What is refugee participation and why does it matter

In the UK, more and more services are giving their clients a voice and opportunities to influence how services are provided.

This is called ‘participation’. This leaflet explains what participation is, and the benefits that it can bring to you and to the services that you access.

When you arrive in Yorkshire and Humber, you can access many different services to help you rebuild your life here. These include healthcare, education, libraries, housing, charities, and others. The types of services that you access will depend on different factors, such as your immigration status and your needs.

Some services are provided by the central and local government - like schools, housing advice, welfare benefits, the National Health Service (NHS), or the police. Other services are provided by private companies or individuals. Yet other services are provided by charities and voluntary organisations.

Sometimes you might not get enough support from some services. For example, you may need support from interpreters, but these are not always provided. Or you may be asked to travel a long distance for an appointment and struggle to get there.

This can be frustrating, and you may feel like you should be provided with more support or better services. Even if service providers are doing their best, you may feel like they are not aware of your specific needs. In these situations, you may want to speak out, so that they will hear and consider your views.

What is participation?

Participation includes:

- Receiving better information about services.
- Sharing your views about services.
- Getting involved in decisions about services.

Participation is sharing your knowledge, skills, views, and concerns with service providers, organisations, and communities and there are different ways to participate. For example, you could participate by becoming well-informed about what's available in your local area or by helping shape the services that you need.

The International Association for Public Participation identifies five different levels of participation:

- **Inform** – when you are provided with information so you can understand how services are provided.
- **Consult** – when services ask for your feedback or opinions about something.
- **Involve** – when services work with you to ensure that your views are always considered.

- **Collaborate** – when services work with you to find solutions.
- **Empower** – when you help make the final decisions about services.

The highest the level, the more impact your views have on decisions.

Participation contributes to positive change in organisations. Providers benefit from participation because it helps them understand the needs of users and allows providers to learn from the knowledge and experience of users to solve problems, eliminate barriers, and make improvements to services. Organisations that encourage participation develop effective and innovative services, understand people's needs quickly, and prevent problems.

What can you gain from participation?

Participation has a positive impact on all service users because it can lead to service improvement. But you can also benefit immensely from getting involved, whether it is in your local medical practice or a charity. For instance, you could:

- Become better aware of your rights, entitlements, and responsibilities.

- Develop a better understanding of services that are offered to you.
- Have a say in the way that services are planned and delivered.
- Participate in activities and events and meet new people from different backgrounds and connect with other people in your local community.
- Stay up to date with guidance and regulations about a range of things, such as health emergencies.
- Get more opportunities to practise English, learn about other cultures and traditions and understand the perspectives of others.
- Gain experience in areas you are interested in and improve your skills, for example your communication and leadership skills
- Get to know the needs of your community better. Learn how to represent and advocate for your community by helping organisations design better services.
- Develop a sense of pride and empowerment as you become more responsible for services that help you integrate more successfully in your community.
- Develop your confidence.

As you can see, participation has many benefits. Getting involved in the running of services and communities is a unique opportunity for you to develop both personally and professionally and make a positive contribution to the lives of others.

You can read the other leaflets in this series to find out more about participation and how to get involved.

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