



# Service User Network (SUN) Projects: Improving access for Black, Asian & Minority Ethnic (BAME) patients?



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## Aims

The aim of this project was to see whether SUN attracts a higher proportion of BAME service users than a local personality disorder service. We hypothesised that this was true, and that SUN may help improve BAME access to psychological support.

## Background

SUN Projects are peer groups for people in acute mental health crisis or who have related support needs. SUN groups are not 'therapy' but are co-facilitated by mental health professionals in a bounded and structured way, using the Appraisal Based Coping model and guided by therapeutic community principles.

SUN was designed to reduce barriers to access: attendees are referred to as 'members' to reduce stigma; group size is capped at a manageable 10 and we ensure that one of our 3 weekly groups is online; our team is diverse, welcoming and compassionate and includes a Peer Support Worker. Members self-refer and are invited to attend as often or as little as they like; there are no exclusion criteria; and neither a diagnosis nor past contact with psychiatric services are mandatory. As we share staff and clinical governance systems with our neighbouring personality disorder service, we noticed differences in representations of ethnicity between each service and wanted to explore it further in this study. Could efforts to reduce barriers to SUN improve access for our BAME population?

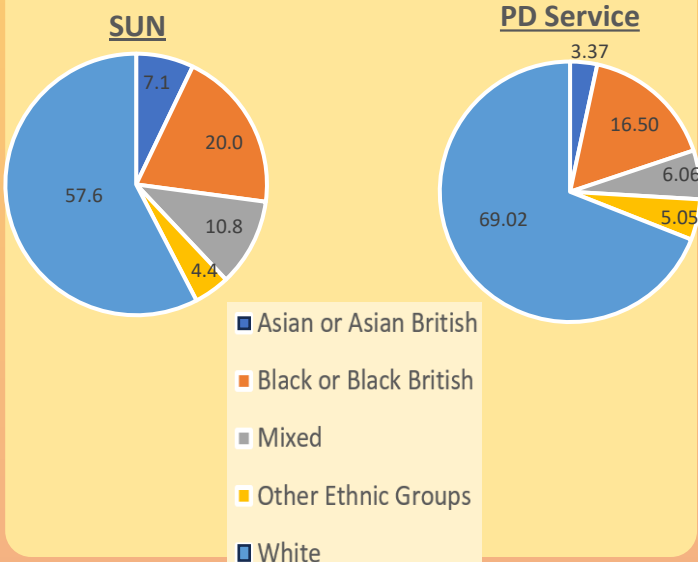
White British people are more likely to receive mental health treatment than BAME people, despite evidence that the latter are more likely to suffer greater mental health morbidity and poorer recovery rates. In the 2021 Census, 48.6% of Lewisham residents identified as BAME; but do Lewisham's mental health service caseloads represent their local population?

## Methodology

We extracted accumulated ethnicity data from Jan 2023 to Dec 2023 to compare ethnic diversity in the SUN caseload with the local personality disorder service caseload, using MS Excel.

## Results

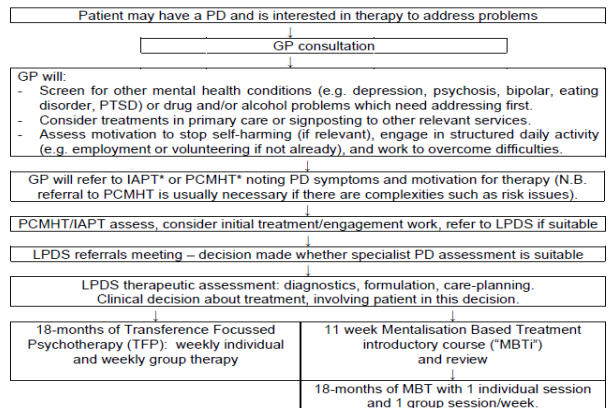
The accumulated caseloads for Lewisham SUN and the Lewisham PD Service from Jan to Dec 2023 were 361 and 343 respectively. Lewisham SUN had a greater proportion of BAME service users on the caseload (42.4%) than the Lewisham PD Service (30.98%). Neither service matched the proportion of BAME people in the borough of Lewisham as calculated by the ONS (48.6%).



## How to navigate the Lewisham Personality Disorder Service (LPDS)

Personality Disorder (PD) is a long-term mental health condition which can severely affect people's functioning in work, leisure and romantic life. People can have problems with abrupt mood changes, impulsivity, identity and self-direction, self-harm and suicidal feelings. They may struggle to have stable relationships or get into conflicts. No two people are the same; each have different problems, symptoms and concerns. Most or all have experienced disruptions or trauma in childhood.

LPDS offers evidence-based treatments to help patients with relationships, symptoms and emotions and to live more fulfilling lives. The referral process is as follows:



The treatment programmes are ambitious and intensive and not suitable for everyone, in which case LPDS will recommend an alternative care plan. This might include signposting patients to the [Lewisham SUN Project](#) for peer support with emotional problems and risk. The LPDS also facilitate PD case discussion sessions in the PCMHTs and CMHTs\* to support colleagues in their work with patients with PD.

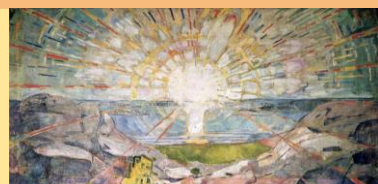
## Conclusion

SUN was designed to reduce barriers to access. This might also account for the greater ethnic diversity on the SUN caseload compared to the local personality disorder psychotherapy service. Statistical analysis is needed to confirm this. More research is needed to understand why fewer BAME people are seen in mental health treatment services and receive worse outcomes. This pilot study has motivated us to do a wider study next, asking why people sign up for SUN but never attend a group, and gathering ethnicity data, to yield more answers.

SUN may act as a fishing net, catching those suitable for the personality disorder service who may otherwise have not been identified. We have developed a leaflet (above) to explain the personality disorder service referral pathway, which we hope will signpost more patients into effective treatments.

Identifying factors that may inadvertently lead to the overselection of White British patients is a necessary albeit uncomfortable and challenging process that unveils institutional racism and unconscious bias. Creating space for teams to reflect on these personal and systemic processes, and identify opportunities for change using QI methodology, is essential for services to attain improved access and outcomes.

Edward Munch  
The Sun  
(1911)



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