

Case study

Languages and culture at work



Communication across cultures ensures a better passage for the homeless of London

The Passage Day Centre is an open access drop-in centre in Victoria for homeless people. Handling as many as 250 clients a day and with up to 100 staff, along with many volunteers, it's the largest operation of its kind in Europe. Staff aim to meet and assess all new clients within their first couple of visits to decide which are the right services for them. If English isn't their first language, this can make things more difficult for them.



While most clients are of British descent, significant numbers are migrants or refugees coming from East Africa and European Union accession countries such as Bulgaria, Latvia and Romania. Problems range from drugs and alcohol abuse as well as family breakdown, and in the last couple of years in particular, loss of work.

Interpreting helps to assess and support clients' needs

Targeting interpreting is used to communicate effectively with clients who are not comfortable speaking English, and to put them at ease during the crucial assessment process. Deputy Team Leader of the Assessment and Advice Team Claire O'Driscoll says, "It's a challenge to deal with the increasing number of homeless clients who do not speak English – for example many from Eritrea only speak Tigrinya or Amharic. We use the services of Language Connect. Their interpreter service enables us to accurately assess and support our clients' needs – treating everyone equally and helping us find the best way to help."

Some members of the team at the day centre also have skills to deal with clients from overseas. A Polish-speaking volunteer works regularly at the day centre and another voluntary worker who speaks French, Spanish and Italian has helped out with written and spoken communications. A freelance interpreter comes in every Tuesday who speaks Polish and Russian – languages spoken commonly in countries such as Bulgaria, Latvia and Romania – to assist with an information session group run for clients from the Accession 10 countries. Key information on housing, employment and other aspects of life in the UK has also been translated into leaflets for clients passing through.

Learning about cultures makes a huge difference

The support that the Passage offers goes further still. A volunteer works with the Education Employment and Training Team, helping clients to work and live in a society which predominantly speaks a language foreign to them. But it's just as important that the team at Passage is able to understand the culture that their clients come from. "It's easy to misinterpret aspects such as demeanour, body language, tone of voice," says Claire. "Learning about the cultures of our clients makes a huge difference, and helps to ensure that they all receive a fair chance."



Links

Passage Day Centre www.passage.org.uk
Language Connect www.languageconnect.net

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