

Refugee Action's
Bolton Employment Project

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working with refugees to build new lives

Refugee Action

Refugee Action is an independent national charity working to enable refugees to build new lives in the UK. We provide practical advice and assistance for newly arrived asylum seekers and long-term commitment to their settlement through community development work. As one of the country's leading agencies in the field, Refugee Action has over 20 years' experience in pioneering innovative work in partnership with refugees.

Refugee Action's **Manchester** office delivers a diverse and comprehensive service across Greater Manchester to refugees, asylum seekers and those who support them. The smaller **Bolton** office is home to a refugee resettlement team as well as the employment project

Employment in refugee communities

Our work with refugee communities has long highlighted both the importance of employment in refugee integration, and the difficulty of obtaining it. Estimates of refugee unemployment vary but the Department of Work and Pensions has settled on an estimate of around 35% ('Working to Rebuild Lives', DWP, 2003). This all contrasts sharply with the findings of the Industrial Society that:

"The majority of refugees arrive with skills, qualifications... Contrary to public perception, few of those who arrive in Britain have any enthusiasm for relying on benefits. And yet because of the many obstacles to finding work

refugees remain an untapped resource. A mere fraction are successful in the search for work, and those who do find jobs are more likely than not to be relegated into unskilled, low paid employment."

Employment project summary

Refugee Action undertook research into barriers to refugee employment in partnership with Lancaster University and North West Development Agency in 2004. The resulting report 'Labour Lost' found low levels of both awareness and satisfaction among refugee communities with employment advice services. It argued:

"Agencies providing... support into employment should... Actively recruit from refugee communities. This will require professional training prior to recruitment. An Intermediate Labour Market scheme seems a suitable mechanism for this"

The Bolton employment project was one of Refugee Action's responses. We obtained £89,000 funding from the Community Fund and £6,000 from Bolton MBC for a project to:

- Increase the ability of a group of refugees to find employment in the advice and information, advice and guidance sectors
- Build the capacity of these sectors to offer a high quality and appropriate service to refugee communities
- Increase refugee access to information, advice and guidance (IAG)
- Increase refugee employment in Bolton

I am very happy with the project. If the project stops, I will carry on with this work, I won't stop helping people.

It did this by grant funding employment advice agencies to allow them to employ 6 refugees full time on 6-month contracts. The agencies provided training and supervision. The refugees (described as 'apprentices') took a full part in the delivery of services, with a particular but not exclusive focus on work with refugee communities. This was governed by a service level agreement between Refugee Action and the employing agency, guaranteeing standards of support and training. Refugee Action also worked with each agency to help them develop their service to refugees in general. This was co-ordinated by a part time refugee action staff member.

Results

The project was a success, providing training and (perhaps more crucially) experience for the individual refugees involved. At the end of the project 60% of the participants had gone on to paid employment in the field, with 1 trainee finding employment in an unrelated field and the final trainee entering further education. Those remaining in employment IAG have completed their NVQ level 3 in IAG, which will provide a firm basis for career progression within the field.

While all agencies reported benefits and learning from the experience, 2 agencies (BRASS and Bolton Wise) have gone on to develop new refugee specialist employment services as a direct result of the project. This has resulted in a sustainable legacy for all refugee communities in the region

Conclusions and recommendations

The apprenticeship or intermediate labour market model is an **extremely effective** way of helping refugees with some experience to move into skilled employment.

There is considerable **added value** when this is focussed on a sector that delivers services to refugees and is combined with capacity building support for partner agencies. This can leave behind a significant and **sustainable legacy** of **improved services** for refugees, and **enhanced capabilities** for the agencies that support them.

A full report detailing lessons learned and specific recommendations for project or service development is available from Refugee Action.

Email PhilipD@refugee-action.org.uk



Apprentices during a training event

I think that the experience has been beneficial because it has enhanced my skills in a real, working situation.

CASE STUDY

Ahmed conducted his traineeship at BoltonWISE Ltd. an organisation with years of experience providing traineeships, job-search training and employment advice for job-seekers in Bolton. His knowledge of the refugee community, coupled with his fluency in five languages, led to his recruitment as an employment outreach worker. Partnered with another BoltonWISE employment advisor, he provided advice in a variety of languages, particularly to members of the various refugee communities. This resulted in improving access to, and knowledge of, IAG employment provision within the growing refugee community in Bolton. While providing employment advice, the relationship built with beneficiaries meant Ahmed also provided a basic sign-posting service, becoming an initial, informal point of contact to other advice services in the town.

As the 6-month project neared its completion, BoltonWISE recognised the need to continue to build on the success of the outreach programme in reaching a community in need

of, but not necessarily accessing, employment advice services. Therefore funding was sought and obtained from Bolton Council to continue providing an employment advice outreach service to the refugee community, particularly Somali. Two IAG workers with knowledge of the refugee community were employed as part of this programme, one of them being Ahmed.

Ahmed is happy to be able to continue his work in helping refugees access the services and advice necessary to enable them to live their lives in the UK. After completing his NVQ level 3, he plans on continuing with further professional development courses in the IAG field. He wishes to capitalise on his linguistic skills to enable him to communicate with and support refugees and those from other ethnic communities in Bolton.

The project paved the way for my future, as there will now be a UK work reference for me to use. I appreciate the opportunity so much; it has given me a very good experience and increased my knowledge. When I first came, I was completely baffled! I am now able to pass on my knowledge to my friends and community.

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