

THE HARBOUR PROJECT

For Swindon Refugees and Asylum Seekers
Registered Charity Number: 1097227

FOCUS GROUP ON VISITOR SATISFACTION MARCH 2015

SUMMARY

The main aims were:

- to examine the extent to which The Harbour meets the needs and expectations of its visitors (asylum seekers and refugees);
- to identify any areas needing improvement;
- and to consider future development.

A subsidiary aim was to test the usefulness of Focus Groups as one way of understanding visitors' thoughts and feelings.

Fourteen visitors participated in the Group facilitated by volunteer and visitor, Maryjoyce Njenga. Using questions agreed by the Trustees, the Group discussed their experience of facilities and services provided by The Harbour, what they particularly liked or thought could be improved, and ideas for possible future developments. They also expressed their feelings about being part of The Harbour community.

There was overwhelming, and often effusive, praise for the work of The Harbour Project team and the impact of The Harbour on visitors' lives. Specific examples ranged from signposting and help with immigration paperwork, to English classes, to housing, to job-seeking, to schools and to emotional support. Several comments indicated that The Harbour had increased visitors' confidence in integrating into the wider Swindon community, and also revealed their positive attitude to the town and its people. None of the participants voiced any criticism or raised any concerns about any aspect of The Harbour's work, or how it functioned.

Regarding possible future development, topics raised were: enhanced communication of The Harbour 'brand' to potential visitors; more opportunities for visitors to help The Harbour e.g. in its fundraising; introduction of debating/discussion fora where visitors could express their views about topics of mutual interest e.g. world events, philosophy etc.; and extended opening hours. There was also a request for a separate Focus Group to explore in more depth how visitors would feel about a hypothetical situation in which The Harbour did not exist.

The follow-up meeting at which participants considered preliminary findings was held on 31 March 2015.

AIMS

The principal aim was to gather evidence of visitors' thoughts about The Harbour, both to inform its development and to provide a measure of visitor satisfaction levels for inclusion in its annual report to funders. Unlike a tick-box survey, the Focus Group format would seem to offer a way for visitors to express their feelings and to talk about personal and sensitive issues in their own words. It also enables consideration of some of the 'softer', less tangible aspects of The Harbour's work that sit alongside practical help with immigration or benefits procedures, advice on opening bank accounts, paying bills etc.

A second aim was to explore the suitability of Focus Groups for exploring visitors' attitudes.

THE FOCUS GROUP

The purpose and format of the Focus Group was approved by The Harbour Trustees, who also agreed the questions to be used to stimulate discussion (Annex 1). Forms inviting visitors to participate were available and drawn to visitors' attention in The Harbour drop-in room during the two weeks before the event. Translation facilities were offered. Although visitors self-selected, care was taken to oversee that the mix of the Focus Group approximated to the demographic of Harbour visitors in terms of single men; family men; and women.

Participants signed in and were told that although notes would be taken during the meeting, they would refer only to random 'identifier numbers' rather than named individuals – a form of Chatham House rule - so no attribution of remarks to named people was made. The Facilitator explained the purpose of the meeting and emphasised that participants were invited to give both negative and positive answers to express their thoughts, and that the Harbour wished to know of anything that needed improving. No member of The Harbour staff was present at the Group meeting.

To enable free-flowing discussion, topics were addressed as they arose, in some cases in a different order from that of Annex 1. This is reflected in the following section where topics and responses are grouped together to reflect relevant points made throughout the meeting.

Fourteen visitors participated; note-takers were a mixture of established and new volunteers, all with an understanding of the Project's aims and objectives; no staff were involved in discussions. Notes were taken in longhand; see Annex 2. It was agreed that the names of participating visitors would not be published to the general public, but will remain available on file at The Harbour. Before the meeting ended, participants were invited to raise any issues that had not been covered or to make any additional comments.

Coffee, tea and biscuits were provided during the meeting which commenced at 11am and concluded at c. 1pm. One participant had to leave at approximately 12 noon. The note-takers met briefly after the meeting for a preliminary analysis.

FINDINGS

Q1 addressed initial awareness and contact with The Harbour.

Several people said their initial awareness was via their housing provider, e.g. Clearsprings. Others had been signposted from Cardiff Refugee Council, and one woman had been personally told about The Harbour by a friend who was already attending.

In later discussion, one of the single men man said that for the first 4-5 months he was in Swindon he only met other people socially at The Harbour, apart from that he was alone in his room. A woman who was pregnant when she first arrived spoke of coming 'everyday' at first, initially seeking housing and help with English.

Later discussion considered whether more might be done to reach newcomers. There was evidence that at least one potential visitor had not yet found their way to The Harbour despite being in Swindon for 4 years. One participant noted that the name 'Harbour' did not on its own immediately convey what the drop-in centre is about, especially to those with little English.

Discussion led to Q2 and Q4 (and indirectly Q9) which generated many examples of why visitors first came to The Harbour and what services they used initially and subsequently.

A woman spoke of the critical importance of provision of baby clothes, and clothes for herself. A family man spoke of early help in English classes and the importance of being able to bring young children to be looked after during them. The use of computing facilities is important, including for help with college work (as cited by younger single men). Also highlighted was signposting to schools and GPs and help with accessing benefits and job seeking. One of the single men said that he felt that being signposted from The Harbour, e.g. to a GP, was helpful because The Harbour is respected in Swindon and recognised as helping people in genuine need.

Courses (English, and more recently sewing, keep fit etc.) were all highly valued. Not surprisingly, some of the family men and women highlighted the value of help with signposting to schools and with the social events, trips and celebrations e.g. the Christmas party. One family man spoke of help with sorting out household bills. Several participants spoke of The Harbour being a place where they could relax and make friends rather than being 'bored', and of its warmth (literally). One family man identified the helpfulness of meeting other people from his country of origin. Some of the single men drew attention to help with access to information to help their college studies/homework.

One of the single men highlighted the 'emotional' support offered by The Harbour. Others described The Harbour as 'like home' where people tried to help with any problem.

Case history

A married man answered these questions by outlining his experience. He had arrived from Oxford with his wife and two children and was homeless. His wife was facing potential deportation. The Harbour helped him process immigration paperwork to the Home Office, and the deportation was cancelled. He attended English classes at The Harbour during which time his children were cared for 'downstairs'. He is now working in Swindon and supporting his family in their Council flat.

Q3 invited people to describe their thoughts today compared with when they first arrived

A woman described how she had arrived not speaking English but now felt at home and one of the single men said he had initially known nothing about the UK but had learnt a lot about the country at The Harbour, as well as practical help for example about college work and applying for jobs.

Another single man said he had observed that when some people first arrive at The Harbour they may be 'aggressive and shouting' but that after coming for a while they 'calmed down'. This same man spoke of the importance of knowing that confidentiality is respected at The Harbour.

During this discussion, one man said he had been surprised by how nice people were. Several participants commented on the friendliness and tolerance they found, and of their positive attitude to people in Swindon /the English: 'very kind and tolerant'.

Q7 asked for views of what The Harbour does well

All responses were very positive. Common themes were: help with money issues, job seeking, advice on contacting solicitors, schools, doctors etc. Not surprisingly some single men highlighted the sports and keep fit activities.

Case history

One of the family men said The Harbour was 'kind in all respects', and that he did not see anything where Harbour is not helping. 'It covers all aspects psychological, social, medical etc...' and he praised the cooperative atmosphere in which everyone helps each other.

Q5 and Q6 were about what people would do/feel if Harbour did not exist

One of the single men said that this was 'very hard' and that without The Harbour he would be 'in space'. Another, explaining earlier how important Harbour was to him, said he (would be) 'scared if no Harbour'. Another participant asked that discussion on this topic be deferred for a separate meeting as it was such a big question.

Q8 invited ideas about improvement

Responses were in four areas:

- i) enhance advertisement of The Harbour to potential visitors (as described above)
- ii) extend opening hours to 3pm - this was supported by the majority
- iii) consider ways in which visitors could help The Harbour, e.g. in its fundraising
- iv) some sort of structured way to enable visitors to debate or discuss topics – philosophical, political/social and provide a space where people could express their views - a sort of more 'educational/social' activity beyond sport.

There was also a view that it would be good if The Harbour could reach wider groups in society, but it was recognised that this is beyond its remit.

No additional topics were raised for discussion.

CAVEATS

It was not practical to record every comment in full; many points were repeated in slightly different words during the discussion. This report attempts to capture all of the main points. Throughout there was an overwhelming consensus of views: no comments were disputed or contradicted. Participants self-selected and varied in their experience of The Harbour and in their fluency in English.

Annex 1 The Questions

Q1 - How did you hear about Harbour; and was what you heard accurate/helpful or not?

Q2 - When you first came to Harbour what was it for?

Q3 - How did you feel when you first visited; and do you feel differently now? If so, how?

Q4 – Why do you come to Harbour? (Ask specifically about English, money management, housing etc.)

Q5 - What would you do if Harbour wasn't here? (Both for legal, practical help etc. and socialising aspects)

Q6 - How would you feel if Harbour wasn't here?

Q7 - What does Harbour do well? (And what would you like to see more of?)

Q8 - Are there any activities or ideas you have that could make Harbour better? (To encourage specific ideas)

Q9 – Does coming to Harbour put you in touch with other visitors? (I.e. to probe whether Harbour makes you feel happier and better equipped to integrate? etc.)

Q10 - Is there anything else you'd like to say that hasn't already been discussed today?

Annex 2 - Contributors

Facilitator Maryjoyce Njenga

Note-takers Nina Stimson, Sarah Clements, Monica Potter