

'It's a humanitarian catastrophe, which, if not addressed humanely, will have a devastating impact on individuals and communities across the world for generations to come'



The tide of humanity

It's been described as a tragedy of biblical proportions. The plight of people seeking asylum in Europe has dominated the news for months. Faced with the biggest refugee crisis since World War Two, Europe's governments have appeared woefully unprepared. But what about the impact on those most likely to work with those seeking sanctuary? PSW asked BASW members for their views on the refugee crisis, what it means for social work and how the profession can meet the challenges.

Has the quantity of work with refugees and asylum seekers increased in your area?

Based on 443 responses to our survey, it can be concluded that social work with refugees and asylum seekers is increasing. More than four out of ten (42 per cent) said the quantity of work with this client group had increased in their area. A similar proportion (42.6 per cent) indicated they had worked with refugees and asylum seekers in the last year.

Have you been adequately trained to work with refugees and asylum seekers?

Despite the increase in work, the vast majority – 85.6 per cent – did not feel adequately trained to meet the needs of the group. One said: "With over 15 years experience in adult social work I have never received specific training with refugees and asylum seekers." Another claimed there was an "expectation that social workers will carry out human rights assessments and understand legislation around asylum applications without training".

Some felt ill-equipped to deal with the trauma experienced by those fleeing violence and war-torn lands. One said: "There are many psychological issues that require support in addition to practical issues". Another said: "As a mental health social worker, further training in conflict, trauma and mental health would be very useful for a more detailed understanding of post traumatic stress disorder."

Cultural needs was an area in which many felt ill-equipped: "I have been working with East European and African people and feel very uncertain of my practice at times with them," said one. Another claimed it was a case of "self learning" in the absence of specific training while another called for interpreters to be "social work trained". A respondent spoke of having "excellent" training in the past, but complained they had not received any follow-up sessions to update on changing legislation.

Do you have access to sufficient resources to support refugees and asylum seekers?

Lack of resource was an issue for 86.6 per cent of respondents, with insufficient funds to

pay interpreters highlighted by many. "Cost of translation services are high and are therefore not readily available," said one.

Another maintained the waiting list for translators was too long, adding: "Asylum seekers and refugees who require interpreters are disadvantaged as interventions cannot be as effective when not conducted via a first language." Finding "gender appropriate" translators for women who have suffered sexual assaults was also raised as a problem.

Many respondents spoke of their concern at meeting the extra demand on services at a time when local authorities are facing cutbacks.

"In the current political climate we are struggling to find sufficient resources to support the existing population," said one. Another said: "I am currently exploring how my local authority will respond to the increasing demand, balanced against no additional funding to do so."

One respondent warned "this places an undue burden and inevitably means fewer resources for other families who are also in need".

Have you ever felt you had to compromise social work values and ethics when working with refugees and asylum seekers?

One of the most troubling findings of the survey was the relatively high number of people who felt they had been forced to compromise social work values and ethics when working with refugees and asylum seekers. Out of 408 respondents to this question, 157 – or 38.4 per cent – said they had experienced this.

One said: “When I worked as an Independent Review Officer I was ashamed that we put young asylum seekers in bed and breakfast accommodation.” Another spoke of having to send a young person back to their country of origin due to failed asylum knowing that they would obtain worse outcomes.

Having to house people in substandard accommodation was highlighted by one respondent while another spoke of people affected by HIV not being supported due to budget cuts. One respondent felt conducting age assessments was tantamount to “collaborating with the Home Office” on deportation. Another complained: “I was trained to make age assessments in a comprehensive and legal way but am obliged to complete them in under an hour in a police interview room.”

The dilemma of supporting people who had ‘no recourse to the public purse’ was highlighted by several social workers, with one admitting to “fiddling the books” to ensure services were provided.

One social worker described working with asylum seekers and refugees as “one of the most rewarding experiences of my career”, but added oppressive and discriminatory policies made it difficult to balance “personal values against your professional boundaries as an employee within public services”.

A student social worker hoped they would be able to “still uphold our values and ethics when working with anyone”.

What one thing would most improve social work with refugees and asylum seekers?

Unsurprisingly, the single thing respondents felt would most improve social work with refugees and asylum seekers was better training, with 23.4 per cent out of 337 citing this.

Better funding came next with 7.7 per cent indicating this as most important, followed by access to interpreters (7.1 per cent).

One called for “government investment and a genuine desire to help people”, while another wanted “clear policy in dealing with refugees and asylum seekers”. Nationally set procedures and policies to prevent delay and uniformity of provision was stressed by one social worker.

Better multi-agency working and a more co-ordinated approach between local authorities

‘WITH OVER 15 YEARS EXPERIENCE IN ADULT SOCIAL WORK I HAVE NEVER RECEIVED SPECIFIC TRAINING WITH REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS’

would help, said others. However, one respondent called for “a crackdown on economic migrants pretending they are refugees and under 16”.

What is the most important issue for BASW to speak out about in relation to refugees and asylum seekers?

Asked what was the most important issue for BASW to speak out on in relation to refugees and asylum seekers, a humanitarian approach came top with 27.2 per cent citing this. Next was lack of resource (15.7 per cent) followed by discrimination and racism (eight per cent) and training (7.1 per cent).

Responses emphasising the humanity of the crisis were many. One wrote: “Every human life has value (not just in theory) irrespective of where people are coming from, therefore we need to protect human beings who need support for survival and a safe and decent life.” Another said: “I think it is important that we all recognise that refugees and asylum seekers are individual human beings with their own stories and that they have things to offer as well as needs to be fulfilled.”

One respondent called for evidence to be gathered on “the failure of local authorities to discharge their statutory duty towards this vulnerable group”. Another called on BASW to “defend the right of people to seek asylum as governed by international treaties and to position the social work profession as in the front line to support refugees”.

Challenging “commonly held stereotypes” of

refugees and asylum seekers was considered important by many. “Human rights first – the politics can come later”, said one. “Refugees are a humanitarian issue,” said another, calling on BASW to “work against the portrayal of refugees as people who will use up resources without giving back”. Others, however, stressed the need for resources. One called BASW to query “how we cope with this human disaster when local authority budgets are cut and we are already working with many posts vacant”.

Another warned: “We risk creating even greater divisions and feeding into the nationalist agenda if we do not make the case for an investment in public services alongside this well-meaning call to help those fleeing.”

What’s your view on the current crisis?

Asked for their view on the current refugee crisis, words such as “tragic”, “complex”, “sad” and “mess” regularly came up.

One respondent said: “These people are fleeing for their lives and clearly need help. However, there are still significant issues in this country around race and religion.” Another said: “I feel we will be overwhelmed and there are a lot of people in urgent need of government attention in this country already.”

One respondent added: “The image of the three-year-old’s dead body saw a shift in the Government’s reaction to the public in wanting to help these desperate people. I think this and the decisions to appease public demand are reactionary and will ultimately put an enormous demand on an already stretched service and the country will not cope.”

Others, however, believe the crisis cannot be ignored. Failure to support refugees could make the problem worse with a rise in illegal trafficking increasing the risk to the most vulnerable, warned one, adding: “Yes, we are in austerity. However, comparing our budget cuts to these peoples’ lives is condescending, simplistic, and frankly inhumane.”

Another simply stressed: “It is a humanitarian catastrophe which, if not addressed humanely, will have a devastating impact on individuals and communities across the world for generations to come.”

“Nobody leaves their country without a compelling reason,” was one social worker’s view. “We need to accept that we are all in this together.”

- More than 500,000 refugees and asylum seekers arrived in Europe in the first eight months of this year
- A record 156,000 people crossed the EU borders in August
- This contrasts with 280,000 for the whole of 2014
- More than 2,800 people have died attempting to cross the Mediterranean into Europe
- The main countries of origin of those arriving in Calais are Syria, Sudan, Eritrea and Afghanistan. Other nationalities include Senegal, Central African Republic, Niger, Mali and Sri Lanka