

SCRUTINY REVIEW: Engaging with Hard to Reach Communities

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WHO WE ARE:

Afrikcare was set up in 2006 as a Befriending service to the Sierra Leonean (West African) Community many of whom were Refugees fleeing the 15 year brutal civil war in Sierra Leone between 1990 and 2005. Immigration advice and support to enable Refugees settle in Haringey and neighbouring Boroughs were originally provided by Sierra Leone Family Welfare Association. The project's objectives were achieved successfully but was time limited and ended in 2007. Afrikcare then took over and continued to provide Befriending, advocacy and culture specific counselling services for this group of people. We are not funded by the council, we relied on members voluntary contributions because we support people living in Hackney, Islington, Enfield as and when needed. Determined to make sure people from our community do not suffer in silence, we were later able to identify more older Sierra Leonean people in need of support and others of West African origin, who were found to be isolated, lonely, some of whom have lost contact with families and friends and lack understanding of the social system.

HOW WE DID IT:

Many of the people we found were through:

- 'word-of-mouth' – talking to other compatriots
- network with other groups in the South East/West London – asking if they know who has arrived and whether they live in Haringey or surrounding boroughs
- attending social functions and events
- attend local Churches/Faith groups or,
- by hearing one of the Country's ethnic language spoken in local markets and shops.

We try to first establish a dialogue and rapport, to build confidence. (Many Africans are friendly and tend to trust all and sundry, however, because of the decades of war which has affected some parts of that continent, there is lack of trust , suspicion and apathy amongst those who manage to escape to a safe place. Therefore, we use certain skills based on our culture to attract these people in order to befriend and find out what there issues are, in order to signpost to other services if need be or provide direct support to the individual or families.

BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION:

Many Older African people tend not to seek assistance because they are not aware that they could benefit from services.

- Services are usually labelled as BME, but when accessed found that they are either for Caribbean or Asian people
- Perceptions that Africans are economic migrants therefore isolate themselves from mainstream services.
- Some older African people living here felt because they have not contributed to tax and national insurance they are not entitled to benefits
- Older family members who are invited to come over as childminders and later become ordinary resident do not understand the social system , and when they fall ill or there is a family rift, they are immediately send back home because families here cannot cope with looking after them. They have limited time to engage with the Council if they are full-time childminders.
- The stigma of HIV/AIDS prevent many African sufferers not to discuss/disclose their issues, but secretly attend private clinics
- BME classification does not always provide a solution for all Africans because of the different customs/cultures/language and values.

WHERE IMPROVEMENTS CAN BE MADE

We recognise that there are limited resources, however, effort should be made to reach out to all communities. This will enable the local authority to learn and understand that we are all unique in different ways as well as contribute to the welfare of our individual communities.

- A recognition/celebrating the diversity of the Boroughs Communities by organising events for and with the different community groups.
- Advertise and promote the services available, eg. Pensions, Disability Allowance, Community Transport, Mental Health Awareness; Dementia, Sicklecell, Prostate Cancer, etc; etc at community events.
- Support the development of culture specific services
- Encourage more partnership/consortia working to manage resources
- Engage with more African led churches as they provide a vehicle for reaching out to those who would not engage with mainstream.

- Ensure that older parents who are child minders do not become vulnerable to abuse.

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