

Coproduction and consultation

An adviser chatting to a member of the public during an EU Londoners pop up event

Key information

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Contents

[Introduction](#)

[What methods to use](#)

[Methods of engagement](#)

[Further resources](#)

Introduction

Local authorities taking part in the Design Lab have benefited from activities that facilitate active engagement with people seeking asylum in designing and shaping services.

This process of collating ideas and lived experiences of service users is called consultation and can have the following benefits:

- **Improving services.** Gathering perspectives of people applying for asylum can challenge a team's assumptions about their diverse needs and daily realities. It can help test and shape the design of new services, improving outcomes for integration.
- **Agency and advocacy.** Linking people seeking asylum with decisionmakers can empower their sense of voice and agency at a time when many are experiencing difficult accommodation conditions and uncertainty over their futures. Formalised consultation working groups can also help create advocacy channels to help boroughs report issues and concerns to the Home Office and Clearsprings Ready Homes.
- **Outreach and trust.** Creating open and structured spaces for people seeking asylum to voice their experiences, and to drive meaningful change in local authority practice, can help instil deeper trust in council staff and institutions. These can help people seeking asylum understand the role of a local authority, show that their experiences are valued, and increase their likelihood of engaging the council to access support.

Key lessons in this section

1. Consider carefully how to engage a plurality of voices, including people seeking asylum of different backgrounds and abilities, and those who may lack trust in the local authority.
2. Identify strategies to embed the perspectives of people with lived experiences into service design through formal working groups, in parallel to wider consultation exercises.

1. What methods to use

There is no set method of ‘best practice’ for engaging in consultation or co-production work and guidance will vary: based on the level of detail needed to inform a project design, based on the diversity and dispersal of an asylum-seeking population within a borough, and based on the financial and staff capacity restraints of a team. However, the following examples of methodologies reflect existing work underway across local authorities in the Design Lab.

Surveys

- Surveys can be useful for gaining short, cost-effective snapshots of opinion and experiences from people seeking asylum. The methodology can also be useful to evaluate or gather feedback on a local authority resource or service.
- Many people seeking asylum may also not be comfortable sharing views in a group setting (e.g. within focus groups), but would be more open to share views on an anonymised, one-to-one basis.
- However, surveys of people seeking asylum have their weaknesses and should be used with caution. Issues include language barriers (even if translated into key languages, some groups will be excluded) and issues of digital exclusion. It can also be hard, particularly through anonymised surveys, to understand how closely a survey sample reflects the wider asylum-seeking population within a borough and whether it captures views across different generations, nationalities, genders and other demographic groups.
- It is easy for surveys to be shared around in one group, or with people who are more trusting of the local authority, while not reaching other sections of opinion.
- Surveys also tended to produce less depth and detail for informing services.
- The local authority team responsible should ideally look to establish in-person support to help participants complete questionnaires. This can include workshops (e.g. in contingency hotels) with interpreters on-site, and staff to log responses and explain questions. Short, facilitated surveys exercises can also be integrated into early help assessments, outreach or drop-ins and disseminated through staff.

Focus groups and workshops

- Focus groups and workshops can gain more detailed information and insights on the experiences and needs of service users, particularly to inform the creation of new services and resources, generating and sense-testing ideas.
- It can be comparatively easier, compared to surveys, to pick up information on the approximate demographics, nationality and skills of focus group participants to spot whose voices are and are not being captured.
- Participants in focus groups can be asked if they would like to be re-contacted for future consultation work. This can be helpful to receive feedback on co-produced resources, or to identify interested participants to take part in formalised ‘lived experience’ forums.

Focus group or workshop approaches can take different forms, depending on the participants involved and the purpose of the project. Projects may wish to combine these methods to engage people with a range of perspectives:

1. Teams may wish to use open ended questions, or even to allow participants themselves to steer a discussion with minimal prompts. This can capture the immediate priorities and concerns of participants and challenge the assumptions of a local authority.

2. Alternatively, consider methods for engaging those who have lower trust in the local authority, or where there may be lower trust in other residents and hotel staff. This could involve some sections of a discussion where participants are asked to respond to questions individually, through a combination of written exercises and staff members collating private interview responses.

While people seeking asylum cannot be paid for their participation, it is important to compensate attendees for their contribution. This should include covering travel expenses. Organisers may also wish to consider other forms of compensation such as providing food at discussions, or a thank you/launch event for participants.

Lived experience forums

- Many London local authorities – namely those with Borough of Sanctuary status – have formalised exercises of consultation into a regularly convening forum, where people with lived experience of asylum (and sometimes other refugees and migrants) are invited to input on integration strategies.
- This approach can help mainstream consultation processes into the design of new services, building in guidance and suggestions from people with lived experience.
- For local authorities seeking to establish a forum, it can help to attract interest through offering training to volunteers. This can develop confidence and relevant skills for participation such as public speaking and community organising, but can also provide vocational skills for use on a CV that will improve employability for volunteers.
- Boroughs in the Design Lab noted that participants within their forums often became valuable ‘go to’ change agents for future asylum work, for example in spreading awareness of entitlements and services, and even in setting up and delivering new initiatives such as social connection activities.
- It should be noted that such groups are a helpful starting point for engaging in coproduction work, but that this should be conducted in parallel to other consultation exercises that collate a wider diversity of voices and views.

Lambeth runs a ‘Sanctuary Board’ comprising volunteers with lived experience of forced migration. As part of their [Borough of Sanctuary](#) strategy, the board convenes regularly to generate ideas and provide feedback on plans for resettlement initiatives. An overview of their model is below:

Lambeth - Sanctuary Board model

1. **Engagement:** Chats with sanctuary seekers, Ideas, Feedback to Leads
2. **Leads:** Feedback to Lambeth Sanctuary Services, Solutions, Sub-meetings
3. **Lambeth Sanctuary Services:** Delivery, Coordination, Funding, Mapping, Documentation, Board and Forum meetings, Communications

A case study from Barking and Dagenham may also provide some useful insight:

Barking and Dagenham - Consultation to produce a 'helping pack'

Barking and Dagenham has created an induction ‘helping pack’ for asylum seeking residents (translated into different languages) that compiles information on accessing services, settling in to the borough, and finding spaces for social connection.

This has been produced through a consultation with people seeking asylum through a series of focus groups, and informed through engagement with a range of council departments and local VCS organisations. A local civil society organisation was commissioned through a small grant to deliver the research.

Results:

- Eight focus group workshops were held with people currently or recently in the asylum system, to inform the content of the pack.
- Groups were loosely moderated to allow participants broad scope to share their views and experiences.
- Discussions were held in a range of community settings, including faith and community centres, to capture voices from different sites of dispersal accommodation.
- Senior local authority executives were invited to observe and learn directly from the experiences of participants.
- Focus group participants will be invited to join a new Voice and Influence group, engaging people with lived experience of the asylum system in future service delivery.
- The pack has been translated into six languages, with participants from the focus groups involved in translating the content.
- A review, involving further focus groups, will be held in six months' time to monitor and evaluate their uptake and usefulness.

Key reflections and learnings:

- The experience of engaging in a consultation exercise emphasised the importance of 'testing and re-testing assumptions', to ensure local authority services and resources successfully understand and engage the needs of asylum-seeking residents.

2. Methods of engagement

Bringing in the voices of people with lived experience of the asylum system takes concerted effort to build trust and relationships, and to directly reach out and engage a range of perspectives. Importantly, continually test your research design to **consider whose voices are perhaps *not* being heard**.

Aim to allow different ways for participants to get involved and make their voices heard, and to make consultations welcoming and accessible for people of different ages, abilities, languages and cultures.

Acknowledge that many may lack trust in official authority figures and consider how consultation exercises can inform people seeking asylum about their safe, anonymous engagement.

VCS or in-house

Boroughs in the Design Lab had utilised a number of partnerships to carry out consultation and coproduction work. Many have commissioned VCS organisations, including those led by staff with lived experience as refugees and people seeking asylum, who were felt to have more trusted relationships with local asylum-seeking residents.

Others had conducted research in-house. This was particularly relevant to boroughs with larger hotel populations – since local authority staff were able to negotiate access to contingency hotels with Clearsprings Ready Homes to conduct research on-site.

Accessibility

Local authority staff should consider at a research design phase how to ensure that consultation exercises are as accessible and welcoming as possible, to capture a diversity of views and different experiences:

- Ideally, arrange for multiple interpreters to be present on-site proficient in the most common languages spoken.
- Obtain data of the hotel population statistics, to check if you are reaching a sufficiently diverse sample. It is unlikely that a consultation can be made entirely representative of the asylum-seeking population; but aim to reach at least the main asylum-seeking nationalities and a broad mix of demographics, such as age groups.
- Utilise trusted spaces such as community or faith centres – ideally in a variety of settings, through VCS partnerships. If participants are to be asked questions about their experiences with Clearsprings or the Home Office, consider using anonymised individual written answers or spaces near to but outside of a contingency hotel.
- Consider hosting repeat sessions at different times of day, to encourage participation from families and people who are working or volunteering.
- Bring in volunteers with lived experience and of different genders to moderate sessions. This can help create a trusting atmosphere to share different perspectives.

Spreading awareness

- Word of mouth is often the most effective way of spreading awareness about consultations with prospective participants. People seeking asylum are more likely to feel encouraged to share their experiences from others they know and trust.
- Hotel management at contingency accommodation can also help to share information on the consultations and, if required, welcoming in local authority staff. However, it is important, if involving these stakeholders, to be clear with participants about the purpose of your research and to outline that contributions will not be shared with accommodation providers.

Building trust and interest

- Emphasise that participants will have meaningful input in driving change through their participation in consultation or coproduction exercises. Be transparent and set expectations around how their views will shape services help people seeking asylum to feel their voices are being recognised.
- Emphasising opportunities to develop transferable skills can encourage interest to participate from people seeking asylum, particularly in forums and in co-production exercises that involve volunteer contributions. Examples included offering to provide an employment reference to participants when they begin looking for work.

Feedback loops – use what you learn, turn it into action, disseminate

- Most importantly, local authorities engaging in consultations should ensure to provide clear and transparent feedback loops to signpost the impact that people seeking asylum have in shaping services around their needs and interests.
- This can have a cumulative effect. As more residents observe the power of their voice to influence change, appetite and confidence to engage in this work will grow.

3. Further resources

- Refugee Action have a helpful [webpage with practical advice and guidance for developing co-production](#) and the role of ‘Experts by Experience’ within your organisation, including on training for volunteers.
- The Joint IDP Profiling Service, a technical support organisation that helps governments collect information about displaced populations, has developed a helpful [toolkit for producing a focus group discussion guide](#).
- Migration Yorkshire has a [toolkit for refugee participation](#) with further details and useful considerations for research consultations.

[Previous](#)

[Next](#)

[Back to table of contents](#)