

**What's Life Like? Listening to SRS Clients**

A report on the findings of this listening exercise prepared by theClient Partnership Sub-Committee, on behalf of Suffolk Refugee Support

February 2022

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1. **Overview:**

The purpose of the Client Partnership Sub-committee is to lead and help Suffolk Refugee Support in the development of its partnership with clients, and to enable consultation, engagement and co-design of its future provision.

Life as a refugee living in Suffolk has its own specific hurdles and difficulties and the Client Partnership Sub-Committee set out to research what our current clients perceive these to be.

This report provides evaluation of using a tailored feedback form to gather the opinions of clients in order to discover what life is currently like for Suffolk refugees and enable SRS to have a better understanding of how best to support them.

**1.1 Executive Summary:**

SRS staff interviewed 92 clients from a wide range of different countries. They were asked to rate how they feel about 10 areas of their lives; Language, Money, Employment, Health & Fitness, Family, Housing, Immigration, Friends, Life in the UK and Education. The Wheel of Life proforma used to support these conversations is shown in Appendix 2. Not all the 92 clients interviewed answered every question in the survey.

People were asked to rate each topic on a scale from ‘very happy’ to ‘very unhappy’. After consideration, it was decided to group all those ticking ‘ok’ along with those who ticked ‘unhappy’ and ‘very unhappy’ as the general experience of SRS staff and volunteers is that clients have a tendency to overstate levels of personal happiness when asked for feedback. People’s responses were also analysed by gender.

Additional comments by participants were also recorded along with a question about whether the person knew of other agencies or places for support and advice other than SRS.

Of the 10 areas the following 6 emerged as those with the most obvious issues to address for our clients:

**Language:**

69% of total participants ticked *ok/unhappy/v unhappy*, of these the gender ratio was 63% male/70% female. This was the area which gathered the most detailed comments including ‘I need more English classes’ and ‘I need help with English reading/writing/language. SRS will need to consider how these needs are best met by SRS and by partners.

**Money**:

66% of total participants ticked *ok/unhappy/v unhappy*, of these the gender ratio was 76% male/60% female. Analysis of the results could suggest disillusionment with people’s lifestyle swap (student of law to food delivery driver, for example) and also that people of restricted status have restricted money. SRS’s area of influence in this area is to support people, where possible, to gain paid employment to improve their financial situation.

**Employment**:

65% of participants ticked *ok/unhappy/v unhappy*, of these the gender ratio was 80% male/56% female. Many more male clients than female clients recognise this as an issue. These figures indicate there are barriers to gaining employment that SRS could support clients with. One key barrier, based on SRS’s experience, is a lack of skills in speaking/writing/reading English, but more research is needed to identify other barriers. Additionally, the skills and qualifications clients gained in their home countries are not recognised by many UK organisations.

**Health & Fitness**:

44% of participants ticked *ok/unhappy/v unhappy*, of these the gender ratio was 31% male/52% female. Accessing GPs is seen as an issue by many clients exacerbated by the difficulties they experience with language. The increased complexity of the health system through the Covid pandemic e.g. triaging through telephone consultations, may also be contributing here.

**Family**:

34% of participants ticked *ok/unhappy/v unhappy,* of these the gender ratio was 63% male/20% female. The proportion of male clients indicating unhappiness with ‘family’ is very concerning. The gender split is more obvious here than with any of the other categories. This will require further investigation.

**Where clients look for support:**

When clients were asked if they know where they can get support from, SRS came up frequently; 24 of our clients cited SRS as the place to go ‘where they can get support’. This reveals there may be issues regarding an overdependence on SRS, and also the need to signpost people to other providers, locally and nationally.

**Other areas of life which were considered: Housing/Immigration/Friends/Life in the UK/Education**:

Only 39% or below of participants ticked *ok/unhappy/v unhappy* in these remaining 4 areas and the gender ratio was almost evenly split on each category, with no specific areas of concern highlighted by the survey or comments.

**1.2 Summary of recommendations**:

* **Language**

Language in terms of reading/writing/speech is a key issue for SRS clients. Their abilities in this area affect how they respond to most of the other categories in the feedback survey. Therefore, good language acquisition could be viewed as the building block on which happiness in many of the other areas depends. SRS already addresses these building blocks; through its ESOL provision, International Women’s Group (IWG), Homework Club, CV assistance etc. We need to make sure this continues to be a focus in the future.

Key areas for further consideration and development by SRS:

* Are our current English language classes accessible enough and in the right format?
* Do our clients know what English language classes are available to them and who provides them i.e. either by SRS or externally?
* Does SRS effectively signpost people to other English provision?
* **Money**

Although SRS has little influence in terms of government policy regarding the benefits available to refugee and asylum seekers, it is able to help clients improve their financial position by supporting them into paid employment. SRS may wish to invest more in this area of support linked to assisting people with their English skills and access to education.

* **Employment**

As well as considering whether it wishes to invest more in supporting people into employment (see Money above), based on SRS’s experience, one of the key barriers to gaining employment will be peoples’ difficulties with reading/writing/speaking English. SRS should review and ensure effective and dynamic links between its employment service and the help provided to improve peoples’ skills in English.

There may be other barriers, but this survey cannot tell us what they are. Identifying other barriers will need some further investigation.

* **Health & Fitness**

Accessing a GP is a key issue identified by people. SRS can best address this by raising the issue with local health commissioners, GPs and/or Healthwatch Suffolk.

* **Family**

Based on this survey, ‘family’ issues appear to be of greater concerns to men than women. It is difficult to draw firm conclusions from the data because the term ‘family’ in this context is ambiguous. It could equally be interpreted as the family living with them here in the UK or the family they have left behind. More research into this would be useful.

* **Client’s reliance on SRS**

The responses given to the question as to where else people seek support indicate that, although SRS is regarded as friendly and trustworthy, it is clearly seen as ‘the first port of call’ whatever the problem. Signposting to other providers and encouraging people to seek help beyond SRS may be areas to be strengthened.

Questions SRS may wish to consider:

* How do we foster independence and self-reliance in our clients while still being supportive and approachable?
* Should there be a cut-off point? A point when clients have enough skills and knowledge to seek answers themselves.
* In future should SRS be reviewing those who come back to them frequently for advice and evaluating if it is time to implement a withdrawal plan?

**1.3 Lessons learnt for future listening/feedback exercises:**

* Although this approach creates additional work for SRS staff, volunteers and the Client Partnership Sub-Committee, it has revealed some important information and messages and should be continued periodically.
* The methodology can be used to cover fewer areas of life to gain more detailed, focussed insights into people’s lives
* More time should be allowed for interviews to address the limitations of language and to understand the person’s situation and context better.
* There should be more focus given to one-to-one rather than group interviews.
* Written guidance should be provided for interviewers, including clarity about the phrasing and language of the questions used.
* When analysing the feedback, care should be taken not to make cultural assumptions given the diverse ethnic backgrounds represented.

1. **Introduction:**

The Client Partnership Sub-Committee has an action plan with several streams of work aimed at developing SRS’s engagement with and learning from its clients. This research is the first stage of establishing periodic formal listening exercises as one of the channels by which a better understanding of clients’ needs is developed.

1. **The main aims of the research:**

* To identify a methodology for finding out the views of SRS clients about different aspects of their life
* To identify how this approach can be further developed for use in the future
* To further develop a culture in SRS where feedback is valued and actively reviewed and used
* To inform the shape of future SRS services to better meet the changing needs of asylum seekers and refugees

1. **Methodology:**

Following discussion in the Sub-Committee, we decided on a 4-week programme of interviews where clients would complete an *SRS Client Feedback Form* [see Appendix 1]. This period of consultation was referred to as *Client Listening Weeks*. Our feedback form was developed from the categories used in the *Wheel of Life* [see Appendix 2] and translated in Kurdish and Arabic. The time scale and dates were set in order to provide a snapshot of clients’ issues and problems at a specific moment so our findings would reflect the present and particular needs of Suffolk refugees.

The 4-week feedback gathering period was followed by an evaluation of the survey responses by the Client Partnership Sub-Committee.

Over the two-week period a total of 92 Suffolk-based refugees completed the *SRS Client Feedback Form*. The clients surveyed originated from a variety of countries; Syria, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Tunisia, China, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, Morocco and Albania. The surveyed group included 32 males, 55 females, and 5 unspecified and their ages ranged between 17 and 60.

Filling in the feedback forms was facilitated by a range of SRS staff and volunteers and took place in a variety of settings, including; the Drop In Service, International Women’s Group (IWG), ESOL classes and youth groups. All staff and volunteers were briefed before collecting feedback and the contents and purpose of the survey were explained to SRS clients using an agreed script [see Appendix 3].

In our considerations of the responses to each category in the feedback we decided to group all those ticking ‘ok’ along with those who ticked ‘unhappy’ and ‘very unhappy’ as the general experience of SRS is that clients have a general tendency when asked for feedback to overstate levels of personal happiness.

1. **Research Findings:**

Orange = Female

Yellow = Male

* 1. **Language**

More English Language classes are definitely desired by a majority of our clients, with 70% of participants ticking ‘ok’ or worse in relation to this issue.

In by far the most overwhelming majority of additional points made by our clients 14 commented ‘I need more English classes’ with 3 further clients describing the issue as ‘I need better English language’. 6 other clients stated ‘I need help with English reading / writing/language’ and 4 more said ‘I need an interpreter/Language Line’.

This is certainly an area that needs further consideration and development by SRS:

* Are our current English language classes accessible enough and in the right format?
* Do our clients know what English language classes are available to them and who should be providing it, either by the SRS or externally?
* Does SRS effectively signpost people to other English provision?
  1. **Money**

In the feedback men ticked more *ok/unhappy/v unhappy* boxes than women; 76% compared to 59%. However, interestingly, more women ticked the boxes *unhappy/v unhappy*; 24% versus 21%. In the additional comments section of the form 6 of our clients noted ‘need more money’ as an issue.

Analysis of the results could suggest disillusionment with the lifestyle swap (doctor to taxi driver, for example) and also that people of restricted status have restricted money.

Although SRS has little influence in terms of government policy regarding the benefits available to refugee and asylum seekers, it is able to help clients improve their financial position by supporting them into paid employment. SRS may wish to invest more in this area of support linked to supporting people with their English skills and access to education.

* 1. **Employment**

Many more men than women recognise this as an issue. While 65% of all participants ticked *ok/unhappy/v unhappy,* 80% of men felt ‘ok’ or worse regarding employment compared to 56% of the women. In the comments section of the form 4 clients stated they would like ‘support with getting a better job/a job’.

These results could be reflecting gender differences in regard to providing for the household and the pressure this creates, but it may also indicate there are barriers to gaining employment that SRS could support clients with.

Based on SRS’s experience, one of the key barriers will be peoples’ difficulties with reading/writing/speaking English. There may be others, but this survey cannot tell us what they are. Identifying other barriers will need some further investigation.

* 1. **Health and Fitness**

Our research revealed that more females than males expressed dissatisfaction in this area, with 52% of females ticking *ok/unhappy/v unhappy* compared to 31% of males. From SRS’s experience, women have better knowledge about health and fitness through our gender specific activities/ information sessions and therefore are potentially more conscious of these issues.

Accessing GPs is seen as an issue, especially as, for our clients, this is exacerbated by the difficulties they experience with language. If we also add to this the inherent complexities of negotiating the system and the recent implementationof triaging via telephone/online only consultations (instead of the usual face-to-face appointments) created by Covid/lockdown many of our clients report health to be an important issue.

In the comments section of the feedback form 4 clients noted ‘accessing the doctor’ as a significant point. This is a problem that needs to be taken to local health commissioners, GPs and/or Healthwatch Suffolk.

**5.5 Family**

The results in this category are worrying. Men certainly appear to be unhappier than women; 80% of women ticked *v happy* contrasting to 37% of men. More men travel to the UK alone so the findings could also reflect how unaccompanied asylum seekers miss their families.

In the comments section at the end of the feedback form 5 clients stated they were ‘sad to be away from family/limited contact’ as an issue. However, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions from the data because the term ‘family’ in this context is ambiguous. It could equally be interpreted as the family living with them here in the UK or the family they have left behind. More research into this would be useful.

* 1. **Housing**

39% of participants ticked *ok/unhappy/v unhappy*, of these the gender ratio was 44% male/36% female. This is a bit surprising as our housing officer is extremely busy, it would be worthwhile investigating what patterns of housing need the housing officer is discovering. Having a question framed in terms of “housing” rather than “accommodation” may not have led to a complete understanding of the issues being investigated.

* 1. **Immigration**

The results in relation to this issue revealed a close consensus for male and female clients, with only a 1-2% difference in responses. It was also interesting, and perhaps surprising, to note that over 60% of all participants ticked *v happy*.

However, in the comment section at the end of the form the survey returned 8 issues of being worried about ‘no home office decision’.

* 1. **Friendships**

This is an issue where women appear to be more dissatisfied than men, with 33% of women ticking *ok/unhappy/v unhappy* compared to 29% of men. This could be because women are more likely to be alone at home or looking after the children. The feedback received also raised questions around whether participants in the survey know what was meant by ‘friends’ in this context. In discussion, for example, some clients expressed that they felt their ESOL teacher was their friend. The language used may need to be refined in future surveys.

Once again, due to ambiguities around language and understanding, it is difficult to evaluate the responses accurately.

* 1. **Life in the UK**

22% of participants ticked ok/unhappy/v unhappy, of these the gender ratio was 24% male/20% female. The high levels of satisfaction expressed are likely to be heavily influenced by people’s comparison of their current lives with what are often dangerous or life-threatening situations they have left behind. From SRS’s experience, another factor is the tendency for clients to overstate their satisfaction.

There was occasional confusion as to the meaning of the phrase “Life in the UK”, due to some client’s familiarity with the English proficiency test of the same name. Staff and volunteers clarified that this question was related to living in the UK as opposed to the English test.

* 1. **Education**

35% of participants ticked ok/unhappy/v unhappy. Of the respondents in the ok/unhappy/v unhappy category, the gender ratio was 35% male and 34% female.

This area was focused on people’s view on their children’s education. It is reassuring that 65% of people were very happy with their children’s schools and education.

**5.11 Where clients look for support:**

As well as listening to people’s views about specific areas of their lives, they were also asked where they might go for help and support. From this feedback, SRS is clearly seen as the first port of call, whatever the problem.

When clients were asked if they know where they can get further support, SRS came up frequently; 24 of our clients wrote SRS as the place to go ‘where they can get support’. This SRS dependency trend, noticed previously by staff, was compounded by lockdown and is evidenced in the feedback comments our clients wrote. SRS was cited for a range of issues from, ‘English classes’, ‘immigration’, ‘help with ID papers’ and ‘decision from HO’ to ‘help with benefits’, and ‘not seeing family’. This means the support SRS provides continues to be seen as friendly and trustworthy by our clients.

However, this also reveals there may be an issue regarding signposting to other providers. Knowing what is available locally and nationally is important, though not understanding the system is normal for those new to this country and/or with a language barrier.

One of SRS’s Strategic Aims is *‘to work in ways that lead to SRS’ service users moving into independence from SRS services’*. For the future, it is important that clients are encouraged to seek help beyond SRS support them into independence for the long term.

**Questions which SRS may wish to consider:**

* How do we foster independence and self-reliance in our clients while still being supportive and approachable?
* Should there be a cut-off point? A point when clients have enough knowledge and language skills to seek answers themselves.
* In future should SRS be reviewing those who come back to them frequently for advice and evaluating if it is time to implement a withdrawal plan?

1. **Strengths and weaknesses of the methodology**

It was agreed that while completing and evaluating client feedback forms creates extra work for SRS staff, volunteers and the Client Partnership Sub-Committee, it was still a valuable resource and should be continued periodically. The main areas of learning about the methodology are:

* 1. **The number of life areas covered:**

In the future we may want to cover a smaller group of issues, especially as this research has allowed us to isolate which areas are the most pressing for our current clients. It would also be interesting to repeat the survey perhaps every 2 years to see which areas change, in terms of priority, over time.

**6.2 Gaining people’s trust to give feedback:**

In the UK we are used to completing regular feedback forms and reviewing a service However, this may not be the same for the majority of our clients. Our clients, given their experience before reaching SRS, may feel reluctant to criticise the help and support they are receiving. Clients may not want to express preferences and opinions due to cultural politeness and their previous personal consequences. Therefore, in future, clients need to be made aware that this feedback is being gathered in a way that is free from judgement; their opinions will never be used against them. In future, we may need to consider feedback being gathered by an impartial outside agency. However, such an approach would need to address how clients will respond when being asked questions by someone they do not know or necessarily trust. Knowledge of the issues facing refugees and asylum seekers would also need to be addressed.

**6.3 The limitations of language:**

Recognising the limitations of the language used in the feedback forms is also important. For example, ‘Ok’ in Hong Kong means ‘good’. Is ‘ok’, as a term for our clients to choose, too vague? Similarly, ‘friends’ and ‘family’ are open to different interpretations. In future, category terms used in the client feedback form need to be clearly explained in the context of the survey and what SRS are trying to find out. The terms in the feedback form were translated into Kurdish and Arabic but this means many of our other clients may not have been fully aware of the specific meaning of words used. Perhaps, if resources allow, future feedback would be better collected as part of a one-to-one interview. This would mean each topic covered and word used could be fully explained in order to record a narrative account of the challenges faced by individual clients.

**6.4 Understanding a person’s situation/context:**

We need to be clearer on what the individual client’s situation/context is in order to evaluate the findings accurately. For example, regarding employment; do the client’s responses mean they are unhappy with their current employment or are they unhappy because they are not working? If they are happy, are they happily employed or happy to not be working?

**6.5 Guidance for the listeners:**

The role of the listeners needs to be clear in terms of the boundaries and expectations. Staff and volunteers collecting client feedback need to be rigorous about the contextual factors at play. For example, the client’s willingness to please the interviewer, group-think (in a class group or friendship group clients tend to tick the same answers), following the lead (i.e. being led by topics covered in IWG sessions or English lessons) or swayed by the opinion of another client or teacher. It is hard to negate the influence of the opinions and delivery of others. For future listening exercises, it would be useful to have written guidance for listeners which addresses these issues. Because this survey was created to give us a snapshot in time we need to consider how current learning and topics impact on the feedback of people who are not native speakers of the language.

**6.6 Not making assumptions about feedback:**

Finally, when reviewing the data, we need to remember there is a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds represented and we need to be wary of using the data to reinforce preconceived ideas or making cultural assumptions based on the responses.

1. **Acknowledgements**

Ultimately this research would not have been possible without the contributions of all the clients who participated.

We would also like to acknowledge the staff and volunteers who assisted clients with accessing, understanding, translating and completing the surveys.

**Appendix 1: Client Feedback Form**

A picture containing text, clipart

Description automatically generated

SRS client feedback

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Date | Advice Worker | Client name (initials only) | Age range (ie 20’s, 30’s etc) | Nationality | Gender |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| KEY: | A yellow smiley face  Description automatically generated with low confidence | Shape  Description automatically generated with medium confidence | A picture containing clipart, lamp  Description automatically generated | A picture containing clipart  Description automatically generated |
| Very Happy | OK - Partly / sometimes | No—Unhappy | Very Unhappy/ scared |

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| How do you feel in areas of your life? | A yellow smiley face  Description automatically generated with low confidence | Shape  Description automatically generated with medium confidence | A picture containing clipart, lamp  Description automatically generated | A picture containing clipart  Description automatically generated |
| Health and fitness  ته ندروستی  الصحه واللياقه |  |  |  |  |
| Housing  نيشته جێبوون السكن |  |  |  |  |
| Education  فێرکردن التعليم |  |  |  |  |
| Employment  ئيش العمل |  |  |  |  |
| Family  خێزان العائله |  |  |  |  |

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| How do you feel in areas of your life? | A yellow smiley face  Description automatically generated with low confidence | Shape  Description automatically generated with medium confidence | A picture containing clipart, lamp  Description automatically generated | A picture containing clipart  Description automatically generated |
| Friends  براده ران االصدقاء |  |  |  |  |
| Life in the UK  ژيان له به ريتانيا  الحياة في بريطانيا |  |  |  |  |
| Language  زمان لغه |  |  |  |  |
| Money  پاره |  |  |  |  |
| Immigration  کۆچ کردن |  |  |  |  |

For SRS staff member/ volunteer to complete (in cases where client ticked very unhappy)

please check what support they believe they need?

Where they believe they could get support from for these areas?

*Once complete please stick in Ellie’s post tray—thanks!*

**Appendix 2: Wheel of Life**

A picture containing diagram

Description automatically generated

**Appendix 3:** **Agreed script to explain the survey to clients.**

**What are the main problems that you face in your life here in the UK?**

* Language
  + How does lack of language affect you – ie ability to integrate into society, apply for jobs, confidence, everyday life – is there one specific thing?
* Housing
  + Are you concerned about money to pay for housing
  + Uncertainty over being able to stay in your current home
  + Do you worry about being homeless
    - Have you been homeless before in the UK?
* Money
  + Not having enough
  + Being able to access the right benefits you are entitled to
  + Having a different standard of living to back home, ie not being able to provide for family as would like
* Employment
  + Not being able to work in the UK (Asylum seekers)
  + Your qualifications not being recognised in the UK
  + Is it worry about how you will support yourself financially
  + Do you feel prejudiced against when applying for jobs
* Isolation
  + Do you feel able to go in public
  + Do you exercise
  + Staff member – does this person come across ok
  + Are you lonely?
  + Do you have a person you can chat to when you are feeling sad/ worried?
* Health concerns
  + Do you have a health concern you are worried about right now
  + Are you registered with a GP
  + Do you feel able and happy to book an appointment and visit the GP
  + Do you understand the advice the GP offers you
* Immigration
  + Asylum seekers – is it hard to settle when you are worried whether you will be able to stay
  + Do you understand what your rights are?
* Education
  + Is/Are you/r child/ren happy in school
  + Are you happy with their learning
  + Is there anything about the school you don’t like?
  + Do you feel confident to speak to the child’s teacher
  + Do you understand the communication you get from the school
  + Would you like to do more study
* Being along way away from family
  + Do you feel supported to apply for family reunification?
  + How does this make you feel?

**How can SRS support you and your family better?**

Loneliness – particular groups or activities or befriending service for clients. Better integration within local community group activities.

Language – are the classes at the wrong time/ day/ level? Would you prefer more informal learning?

Benefits – would you like classes on the benefit system? Would you like lessons on how to fill out forms online? Is IT an issue? Would you like some communal computers for clients to use?

Employment – are there any other employment services you would like support with?

Health – can SRS liaise more closely with the GP? Can we run particular exercise classes or information sessions at SRS?

Immigration – would you like information sessions at the beginning of your rights? What to expect?

Education – SRS to work with schools more closely for translated info. To provide more information about the school system and how it works in the UK?

Groups – we provide many different groups and activities within SRS and try to cater for everyone – are there any groups you would like to see us running, such as: gardening, painting, club for men. What times / location etc would mean that you could attend?