

## Survey on service needs for refugees – starting point for developing library services

The number of refugees/ potential immigrants rose noticeably and rapidly during 2015. Europe-bound influx of refugees brought more than 30 000 asylum seekers to Finland. There are now refugees in many municipalities where libraries have no prior experience in dealing with immigrant customers.

As part of The Ministry of Education and Culture's field of operations, library services are typically of the kind, that the status of the immigrant and the reasons behind immigration have little or no bearing on what kind of services and support services an individual can get [Definition of immigration policy of the Ministry of Education and Culture, 2009].

Now that the situation has changed, there was a need to find out what kind of service needs asylum seekers have and how can library services meet these needs and what kind of overriding measures need to be taken. The survey was made with financial support from the Ministry of Education and Culture.

Altogether 113 refugees were interviewed for the survey in the metropolitan area, Turku, Joutseno and Kauhava. Those interviewed spoke Arabic, Persian (Dari), Kurdish, Pashto and Somali. The average age of adult interviewees was 29 and most had either comprehensive school or second or third degree. More than half, almost 60% of those interviewed had used library services while living in Finland. It can be deduced from the survey that the educational background and language skills had an effect on how library services were used, for example how the interviewees learned about library and library services and how to use them, on reading habits and voluntary language studies.

Refugees come from countries that do not have the same kind of open to all library system that Finland has. Many of them do not necessarily know the service principles of public library, for example, that anyone can come to a library just to spend time or that in principle library services are free. Even if the interviewees had used libraries in their own countries, they did not know that in addition to books, libraries have many other materials and services available.

As a control group, 28 people with an immigrant or multicultural background were interviewed in the metropolitan area. Both groups, refugees as well as the members of control group wished for multilingual information outside of the library. They were willing to participate and to have a say in the way services are being developed and implemented.

Two separate questionnaires were sent to libraries. Those, mostly small and medium size libraries, which had little or no experience with refugee / immigrant customers and bigger cities which had more and longtime experience.

According to responses, support is needed for human resources, training, materials, happening planning, material acquisitions and handling as well as planning cooperation with other operators.

Active marketing became evident also from the questionnaire sent to various agencies and organizations.

Library has its own important role in supporting assimilation process. They offer tools for language learning and on how to learn about one's new homeland. Newcomers also want to tell about their own cultural background and library provides a place where citizens can meet newcomers and learn about their culture.

According to the survey, libraries around the country have readily accepted the challenge and have been thinking about how to provide services for the newcomers. Shared services of the national library net are known and have been utilized relatively well also in those municipalities where there is little or no prior experience about refugees or immigrants.

Cooperation is needed on both national as well as regional levels. Nationwide services such as Multilingual library services and Libraries.fi –editorial marketing support are important help for the libraries. Sharing of different operational practices is also important. The Finnish Public library project register contains information on implemented projects and it also provides a channel for sharing different operational practices.

Local cooperation in municipalities and information sharing is of vital import. Library services are not necessarily well known among other agencies and organizations which are, or would be, important partners. Cooperation between various agencies and organizations is necessary background as support also for libraries. According to the survey, these other operators are ready and interested in planning services together with libraries. Libraries need to be active also in this and in spreading information on available services. Newcomers' participation in developing these services must not be overlooked.