekly sessions will also provide the venue and time for plans to be made for future trips and for monthly variety activities with the aim of providing variety around stability and routine and developing a sense of ownership for participants.

Summary of learning and phase 2 plan

Threads that will run throughout phase 2 are:

- One to one support and advocacy - phase 1 demonstrated the demand for this as many participants engaged in the project required complicated interventions with no clear referral route or process.
- Recruitment of others into the project – this may happen by word of mouth but there is also the need to seek out those who are most isolated using the methods previously used for phase 1.
- Integration into Ageing Better services – as discussed in phase 1, participants had a strong desire to integrate but there were numerous barriers to them achieving this. However, towards the end of phase 1 some participants had started to explore some opportunities. Phase 2 would continue to support participants to learn more about Ageing Better and the range of services/ activities available to them. They would be accompanied to activities and encouraged to think about the possibility of hosting activities.

Sustainability

The approach taken throughout phase 1 has been one of building relationships based on learning, honesty and developing trust. With the intention of building self-esteem and confidence, participants have been involved in decision-making and then supported to access events and activities and this theme will continue into phase 2. The foundations for sustainability have already been laid and will continue to be by increasing participants' involvement and developing a sense of ownership. Phase 2 will also promote opportunities for learning, for skill development and integration with Ageing Better, which will all support individuals to make sustainable life changes