

Appendix 10 Commissioners Visit with Golden Opportunities, Skill and Development (GOS&D)

Visit: *Golden Opportunities Skills and Development at Featherstone Terrace, Southall*

Date: *Tuesday 27th July 2021*

Attendees: *Laura Forrester & Mohan Luthra*

Hosted by: *Sharmarke Diriye & Mukhtar Handule*

Participants: Trained advisors, clients and ESOL class adult pupils

Introduction to GOS&D

The Golden Opportunities Skills and Development is a charity which offers the community of Ealing support and access to skill-building projects, courses, advocacy and advice on many key issues. Established in 2003 by three friends from diverse backgrounds, all living in Southall, they came together to set the charity up as a positive step towards offering local people support that could make a real difference to their lives. They regularly came across young people who had lost faith in a system that they believed was designed to only support the wealthy and many of their parents were struggling to access services due to language and literacy limitations.

This is a hub-based service, located in a portacabin next to the Featherstone Terrace car park in Southall. Training and advice offered by GOS&D is varied, their services are designed to meet the needs of people from socially disadvantaged parts of the community, to help them establish confidence in their lives, provide them with new opportunity and to help them flourish.

GOS&D relies predominantly on volunteers to deliver their projects, of the 12 volunteers they have 6 are trained advisors that can assist on matters related to housing, welfare assistance, mental health and well-being and education.

Training Classes Offered by GOS&D

Computer and digital Classes (accredited)

ESOL classes (accredited)

Social mobility – pre-employment, self-employment and volunteering

Training and access to opportunities for young people not in employment, education or training (NEET)

Literacy and numeracy training (accredited)

Personal development and strengths-based training (accredited)

Health and safety in the workplace (accredited)

Customer Services (accredited)

Referral pathways and signposting to appropriate services are combined with the classes offered to ensure every individual is offered a person-centric service designed to suit their individual needs.

80-85% of the people who use GOS&D are unable to use the internet or have no local access.

Advocacy and Guidance

The advice and guidance service offered by GOS&D is free, confidential, and non-judgemental offered in multiple languages. Pivotal to a community that is multi-cultural the information can help individuals and families navigate their journey through complicated systems and processes linked primarily to welfare support, welfare rights, health, school exclusion and housing. Many of the people GOS&SD support struggle with financial hardship, sickness and are socially and economically disadvantaged.

Listening closely to what the community's needs are and offering the support in multiple languages helps to create trust with the charity's advisors, perceived as active listening and a genuine desire to help. Every person who comes with their story, situation or problem is considered as someone who is looking for a positive opportunity to help them succeed in life, GOS&D believes every person has something to contribute regardless of what issues they face.

Most people who need advocacy support tend to lack confidence, there are language barriers and/or they have had bad experiences with statutory services when attempting to access information or advice. GOS&D will make the telephone calls and write the letters required on their client's behalf.

Key concerns raised by GOS&D advisors

- Housing benefit and council tax service are overwhelmed with calls; it is very difficult to get through to them
- Silo working at the council increases the amount of time it takes to resolve an issue. Often a social worker will be unaware of a client's housing or welfare concerns and vice versa. Information is not shared and nobody has a real picture of what they are dealing with.
- There are no translation services offered by statutory services, and when the council does offer a translator service the interpreter offers answers on behalf of their client rather than relaying what an individual has said.
- The council continues to offer compensation to people who have not received an adequate service, we have 15 clients that have been in receipt of compensation. If the system doesn't work than it needs to be fixed. You cant fix a system by paying people off.
- In the last 7-8 years staff addressing housing and welfare issues don't have the training nor the communication skills to address concerns holistically and with compassion. No attempt to look at each case separately and develop a solution based on an individual's needs.
- People are often unaware of their welfare rights and do not challenge the system
- Services such as housing and social services require an external agency to assess and review their performance and policies on a regular basis, without this the level of service offered will quickly deteriorate
- The commissioning of voluntary organisations must be reviewed immediately, funding is broken up into many different sections, whereas many of the issues that are trying to be addressed have a strong relationship to each other.
- There are many unscrupulous lawyers that have tried to take advantage of our clients, charging up to £180 for a letter, people will continue to fall vulnerable to these businesses when statutory organisations are unable to provide communication channels that remove exclusion.

- Parents facing language barriers are often unaware of what process and duty of care a school is responsible for when supporting their special needs child. The special needs care plan is not discussed, and schools get away with doing the minimum knowing the parent is unable to understand the system, therefore, unable to convey their concerns.

GOS&D Client Data: (April 2020 to August 2021)

Since the start of the pandemic the five areas of support that has seen a considerable increase in demand are

- Completing applications (accessing services such as jobs)
- Appealing decisions
- Advocacy (fighting for user rights)
- Making complaints on behalf of clients.
- Direct service provision (such as mental health support, etc.)

| Issue | Number of clients |
|---|-------------------|
| Housing | 432 |
| Universal Credit | 617 |
| Employment Support | 327 |
| Debt/Financial Exclusion | 438 |
| Education (exclusions) | 312 |
| Mental health | 259 |
| COVID-19 crisis support | 582 |
| Law enforcement cases | 31 |
| Immigration (Information, guidance, referrals, etc) | 101 |
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Number of clients using GOS&D in August 2021

Number of people relying on services from GOS&D has grown to a level higher than the total number of people since its inception largely related to the impact of the pandemic.

The above compounded figures include clients that have accessed more than one service and have in some cases been double or even triple counted.

- The total number of users seen were 2756 and apart from 6 clients who identified as White (ethnicity), the rest were/are from Black, Asian, Minority, and Ethnic and Refugee communities.

- Of the 2756 users: 1837 identified as females and 919 as males.

- In terms of ethnicity the percentages are as follows: 32% Somali; 44% Afghanistan (mainly Sikh); 12% Eritreans; 7% Nepalese; 4.98% Syrians and 0.2% White.

What people who use the services of GOS&D told us?

My 11-year-old daughter was suffering from regular stomach pain, I attempted to contact my GP, but they told me to use the website to record the symptoms and to arrange a telephone appointment. It took five months to sort out as I can't speak English and I don't know how to use the web, it was GOS&D that made the call.

37 year old Afghan Sikh Female, currently taking level 1 ESOL, cannot read/write

I live in a flat with a leaking roof, there is water damage on my balcony and though GOS&D helps me to bid for other properties using LOCATA, I have had no luck. People tell me to contact my councillor, they mention councillor surgeries. What are they and when do they take place? I lack the confidence to speak to my local councillors, how can I talk to them when I don't speak the language?

50-year-old Sudanese Male, taking ESOL classes

I came to this country in 2001, did my best to learn English and started working for the Sofitel hotel, shuttling their guests in a shiny Audi van to Heathrow. I had to wake up at 2.00am to get to work by 3.00am. The neighbour below me at Gainsboro' Tower, (Medlar Farm estate) is an alcoholic, a drug addict and had threatened assault on me since 2015. He played music very loud knowing this would trouble my sleep. I called out the council's noise nuisance team every night, but my voice was ignored, he continued to disrupt my sleep, and cause me severe anxiety. One day after another sleepless night I accidentally fell asleep at the wheel. I had no passengers, the police thought I was a terrorist and questioned me like I was guilty of trying to cause harm to people. Thankfully nobody got hurt, but I lost my job. I was once a proud man who never had to rely on welfare handouts but today nobody wants to employ me and yet I continue to live above the man who took my livelihood away from me and to this day threatens me.

52-year-old Somali Male, Unemployed

I have always worked as a cleaner and I work hard to this day though I have very bad knees. My pay is low, this means most of my wages goes to pay my rent and what is left over I use to pay for my utility bills and food. There is no money to do anything nice, such as travel, buy books or buy myself something nice. It's a vicious circle. Why do they pay me so little?

53-year-old Somali Female, comes to GOS&D to spend time in the company of other Somali women and to improve her English

I am a single mother of 5 children, today my eldest son is missing, my middle son was jailed for stabbing and killing another young person, one of my daughters is sofa surfing and only two of my children live with me. I fled Somalia looking for a better life, but I have had 13 temporary homes in London - to date no permanent home. My children had to constantly change schools; they were burdened with uncertainty which left them anxious. No long-term friends nor community. Today, I am struggling with my mental health and yet no mental health care package has been offered to me. This is a nightmare.

40-year-old Somali Single Mum

Mental Health:

In 2019 after conducting a round table discussion on mental health for mainly refugee residents GOS&D made a conscious decision to look at what percentage of their clients were concerned about their mental well-being. Before the pandemic (March 2019 to March 2020) 421 residents admitted to suffering from some form of mental health concern, such as anxiety, depression, stress, severe insecurity, agoraphobia, OCD etc.

In response to the data on mental well-being GOS&D set up a volunteer-led mental health project to identify gaps in the provision of culturally specific/sensitive mental health service to Black, Minority Ethnic and Refugee (BMER) individuals in Ealing. The project was made up of four key actions:

- Supporting statutory and voluntary agencies through consultative and other networking approaches/opportunities to articulate lived experiences of B<ER individuals when accessing mental health services
- Provide health agencies a platform by which they can consult and engage with BMER communities to better develop the appropriate culturally specific mental health services
- Offer monthly user-led story-telling therapy
- Offer advocacy support by challenging inequitable treatment and discrimination faced by BMER individuals experiencing mental health challenges at every level

A review has been carried out of all GOS&D clients to determine whether the pandemic has led to any changes in the number of people struggling with their mental health, 671 users have admitted to having some form of mental affliction, 145 users are currently making use of the BMER pilot programme. GOS&D was able to support and work with 37 clients who struggle with severe mental health concerns but were unknown to their GP or any other appropriate mental health service.