

SEMINAR REPORT

Issues discussed and next steps

Multi-agency seminar on client casework databases – **'Lessons learnt and best practice for the future'**

King's College London, 17th July 2002 9.30am -2pm

Funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation as part of their ICAR led project 'Making better use of existing information and data about refugees and people seeking asylum'



The purpose of this document is to highlight the main issues discussed during the seminar and to make some suggestions as to what next. A full write up of the presentations made during the seminar are also available from ICAR – 'Seminar Report- Presentations' (see below)

This document is divided into 3 parts:

- 1) Background to the seminar and the ICAR partnership project 'Making better use of existing information and data about refugees and asylum seekers' funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF)
- 2) Issues discussed
- 3) Next steps

1) Background to the seminar and the ICAR partnership project 'Making better use of existing information and data about refugees and asylum seekers' funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation

- The idea for the seminar came from discussions that ICAR had with refugee agencies as part of its wider project about how to make better use of the information and data produced by refugee agencies. It became clear that the development of client casework databases was an area of work common to many and that there would be merit in bringing agencies together so that they could discuss lessons learnt, share best practice and begin to assess the possibilities for joint working.
- The seminar was guided by the aims of the wider project :
 - Increasing understanding within the sector about the value of systematically recorded data and information, particularly about the value of collecting client casework information and data for use in service development and policy and advocacy work
 - Encouraging joint working between agencies in the area of data and information collection, recording and use so that expertise is shared and the evidence base to inform advocacy and policy work is substantially increased.
- ICAR deliberately sought to involve in the seminar agencies at different stages in the process of database development and with differing levels of resources and needs, so as

to gain a full picture of work in this area. Agencies attended from across Britain from national refugee agencies to local Refugee Community Organisations. The number of attendees was only limited by the need to keep the seminar manageable.

2) Issues discussed

- **Key decisions in the process of client casework database design and implementation**
 - What data and information to collect, why, and for what purpose?
 - for internal needs e.g. to review service provision, for use in advocacy and/or research
 - to fulfil external demands e.g. reporting requirements to funders or for Quality Mark
 - Fast versus slow development; short term needs versus long-term goals
 - What software to use?
 - Generic package e.g. Access
 - bespoke system
 - Who will the users be?
 - How many users will the system need to cope with?
 - Is there a need for an intranet system for use across multiple sites?
 - What will the role of volunteers be? Is it a good use of time and resources to train them to use the system? Can you be sure that using volunteers complies with data protection issues?
 - What other systems might you want your database to be linked with? e.g. UK Advice FinderUse, Royal Mail Gazeteer
 - What other agencies to co-operate with?
 - to minimise duplication of effort on software development
 - to standardise aspects of data collection
- **Key stages in the process of client casework database design and implementation**
 - Drawing up a user specification
 - Implementing interim measures e.g. the use of hard-copy forms, excel spreadsheets
 - Choice of software
 - Writing of a technical specification
 - Technical development
 - Repeated testing of a pilot system
 - Roll out and staff training including a user manual with clear ethical guidelines
 - Evaluation
- **Challenges**
 - Selling the idea to time-pressed front-line staff
 - Encouraging all staff, both collectors of the data and information e.g. caseworkers AND users of the data and information e.g. 2nd tier staff to engage creatively with the system
 - Skilling up of staff, as fielding help requests is time-consuming
 - caseworkers to enter data
 - 2nd tier staff to retrieve the collected data and information for use in their work
 - Ensuring data integrity

- Helping caseworker to cope with the changes an electronic system means for their interaction with clients
 - Structuring data
 - whether each client should have a record of their own, or whether clients are to be logged collectively by asylum claim
 - how to structure names as many clients have several
 - what data definitions and categories to use e.g. for lists of languages, ethnic groups
 - Ensuring client consent, confidentiality and data protection standards are met
 - Ensuring sufficient resources for continual investment and development
 - Ensuring good relations with funders and policy makers so that you are alerted in good time or involved in discussing changes in their reporting requirements
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- **Impact on the organisation**
 - Ability to provide a more effective service as data and information about clients is more readily available –
 - Services can be tailored according to evidence of need,
 - Strategic planning and budgeting can be more easily undertaken
 - Staff performance and workload can be more easily reviewed
 - Data and information can be easily used in advocacy and policy work, for reports to Funders and for supporting funding bids
 - Higher level of IT dependency but also of IT proficiency
 - Changes relationship with clients: more impersonal or more professional?
 - Helps frontline and 2nd tier workers to understand and appreciate each others roles better
 - Ability to talk to policy makers/funders with extra authority knowing that there is readily available data to support your reasoning
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- **Tips**
 - Utilise project management skills so that the aims, methods, outcomes and resource issues of the project are clearly defined and can be well monitored. Build in risk management
 - Conduct extensive staff consultation to research their needs and to capitalise on their expertise e.g.
 - Involve caseworkers in the design process as they understand the procedure best
 - Involve 2nd tier staff early on as they know what data and information they need for their work
 - Make sure developers document their coding procedures very precisely so as not to be dependent on them for further development/alterations
 - Build in for change in the technical structure –e.g. develop a modular database
 - Include mandatory fields so that data integrity issues are minimalised
 - If at all possible introduce the system at the beginning of the financial year to avoid the problem of data collation from two different systems
 - Build database maintenance into funding bids/project plans

- Build into the project for extra demand on IT support staff

- **Joint working**
 - Joint working can take place at several levels:
 - Exchanging information about who has what data and information
 - Giving advice and sharing lessons learnt
 - Sharing data and information to increase scope
 - Combining data and information for a common purpose

 - Benefits of joint working
 - Greater knowledge about what evidence exists
 - Non-duplication of time and resources
 - Single issue organisations can provide organisations that work on several issues with more detailed data and information. Conversely the broader range of data and information from organisations that work on several issues can help contextualise the data and information of the single issue organisation
 - Ability to present a united evidence-based front to policy makers and or funders

 - Key issue for joint working
 - Need for an agreement at the outset clearly detailing ethical issues, defining the roles and responsibilities of each organisation and specifying the types of outputs expected and how and by whom they can be used.

3) Next Steps

ICAR is keen to do what it can to facilitate the sharing of best practice and joint working in client casework database development. Participants were asked to consider what help they most needed and what role ICAR could play in this. The following suggestions were made:

- Develop guidelines on inter-agency data and information sharing, particularly with regard to Intellectual Property Rights (IPR)
- Develop guidelines on data definition for use across the sector with a view in the long-terms to conceptual harmonisation e.g. ethnicity, country of origin, stage of asylum process, racial harassment
- Survey existing databases to establish software, platforms, developers used
- Survey existing databases to establish how reconcilable they are in terms of collating data and information e.g. on service needs of women etc
- Develop guidelines to help organisations needing to fulfil Quality Mark requirements
- Develop guidelines on data protection and client confidentiality
- Develop guidelines on use of case studies in advocacy work
- Build partnerships between those organisations at similar stages in the process of database development so as to save duplication of effort
- Encourage joint working in terms of information reporting between those with NASS contracts – this area was recognised as being the role of the Inter-agency Co-ordination Team.

- Set up a forum on the use of data and information (e.g. for press and/or information officers) so that best practice in different parts of the UK is more easily known about
- Take a lead on assisting the process of making better use of systematically collected data and information as evidence for policy-making and advocacy work by agencies acting alone and in partnership with others.

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