



# Steps Towards Co-production



## Gateway Portsmouth Project- An Analysis of Focus Group Findings 2014



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Portsmouth  
CITY COUNCIL

Uta Schmidtblacher, Marshada Chowdhury, Graham Lister

# 1. Background to this research

This report summarises focus group findings conducted as part of the Gateway Project, an initiative to help migrants break down barriers to health, education and employment, smoothing their path to integration. Findings are based on 6 focus groups that were conducted in Portsmouth during a two-year European Funded programme from 2012 – 2014.

The research explored the experiences of migrant women participating in the project in terms of their personal development, English skills, the impact on their health and wellbeing, their families and the impact the overall project has had on their journey to integration. Gateway Portsmouth offered a varied training programme with ESOL-focused learning, opportunities and services to support the migrant experience for third-country migrant women who have been in the UK for less than 10 years to support them on a journey towards an improved quality of life and wellbeing in the UK.

## The Gateway Programme explained

The Gateway project has worked with approximately 100 women to-date who participated in a number of different courses. The courses offered were the core Advisor Training leading to a qualification enabling Advisors to deliver advice and guidance within their communities, specialist training in education, employment and health and a range of other workshops focusing on chronic disease management and issues relevant to the needs of the migrant communities. Central to this was the provision of Community English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) where women had the opportunity to enhance and build on their levels of conversational English to support their overall learning and development.

## 2. Methodology: how we did it

### Baseline data to measure changes

This research involved both a quantitative and qualitative element. To gather quantitative data, the experiences of integration and quality of life as perceived by the participants were captured at the beginning of the project and towards the end of the project through an experiential survey (annex 1 & 2). This provides the baseline data to measure changes through the project and benefits perceived by the individuals. This information also feeds into the Social Return on Investment Tool (SROI) that has been created to measure the social value created by the project.

### Diverse participants

The qualitative element focuses on these experiences in more depth by giving participants the opportunity to talk about their experiences and discuss them in focus groups. As the group of participants is very diverse and personal circumstances differ between individuals, the focus groups would provide the ideal platform for participants to discuss and share as a group their range of experiences and changes during the course of the project. The implementation of the focus group research complements the quantitative research and illustrates points that cannot be captured in numbers.

### Points that cannot be captured in numbers

As a strategy for enhancing participation, focus groups of participants with similar experiences were led by facilitators who shared their experience as migrants. The process was planned in a number of steps that included training up peer researchers, creating relevant research questions, organising the focus groups and carrying out six focus groups with participants from the Gateway project.

### Training up peer researchers

### Open and honest responses

In order to gain the most open and honest responses from participants, researchers were selected and trained from the existing group of trained advisors as participants were more likely to open up and talk about with peers.

### Advisors volunteered and trained

Six advisors volunteered to be trained in basic research skills and to take part in carrying out the focus groups. This was also a good opportunity for the advisors to gain new communication skills and put them into practice, thereby developing confidence and feeling empowered.

### The aim of this training was to enable

The training was carried out by the project team and covered a range of topics such as research categories, moderator & recorders skills, organising and carrying out focus groups, active listening, unbiased questioning, ground rules and analysis of outcomes. The aim of the training was to enable participants to organise and carry out focus groups independently with minimal support from the project team.

### Pilot / amendments

After completing the training, a pilot focus group was carried out in order for the peer researchers to practice their skills and also to pilot the focus group questions to test the effectiveness and fluidity of questions. As a result of this, amendments to the original questions were made to make them easier to understand within an ESOL context and more workable in a focus group setting. This is especially relevant as the focus groups were being carried out with participants whose first language was not English, some of whom spoke very limited English. Teams were then formed with each moderator facilitating one or more of the focus groups.

## The research questions focused on these areas:

### Changes to the lives of participants through participation in Gateway

### Skills gained

### How do you feel?

### Quality of delivery

**i)** The affects and changes to the lives of participants and the life of their families through taking part in Gateway. This question was very general and could include any changes from getting out of the house more to finding more friends to more recognition within the family or generally feeling happier.

**ii)** English skills that participants had gained by attending Gateway, either directly through participating in one of the ESOL classes or indirectly by participating in the advisors training or other opportunities and courses provided. This covered skills like reading and writing but also related skills and confidence in speaking English in everyday life, for example appointments, talking to people, communicating at their children's school etc.

**iii)** How participants felt about their lives in Portsmouth and about their social contacts after being involved in Gateway. This included their feelings about living in the city and what they liked or disliked about it as well as if they met any new people in Portsmouth.

**iv)** Project delivery and quality of the Gateway project as well as the personal development and learning of participants. Questions included which part of the project was most important for participants, the most important thing they learned through Gateway, their overall impression of the programme and ideas for improvement.

**The thinking behind the practice: social capital and integration**

**Social Bridges**

**Social Bonds**

**Social Links**

**Investigate**

**The numbers involved**

According to Ager and Strang (2004), Social Capital as developed through social connections is an important indicator of integration. Social connections can be categorized under three headings: Social bridges which are connections across national, ethnic and religious groupings, thereby contributing to social cohesion. Social bonds describe the connections within a certain section of the community which could be an ethnic group, a faith group or any other group with common characteristics. For migrants, these social bonds can prevent assimilation and give a sense of identity as a minority within a majority culture. The third category is that of social links which describes engagement with formal structures and service providers (Harper, 2002).

In the focus groups different questions were asked to investigate the amount of social bridging, bonding and linking that were directly or indirectly achieved through Gateway. These included how much participants had learned about other cultures, if they were involved with other services and how they felt about contacting services now and if there was a change in these feelings from before they participated in Gateway.

The focus groups were conducted within existing courses that ran as part of the Gateway project. These were five groups with participants in ESOL classes and one group with participants who completed the core advisor training. There were 42 participants in the focus groups in total and all were carried out in the community venues where the Gateway courses usually take place which was a familiar setting to participants. The groups were run by one or two peer researchers who acted as the moderators and one member of the project team who took on the role of note taker.

**Peer researchers took a leading role**

This arrangement enabled the peer researchers to take a leading role in carrying out the focus group whereas the member of the project team stayed in the background as much as possible. The aim was for participants to be able to express themselves as freely as possible and not to feel they had to give socially desired answers. This also gave an opportunity for the peer researchers to gain confidence in their skills and take responsibility in the research process.

**Getting through the barriers one conversation at a time**

Some participants, as anticipated, didn't speak English very well and were assisted by one of the peer researchers who explained the questions to them, sometimes interpreting, but this was only a minority. Therefore, having facilitators with shared experience had a positive impact on the efficacy of the focus groups encouraging better participation.

**The numbers involved, again**

The focus groups were approximately an hour long and recorded digitally as well as handwritten notes. To analyse the data, members of the research team carried out a thematic analysis, looking at the reoccurring themes in the responses and noting the frequency in which these topics were mentioned. This analysis was carried out by three members of the research team to provide different perspectives on the analysis. The content of focus group records was analysed and emerging themes identified and reviewed. It was identified how often particular characteristics and benefits of the project were mentioned by participants and how they described them in the focus group conversation.

## 3. Emerging themes

### Focus on experiences in integration

With a focus on the experiences of the participants and the impact the Gateway Project has had on the integration of individuals in Portsmouth and the UK, the following overarching themes were identified in the analysis as benefits that participants perceived they gained from the programme.

### Benefits gained

### 3.1 English skills

When asked about what benefits they gained from participating in Gateway, the benefit that was reported most frequently was improving their English skills. Broken down in different categories, participants mentioned most frequently that their English speaking skills had improved, followed by their understanding of English and their general English skills.

### Improving English skills was the main focus

This result is maybe not surprising as many participants in the focus groups were taking part in ESOL classes as part of the existing programme; therefore improving English skills was the main focus for these participants.

### "Now I can understand"

In addition to this, participants who took part in the general advisor training and not in specific ESOL classes also stressed that the programme contributed to improving their English skills: "Before I couldn't understand and now I do. Before I was silent, now I have more confidence, can speak more fluently, can listen to people more, have longer conversations and join in" (C6). "I'm comfortable in listening. Speaking is difficult. First time I couldn't understand accents. Now I can understand" (A6).

### Significant effect on their ability

A high number of participants reported that the improvement in English skills had a significant effect on their ability to carry out every day activities such as shopping and also increased their confidence and their ability to make contacts to other people and services:

"Before I was shy but now I can speak to others confidently" (D5).

"When I came to UK, I was very shy, couldn't talk English. After I joined the class I feel more better in talking, shopping" (C5). "When I first arrived, no understanding, now after attending ESOL, can answer questions" (F3).

### Mentioned most frequently

## 3.2 Confidence

The benefit that was mentioned most frequently by the participants after the improvement in English skills was an increase in confidence. Participants reported that they felt more confident in speaking English, for example by becoming aware that there are other people in similar situations who don't speak English perfectly. One participant reported that the most important thing they learned through the project was that "everybody can make mistakes and everybody can speak English" (E5). "I feel I've got better confidence, if anybody question, talking is better, try to answer question" (E1). "[The course] helped a lot, now got confidence to speak in front of others" (D1).

### Confidence increased when making doctors' appointments

Participants also said that their confidence increased in other areas of their lives, for example when making appointments with services, doctors or talking to people at their children's schools. "Before I couldn't talk about my problems, now better" (E5). "I can now talk to other mothers at my son's nursery (H8)".

## Confidence continued

"Before, English not good. Now more confident, speaking more. Live alone with child - can speak with doctor/hospital Can do everything. Happy" (A6).

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## A positive cycle

The responses suggest that the increase in confidence could be triggered by different factors - improving English skills, becoming more independent by being able to carry out every-day life activities, improving social support by meeting other people in similar situations or positive feedback from their families who recognised the change in participants. The improvement in confidence then often started a positive cycle as it led in turn to the participants being able to do more activities independently, thereby again leading to an increase in confidence.

## An increase in social links

### a. Contact with services

An increase in contact with service providers or social links was also reported by a high number of participants as a result of the Gateway project. Many said that they struggled before to make contact to services, such as GPs, their children's schools or others because of lack of language skills or confidence. Some mentioned that they hadn't been to see a doctor on their own before at all. Others described that they didn't have the confidence to make phone calls to services or answer the phone. "I now know how to ring emergency services" (C1). "Before confused with making appointment. Now understand better. Health problems have been sorted out" (E3).

"Now I am  
happy"

Being able to  
contact  
services  
contributed  
to become  
less socially  
isolated

New friends

"I like  
Portsmouth"

"Before ESOL class I had problems talking with doctor, school, shop assistant. Now I am happy" (E5)

A lack of knowledge about services before participating in Gateway didn't seem to be the main issue as much as the confidence and skills to physically get in touch with these services. Again, this might be due to the nature of the groups that the focus groups were carried out with as only one group consisted of people who took part in the advisor training. A contributing factor to this could be the basis of the community ESOL syllabus which focuses on the English needed to access various services as well as everyday English. This was reflected in some responses where participants mentioned that they gained information about services from the programme. Some participants reported that they are now using library or leisure services like the swimming pool. For many participants, being able to contact services contributed to becoming less socially isolated and more independent.

#### **b. Social Contacts**

Meeting other people and making social contacts (bonding & bridging) was also seen as a major benefit of the Gateway project. Many participants reported that they met a lot of new friends through Gateway, that it helped them to meet people in a similar situation and that they felt socially well supported in the project. Respondents also discussed ethnic similarity as one factor that facilitated the development of trust and friendship within the project. "I'm happy to come here, saw many ladies from different countries, I like Portsmouth, feel happy, have found friends, have been in England for 7 years" (F2).

**Happier being involved with the community and appreciating other cultures**

**Social support**

**Overall happiness and wellbeing**

**"Found broken pieces inside, like giving medicine to mend"**

"First alone, now lots of friends" (H4), "Feel better, met new people, talking to each other, made friends" (C5). "It has changed life [speaking about another participant], she is blossoming, she had a hard time clicking with people and is now happier being involved with community and appreciating other cultures" (E6).

The social support and the feeling of not being the only one who struggled with issues like speaking English had a positive effect on participants' confidence.

### **c. Happiness & Wellbeing**

The perception that the Gateway project contributed to their overall happiness and wellbeing was mentioned with similar frequency to the positive effect in terms of social contacts.

Participants reported satisfaction with the project, happier with their life overall since participating in Gateway or happier about their life in the UK or Portsmouth. "Now many things have improved. Very happy, going shopping alone" (D4). "Most importantly I feel happier being involved. I met lots of people from different backgrounds/countries" (C6). One participant described how the project helped her to overcome problems "[The Gateway programme] gave different levels of care. Have locked key and exterior, found broken pieces inside, like giving medicine to mend" (E6).

#### **d. Future Aspirations & personal development**

A number of participants reported that the Gateway project opened up new perspectives for them and that they now felt able to do different things with their lives than they had thought of before taking part in the project.

"The project opened a gate for me, opened a door to help other people in the city" (E2). "My mind is fresh coming here" (H4), "Opened new avenues to explore, networking" (E6).

**"Not just a mum but a person"**

[The project] brought back forgotten things. Interaction, brain storming, gave adrenaline. Felt awakened to get back out there and to things again. Not just a mum, but a person! (E6). "[The project] has changed people's lives, especially advisors. When I meet them I can see they are happy, feel their confidence building. Happy to talk to you. Wish we can be with project as long as possible. Feel change in others. Life changing project" (C6).

**Community advisor training**

Some respondents commented on how they were now able to signpost people to services and help others due to the Advisor Training. Some other participants mentioned as well that their families recognised a change in them since participating in the programme and that their husbands were proud of them. This recognition raised their confidence and self-esteem for what they had achieved, thus motivating them further to participate and expand on their skills and identify goals in life.

**Achieved**

**e. Other themes**

There were a number of other themes that were mentioned less frequently but still were quite significant for many participants. One was the contact to people from other cultures (bridging) and learning about other cultures and religions as well as British culture. "Before I learned about other cultures from books. Now meeting new people, learning about clothes, countries...Helped to find out more. By improving English, can understand more about people" (G3).

**Identify goals in life**

Another benefit from the programme was an increase in independence: "I couldn't go outside alone when I came here, now I can go out alone, my husband supported me to attend and is proud" (C3).

### Enjoyed helping and volunteering

Some participants mentioned that they enjoyed helping others and volunteering as part of the programme. Again, this wasn't mentioned as frequently possibly due to the low number of Advisors in the focus groups in comparison to ESOL learners.

### ESOL provision

A few respondents commented on the ESOL provision in general and that much longer classes should be provided to maximise learning opportunities as well as covering reading and writing skills. One main aspect of the Gateway Project is to deliver two Conversation ESOL classes per week for those with lower levels of English. In addition to this a bespoke ESOL course for Advisors only is delivered to build on their English to enable them to carry out their role as Advisor more effectively.

### Conversation classes ESOL delivery

Further comments around the ESOL delivery included respondents discussing the inconvenience of mixed level groups: "For new participants there is repetition and others get bored" (E4/G4). Despite this, respondents felt the ESOL tutors were extremely understanding of cultural and religious needs as well as being engaging and helpful with participants' learning needs.

### How the project could be improved

During one of the focus groups, when asked how the project could be improved, a few Advisors felt strongly about how the Gateway project has supported them: "It is a tailor fit programme to develop with different levels of care; Gateway has been a lifeline for me and others" (E6). "Need more real life practise, now focused on education, health and employment. It can give everyone more chances if there is contact with more organisations outside project - better chances, more choice" (C6/E6).

Overall, all respondents were extremely satisfied with the project as a whole and felt that team members were approachable and supportive.

## Conclusion

### Complex needs and values

The focus groups conducted presented an opportunity to comprehend how participants view their experiences of integration in the UK and how the Gateway project has contributed to this process.

The findings discussed in this report highlight the range of benefits the Gateway project has brought to the lives of migrant women participating in the project in view of their complex needs and values for such a diverse group. Six overarching themes are discussed which summarises an array of positive experiences within the programme and also emphasises the difficulties faced by migrant communities during the integration process on both a practical and emotional level.

### Difficulties faced by migrant communities

The focus group findings substantiate previous informal feedback received from participants on the effects of the programme and illustrate that for many participants, the project had a significant impact on their lives and their [integration in the UK](#) and Portsmouth. The most significant benefits reported by participants were [improved English skills](#), an increase in [confidence speaking English](#) and carrying out day to day activities, improved and new social contacts and [contacts with service providers and the ability to contact](#) services independently. The project also had a big impact on participant's [quality of life](#) and [happiness](#) as well as [opening up new life perspectives](#) and development opportunities for the women involved and [increasing their independence](#).

### Integration in the UK

### Significant benefits

Participants gave very positive comments about the delivery and quality of the programme in general and the support received through the project team and fellow participants throughout the project.

## Recommendations in relation to ESOL

### Meet the needs of the learners

### Continuous participation

### Create future opportunities in volunteering and other opportunities

### Feasible?

### Strengthen partnerships

### Renew social networks to develop future opportunities

Furthermore, it is important to note that a few recommendations have been suggested in relation to the frequency of ESOL classes with the need for more sessions and the issue around mixed levels creating a hindrance to learning including the involvement of new learners in an existing course. Although the ESOL classes have been structured to accommodate the varied levels of ability, it is clear that a more successful grouping strategy is required with scaffolding and differentiation of instruction to meet the needs of the learners. Despite this feedback from respondents it is clear that the delivery is meeting the needs of the majority and continuous participation and attendance illustrates that respondents value the provision and understand the positive change ESOL provision can bring about for an individual and a community.

A few respondents also commented on the need to link up with more organisations to create further opportunities in volunteering and other opportunities. For a two-year pilot project based on the growing needs of migrant communities, it is apparent that such recommendations are imperative to respond to the constant shift of needs. Although it may not be feasible to implement towards the latter end of the project, an effective action in response would be to form a participation or steering group in the early phase where, in addition to team members, participants would be invited to attend to join alongside stakeholders, community leaders and relevant individuals. The functions of this group would be to discuss the feasibility of implementing all aspects of the programme to ensure delivery is relevant and meeting the needs of participants. It would also strengthen partnerships and renew social networks with the potential to develop future opportunities for sustainability.

**It cannot be claimed to be fully representative of all new third country migrant women**

**The information obtained is critical**

**It addresses the barriers faced central to success**

Although it cannot be claimed that the group of participants were fully representative of all the estimated 1,700 new third country migrant women in Portsmouth (Baseline Review, 2012, p.10), the opinions expressed are indicative of the migrant experience and provide a foundation for the development of better inclusive mainstream services to successfully meet the needs of the migrant population.

The information obtained is critical to the delivery of services for the migrant population as it addresses the barriers faced by these individuals and provides an insight into concepts that may not be well understood by the wider community. Furthermore, by conducting these focus groups, the Gateway project has been able to identify the many positive outcomes of the programme, with the bespoke ESOL provision being central to its' success in enabling women to integrate, lead a happier and more satisfied life in Portsmouth by **realising their full potential**.

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