

Form filling project

Volunteers working in partnership to improve local public services

NEWHAM in east London is one of the most ethnically diverse boroughs in the UK, with over 100 languages spoken locally. Through consultation with local people the Community Links' What If...? team found that many claimants filling in benefit application forms were finding the process difficult. Around 70% of forms were incorrectly completed on the first attempt, resulting in delays of up to 8 weeks before benefits could be paid.

Community Links' What If...? team saw that a resolution of the issues could quite simply be developed if the language skills present in the local community were harnessed. Community Links' What If...? team recruited, trained and supervised volunteer translators to work alongside JobCentre staff. Many of these were from refugee communities living in Newham.

Multi-lingual volunteers deliver on-site help for customers to complete benefit claim forms.

The aim was to speed up the processing of benefits, give advisers more time with clients to spend on job search, and reduce the burden on local agencies providing form-filling advice. The idea was initially tested in partnership with Newham's four JobCentres and then extended to cover the three Social Security offices.



Impact

Over the three years of the scheme around 2,000 people have received support from volunteers; the number of forms returned due to errors has reduced to less than one percent. The number of queries each week about non-payment or late payment of benefits has reduced by 80 per cent. JobCentre staff have saved 239 days by not filling out claim forms. During February 2004 Newham JobCentres achieved the highest job entry rate in the country.

A total of 160 people, who speak over 30 community languages between them, have volunteered for the project, for a total of over 3,000 hours. Around a third of the volunteers have gone into employment – seven have taken up employment offers with the local JobCentres.

JobCentre Advisors have seen at first hand how volunteering can help people into employment and now refer their clients to the project.

The project has shown how refugees, recent arrivals and other volunteers have made an important contribution to the system for the benefit of themselves and others in the local community.



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