



working with refugees to build new lives

Bolton Employment Project

Project Report
2004-2005

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Refugee Action

Introduction to 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.

History of Refugee Action

Refugee Action was founded in 1981 to provide a new approach to the successful resettlement in the UK of refugees and asylum seekers. This was based on supporting, promoting and working in partnership with refugee communities. Our work has included the reception and settlement of thousands of newly-arrived refugees from Vietnam, Bosnia, Kosova, Liberia and the Congo.

Refugee Action's work today includes:

- **Support and advice services for asylum seekers and refugees**
Refugee Action is one of the largest refugee organisations in the UK. We provide support and advice services in 22 counties in England, from offices in Manchester, Liverpool, Leicester, Nottingham, Bristol, Plymouth and Portsmouth.
- **Integration and supporting refugee community organisations**
Refugee Action works with refugees in the community, helping them to develop new roots, participate in the wider society and set up their own community organisations. We promote good practice by working with the voluntary and statutory sectors.
- **Advice for asylum seekers considering return**
Our voluntary return project, Choices, offers independent advice and information to refugees and asylum seekers who are considering whether to return home and want to discuss their options.
- **Providing a voice**
Refugee Action campaigns for the rights of refugees and asylum seekers and works to ensure that their voices are heard both in the media and in the formation of public policy.

For more information go to www.refugee-action.org.uk

Refugee Action in Greater Manchester

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 the Gateway team as well as the employment project. The services offered include:

- **Advice and signposting** to dispersed asylum seekers
- **Telephone advice line** for asylum seekers and agencies who support them
- **Choices** advice service for refugees and asylum seekers considering returning home
- **Emergency accommodation** for newly arrived asylum seekers
- **Community development** support for refugee led organisations
- **Refugee awareness training** and training on asylum support issues for a wide range of groups and agencies
- The **Well Being** project promoting mental health and integration through sports and arts activities
- **Horizons** supported volunteering project
- **Racial harassment prevention** in North Manchester
- **Time Together** refugee mentoring scheme
- **Research**, including '*Labour Lost*', an exploration of barriers to refugee employment funded by the North West Development Agency.
- The **Sunrise** pilot project, which supports refugees in receipt of a positive decision in integrating into their new lives within the community.

- The **Gateway** project, based in our *Bolton* office, supports 83 people from Liberia and Congo resettled in Bolton under the Gateway Protection Programme, which is now being expanded to neighbouring Bury.

Employment and refugee communities

Our varied work and extensive contacts with refugee communities has long highlighted the importance of employment in refugee integration as well as 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 contrasts sharply with the findings of the Industrial Society that:

"The majority of refugees arrive with skills, qualifications and experience - all of which could be of benefit to UK employers at a time of nationwide skills shortages. 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."

A Poor Reception, The Industrial Society, 2001

Our own research with Lancaster University and the North West Development Agency confirmed this and explored why this might be and how it could be addressed. Among our key findings were that refugee communities had extremely low levels of awareness of employment advice (and specifically Information, Advice and Guidance - IAG) services. Where there was awareness there were often low levels of satisfaction and a strong sense that agencies had too little understanding of refugee communities.

A conclusion of the research was:

"Specifically it is suggested that Job Centres and other agencies providing similar 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."

Labour Lost, North West Development Agency, 2004

The Bolton Employment Project was developed as a response to this and we believe it demonstrates a creative way of addressing refugee unemployment that can be built on by Refugee Action and a wide range of other agencies.

The project in summary

The Projects aims and outline methodology are summarised below

The Bolton Employment Project aims 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 advice and information, advice and guidance
- Increase refugee employment in Bolton

How will it work?

It will do this by grant funding IAG agencies to allow them to employ 6 refugees full time on a 6-month contract. The agencies will provide training and supervision. The refugees (described as 'apprentices') will take a full part in the delivery of services, with a particular but not exclusive focus on work with refugee communities. This will be governed by a service level agreement (SLA) between refugee action and the employing agency, guaranteeing standards of support and training. Refugee Action will also work with each agency to help them develop their service to refugees in general. This will all be co-ordinated by a part time refugee action staff member based with a partner agency in Bolton (BRASS).

Project Summary, Refugee Action, 2004

A successful bid to the Community Fund brought in just under £85,000 from a fund which had been delegated to Action for Employment (A4E) to support work to increase employment among Black and Ethnic Minority communities in Bolton. A further £6,000 was provided through the Bolton Asylum team

The first 3 agency partners were selected (BRASS, NEARIS and Bolton Asylum Team) and in July 2004 Karen Sharp was appointed as project coordinator.

BRASS and Bolton Asylum Team were unable to start trainees in the first cohort and at short notice SITU agreed to appoint an apprentice. This left a first cohort of only 2 trainees, at SITU and NEARIS starting in late autumn 2004. Both trainees were enrolled on NVQ's in Information, Advice and Guidance at level 2. The SITU placement broke down half way through and it was decided to try to 're-place' the trainee as part of an expanded second cohort. The traineeship at NEARIS completed successfully in the spring of 2005.

The second Cohort of trainees at Bolton Asylum Team, BRASS and Bolton Wise (which took 2 trainees) started in early summer 2005. All 4 trainees were enrolled on NVQ's at level 3.

Impact of the project

Outputs

The project has been broadly successful in meeting its agreed outputs.

6 apprentices from Bolton refugee communities engaged and in placement

Because 1 trainee had to be 're-placed', only a total of 5 apprentices were engaged, with one of them engaged by 2 different agencies.

6 refugee access or employment awareness plans developed in conjunction with placement agencies

All 5 engagements that completed resulted in refugee access or employment awareness plans.

6 training and development action plans developed

All 6 engagements included training and development action plans

4 quarterly reports produced each year

Quarterly reports were produced as agreed throughout the project's duration

Appropriate guidance and training for placement agencies

All requests for training and guidance were met.

Impact

Judging the impact against the aims:

Increase the ability of a group of refugees to find employment in the advice and information, advice and guidance sectors

Two of the partner agencies (BRASS and BoltonWISE) have received funding to continue the service developed through this project. They are retaining 3 of the refugees who participated in this project, 1 at BRASS and 2 at BoltonWISE.

Of the 5 trainees, 3 felt that the project had made it easier for them to gain employment in the future. 1 was unsure (although has since found employment at BRASS) and 1 felt that aside from providing a reference the project had not enhanced his employability.

The 3 trainees who are continuing to work in IAG are on track to complete their NVQs level 3 in IAG in the next month. 1 was unable to complete their NVQ, having decided to leave the field, and the trainee who completed the first cohort obtained their NVQ level 2 in IAG.

Build the capacity of these sectors to offer a high quality and appropriate service to refugee communities

The 4 agencies that completed engagements were asked to take part in the end of engagement evaluation. Asked to rate the project from 1 (poor) to excellent (5) average responses were:

Information about the project from Refugee Action	3.75
Support from Refugee Action	4.00
Projects helpfulness to our agency	3.50
Projects helpfulness to trainee	3.75

Asked 'Has the project made a difference to you organisation?' 2 agencies said yes, 1 a qualified yes and 1 a qualified no. Comments were:

"Made us more aware of problems faced by refugees seeking employment"

"Raising staff awareness of the barriers and difficulties faced by refugees; increased links with refugee agencies and communities; raising the profile of [our agency] and the services we offer within ethnic minority communities; possibility of developing more work with refugee communities in the future"

"[Our agency] is run by staff and volunteers who are able to provide a wide range of services including the provision of IAG about education, employment, training, housing and medical services. In addition to this [we have] built up a network of contacts and agencies to which students seeking specialised advice can be referred. Having an extra member of staff was beneficial but did not alter the level of service we provide"

"Whilst it has helped team members, it has at the same time been very time consuming".

Increase refugee access to advice and information, advice and guidance

This is perhaps the greatest success of the project. Two agencies have, as a result of the project, developed plans to significantly extend their services to refugee communities. One has received funding from Jobcentre Plus to mainstream the projects services to offer employment advice and signposting to refugees accessing drop-in support. The other is developing both outreach services and specialised IAG and job seeking packages for refugees, perhaps linked to the Gateway protection programme. Refugee Action are actively involved in supporting this.

The project has also been a significant factor in bringing about a regular meeting of agencies involved in refugee employment in Bolton for information sharing and with a view to developing a Bolton refugee employment strategy.

Increase refugee employment in Bolton

It is too early to judge this, and there are serious problems even in taking baseline measurements. Until mid 2005 there was no way of measuring refugee unemployment locally. Job Centre Plus has recently introduced a 'voluntary marker' that, it is hoped, will make refugee employment measurements over time and between areas possible in the future.

Recommendations

The Bolton Employment Project was a pilot, and while the impacts outlined previously are of significant value, the lessons learned are just as important. The project evaluation included one-to-one interviews with all trainees involved in the project, questionnaires sent to all agencies who took part (which were completed by the 4 agencies which had completed engagements), an in depth interview with the project coordinator and finally a focus group involving a range of key stakeholders to test initial findings.

Perhaps the central finding was that all 4 agencies would consider taking part in a further development of the scheme in the future and felt that it was valuable and worthwhile. All agencies, as well as the coordinator and trainees, recommended a range of possible improvements about which there was widespread agreement.

Longer set-up period

It was widely agreed that there was not enough time for project set up. Partnerships and service level agreements and timetables should have been agreed either at the start of the project. Ideally the whole project should have been developed in partnership with the engagement agencies (though this might have meant reducing the number of agencies). This could also help agencies identify areas where they needed additional information, training or support and to find the best ways of addressing these needs.

There were some problems with smaller partner agencies where events external to this project knocked them off course and caused significant slippage. Where an agency was drafted in at short notice to 'fill a gap' it was impossible to do the set up work thoroughly and it was this engagement that did not complete.

More rigorous recruitment process

The methodology of the project aimed to be as close to 'normal' employment as possible. All trainees were recruited and employed by agencies and funded by Refugee Action. However, the compressed recruitment schedule led to an impression that trainees were employed by Refugee Action and placed with agencies. More careful recruitment and better provision of initial information must address this. In hindsight, it seems the most successful candidates were recruited by the most formal and rigorous recruitment processes.

A particular difficulty was that many refugees are clearly very eager to work and sought employment on the project even though they did not aspire to work in this field long term (though they were willing to work and study to their utmost during the programme, seeing it as a good way into employment in general). A more general 'pre employment' programme based around 'working with people' may have been a way of locating people who were aiming for this

career path and for whom the training and experience would be of greatest benefit.

Improved Project Clarity

All trainees were recruited and employed by agencies and funded by Refugee Action. However, the compressed recruitment schedule and uncertainty about how to describe the project to the trainees led to an impression that trainees were employed by Refugee Action and placed with agencies. This in turn caused the trainees to express concern as the project came to an end since they did not fully appreciate the short-term nature of the project. Better provision of initial information would address this and could emphasise the temporary nature of the scheme and the responsibility of the trainee to move into independent employment.

Longer Project Duration

While NVQ level 3 is a very useful qualification within the sector, it cannot be achieved within a 6 month period without extensive knowledge of the field.

It is clear that to take someone, however able, and make them employable within the professional IAG field takes more than 6 months. More time than was anticipated was needed to give people a broad understanding of the 'world of work' and work culture in Britain than we had allowed. It was felt that longer engagements were needed, even if this meant reducing the intensity of the placement e.g. employing people part-time.

Additional training needs

There may be a need for specific language support to help trainees grasp the technical vocabulary of IAG, and to develop proficiency in writing reports.

Trainees also expressed concerns about what would happen to them at the end of the project. This was addressed by providing job-search training. In future, this could be coupled with additional information and individual action planning support.

Conclusions

The Bolton Employment project has been a success. The hard work of agencies, trainees and the coordinator has come together to make a real difference to the lives of individuals and the plans of agencies that will, in the long term, ensure better opportunities for refugees in Bolton.

We believe that the model we used is a good one. To improve refugee employment there is a clear need to improve the way that IAG agencies engage with refugee communities. The people with the best understanding of how to do this are refugees themselves. To employ refugees within the sector requires programmes that give refugees the skills, qualifications and (crucially) experience to gain employment in the sector on their own merits. A form of traineeship is perhaps the most direct and effective way of achieving this.

The pilot project has been effective, and has taught us a great deal about how this can be developed in the future. The pilot project has been based in Bolton, and we believe that there is a strong argument for a new expression of this project in Bolton, building on the strengths we have developed and learning from our experience of the last 18 months.

We also believe that the needs the project addresses are by no means confined to Bolton. Bolton in some ways typifies the situation of refugees in dispersal areas, and we believe that this methodology is far more widely applicable. It is applicable to any other dispersal area where a partnership between refugee specialists and employment specialists can be forged. The pilot project was led by Refugee Action, but there is no reason why the lead cannot come from within the IAG sector, from refugee led groups or from Job Centre Plus itself.