

Partnership



A Way to Work

Successes and Lessons from a Refugee and Asylum Seeker
Employment Partnership Project
Refugee Resource, Oxford

Rachel Wiggans

Access First Project Coordinator

Published June 2005 by

Refugee Resource

Hooper House

3 Collins Street

Oxford OX4 1XS

0845 458 0055

info@refugeeresource.org

Acknowledgements

Bridget Crampton, Lucy McConville, Anna Sanders and Amanda Webb-Johnson made invaluable contributions to this document. We also acknowledge the contribution of members of the Oxfordshire Refugee and Asylum Seeker Training Education and Employment Partnership (ORASTEEP) and thank, above all, the refugees and asylum seekers who participated in the project and made helpful suggestions throughout about how the service could be improved.

Photographs in this report were taken by Bridget Crampton, Eleanor Moore and Rachel Wiggans

Please feel free to reproduce any part of this report. We ask you to acknowledge the source.



cover photo: EK was offered a placement doing office work at East Oxford Action. After a few weeks' work she applied for a vacancy there and was appointed.

Refugee Resource is a charity limited by guarantee in England. Company no. 4558542 Charity no. 1098876

Contents

Introduction	3
What is Access First?	4
Partnership	5
Setting up	8
Services offered by Access First	10
Delivery	13
Employers	15
Placements	16
Resources	19
Other support	20
Staff training	21
Management	22
Funding and sustainability	23
The outside world	24

Foreword

Oxfordshire has a history of accepting refugees.

In 1914 Belgian refugees fleeing the First World War were welcomed in Bicester and Finmere. In the 1930s refugee academics from Nazi Germany found sanctuary at the University of Oxford.

More recently, when Campsfield House in Kidlington became an immigration detention centre, some of those whose asylum claims were successful settled in the county on their release.

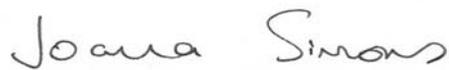
There is great diversity amongst the individuals who are often lumped together as 'refugees and asylum seekers'. The estimated 2,500 refugees living in Oxfordshire have fled from persecution or war in over 50 countries and speak over 50 languages.

Those born and brought up in the UK are privileged not to have had reason to flee their home country, and the stability that exists in the UK can sometimes make it difficult to understand the desperate circumstances that have led refugees to abandon their homes, jobs, families, friends and all that is familiar to them.

But it is to Oxfordshire's advantage to welcome them and the skills and abilities they bring. Some have previously worked as entrepreneurs, or farmers. Some are doctors, nurses, teachers or journalists. Others bring construction and engineering skills. Many are now contributing to Oxfordshire's community and economy, in education, the NHS, in manufacturing, distribution, catering and a host of other jobs on which we all depend. Oxfordshire County Council itself employs refugees in a variety of different jobs.

As a Council we are committed to supporting refugees in contributing their skills as soon as possible, in order to help them re-establish their lives and integrate into Oxfordshire society. To achieve this the Council, the voluntary sector and local employers are working together, sharing information and expertise and learning from each other.

We welcome this booklet produced by the Access First employment and training project, with whom the Council has been very pleased to work in partnership.



Joanna Simons
Chief Executive
Oxfordshire County Council

June 2005

Introduction

We have written this booklet in order to share our experiences of partnership working in support of refugees and asylum seekers who are looking for work.

When we started, in 2001, the only sources of expertise about running a refugee employment and training project that we could find were in large metropolitan areas. We knew that working in Oxfordshire would be different, but we visited *Refugees into Jobs* in London and were very grateful for the wealth of experience and advice they shared with us. They told us about ways of working they had found successful and pointed out some of the pitfalls. We drew on their expertise, along with that of our local partners (particularly Oxfordshire County Council's Community English School¹) and that of local refugees and asylum seekers themselves. After initial seed corn funding for the project from the Single Regeneration Challenge Fund through East Oxford Action, together with our partners we created a funding bid to the European Social Fund.

Our ethos

At the heart of our bid was partnership, which we were determined to make work effectively. Refugees and asylum seekers have complex needs which no one organisation can meet alone. By pulling together we were sure that we could create a service that valued and respected refugees' and asylum seekers' own experience and skills, and identified and provided the help they needed in order to contribute to our local society and economy, as they clearly want to.

Of course part of valuing refugees' and asylum seekers' skills and experience was building it into the project itself, and our advisory group, consisting of six refugees and asylum seekers, met every three months to comment on what the project was doing and planning, and provide invaluable insider advice about the difficulties we faced.

The third key commitment was to people as individuals. In every interview we start from where the person is. Notwithstanding the tick-boxes our funders require, what we offer is what the individual identifies as their need. We do not encourage people into something they do not want simply because it will help us reach a target. And if what they want does not improve our outcome statistics, we aim to help with it nonetheless or, if it is outside our expertise, find a partner who can help. This approach has created long term relationships, real trust, and joyous celebrations when someone achieves their ambition.

At the root of the successes we have had are unquestionably these three strands: our partnership; the fact that at each stage the project was shaped by refugees and asylum seekers themselves; and our commitment to individuals above structures.

Evaluation

In spring 2004 the Access First project was evaluated by Michael Bell Associates, who have conducted evaluations of many refugee projects. They commented that "Access First is a model of good practice in partnership working, with all partners fully engaged in the development and delivery of the project and expressing considerable pride in their collective achievements. The project has also successfully engaged service users in the development of the project from its inception through monitoring progress to planning of service improvements and related developments."

Michael Bell Associates also praised the project's 'holistic approach' and the way its staff worked with employers. They identified Access First as one of the most successful they have seen in securing employment opportunities for refugees; the Home Office Refugee Integration Unit's sub-group on employment consider it a flagship project.

But it has not always been easy, and now that we know a lot more about running a refugee employment project in a non-metropolitan area, we felt we should once more follow *Refugees into Jobs*' good example, and share our experience with others doing similar work.

¹ The Community English School is run by Oxfordshire County Council Adult Learning

What is Access First?

The Access First Employment and Training Project, a partnership project coordinated by the Oxford-based charity Refugee Resource, supports refugees and asylum seekers into work and training that matches their skills and abilities.

The first phase of Access First ran from July 2001 to December 2003, offering a range of services to refugees and asylum seekers. Individuals could choose whether to enrol on the full project, which for most included a 60-hour Work Preparation course, or whether to opt for a few advice and guidance sessions (for further information on what was offered see p10).

Access First worked.

Of the 72 who enrolled on the full project, by December 2003

46 (64%) had secured employment, 26 (36%) full time and 20 (28%) part time

9 (13%) had gone on to training

3 (4%) were doing voluntary work

In addition 135 people received advice and guidance from Access First on a wide range of work-related issues and, although full information is not available, many of these were also able to progress into paid employment.

We are proud of these successes, and so are the refugees and asylum seekers who achieved them and the employers who have worked closely with us. We remain in touch with many of our clients and continue to follow their progress and offer support as they struggle to overcome further barriers and rebuild their lives in the UK.

Along the way we have learnt lessons about what works well, what is less successful, and how to deal with some of the pitfalls. Guided by an advisory group made up of refugees and asylum seekers and a steering group of partner organisations the project was able to experiment, adapt and improve.

At the end of the first phase, the independent evaluation by Michael Bell Associates enabled us to take good practice and lessons learned into the next phase, which runs from April 2004 to March 2007. We hope that others involved in employment projects supporting refugees and asylum seekers in rebuilding their lives in the UK will find our experiences useful.

40% of clients had indefinite leave to remain so had the right to work without restriction in the UK.

35% had exceptional leave to remain. As this was a temporary status and the Home Office documents showed its expiry date, employers found this off-putting.

25% were asylum seekers waiting for their case to be decided. They had all applied for and received permission to work before this possibility was withdrawn in July 2002. In many cases the document showing they had permission to work also stated that they were liable to detention, a strong deterrent to employers who already struggle to understand and stay within the demands of employment law.

Partnership

'Partnership' is an over-used and misused word, but partnership is how Refugee Resource works, and partnership is why Access First is successful.

Partnership as relationships

with clients...

At the core of Refugee Resource is an absolute commitment to refugees and asylum seekers and to meeting their needs, as expressed by them, in accessing employment and training. The project was set up as a result of a consultation with refugees and asylum seekers, and was shaped throughout by an advisory group of refugees and asylum seekers. Clients' expressed needs, not organisational structures, decides what happens.

with service providers...

The key Access First operational partnership was between Refugee Resource where one-to-one advice and guidance sessions were offered, and Oxfordshire County Council's Community English School² where a new ESOL-rooted Work Preparation course was offered to groups. The employment advisors and the course tutor were in contact frequently to discuss ways forward for the refugees and asylum seekers we were jointly supporting.

Partnership with other service providers is also crucial. In order to put refugees' and asylum seekers' needs as close as possible to the heart of what we do, we take time to plan our projects and to talk to other service providers – we aim to promote collaboration and avoid duplication. We share information about our work (not about individuals, unless we have their permission) openly with other organisations, we learn about what others offer, and we make sure that referrals are in the best interests of the client.

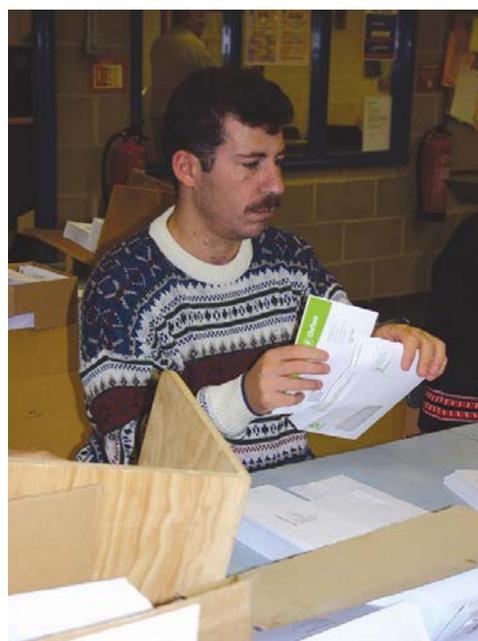
This means in practice that if we think another provider can offer a more appropriate service to a client, we refer or, if the client would benefit from two organisations' involvement, we collaborate. We do not regard a client (nor the potential 'outcome' that they represent) as 'ours'.

with employers...

We are privileged in Oxfordshire to be able to work in partnership with committed employers. Oxfordshire County Council, the largest employer in the county, and Refugee Resource entered into a partnership agreement and the Council has offered several work placements to refugees and asylum seekers. In particular its Fire and Rescue Service has created paid opportunities for individuals with certain skills to work for periods of up to a year. We have also worked closely with several employers in the private sector, learning what their requirements are and making sure we send candidates they will be keen to employ.

Partnership in management

The Access First advisory group, comprising six refugees and asylum seekers, met quarterly and their views and opinions fed into a quarterly steering group whose members came from local agencies with a direct interest in the work: Employer Coalition, Jobcentre Plus, Asylum Welcome, Community English School, Social and Health Care's Asylum Seeker Service.



KJ was offered a work placement at Oxfordshire Employment Services

² see footnote on page 3

Partnerships as structures

The Oxfordshire Refugee and Asylum Seeker Training, Education and Employment Partnership (ORASTEEP) has been meeting for over four years. It includes voluntary organisations like Refugee Resource and Asylum Welcome; the statutory sector - Oxfordshire County Council (Social and Health Care and the Learning and Culture Department including ESOL), Further Education Colleges including a pastoral support service for disadvantaged young learners, Jobcentre Plus, the Learning and Skills Council, Connexions. The two-monthly meetings are a practical sharing of information, identification of common difficulties or gaps in provision, and collaboration to enable all our services to work better together in the interests of clients. Over the four years of the partnership relationships have become more trusting, and the ability to discuss difficulties and problems has enabled each partner to provide a better service. We are convinced that the partnership approach has improved services to clients.

The Oxfordshire Refugee and Asylum Seeker Training, Education and Employment Partnership

What worked

Key organisations were involved

and those attending demonstrated committed leadership and were able to make decisions for their organisation.

Regular attendance at meetings

made work easier because we knew each other. It built trust and respect of others and understanding of their priorities. It meant we knew who to ask for what and it made referrals easier.

Agenda

was things that needed to be done, including problems, not just 'story-telling' and not just bid-focussed. When necessary a working group was set up to address specific issues, eg a support project for 16-19 year olds came out of the partnership identifying a need.

Shared responsibility

Minute-taking and chairing was shared, and individuals took responsibility for action between meetings - things *did* get taken forward.

Shared knowledge and experience

Members of the group learnt from each other, both formally

- we held a joint training session about New Deal (see Staff training, p21); and informally
- individuals contacted each other between meetings to ask advice or talk through a problem or discuss the best way to support a client.

Members felt that the partnership was supportive. Being willing to address difficulties openly with each other led to more creative joint problem solving and more trust.

Collaboration over the changing context

Where changed legislation had an impact on work with refugees and asylum seekers various organisations could agree about how to respond coherently, for example over the family Indefinite Leave to Remain project.

The partnership had credibility

Partnership backing made it easier to take things higher within one organisation and have them adopted – it gave a wider remit than just one organisation and new ideas that came from the group influenced policy.

It also gave funding bids credibility.

“As an ESOL tutor, supporting asylum seekers/refugees into work in the context of partnership backing was very rewarding. Doors were opening for individuals to move forwards, unlike the frustrations of other more isolated ESOL provision. ORASTEEP meetings were practical and interesting and gave me a much wider knowledge of what was possible.”

Lucy McConville, Course tutor

Learning points

When setting up and developing a partnership

- research what already exists

- look at examples of successful partnerships in the field

- see if there is a felt need

- start small and use one or two organisations to influence others

- promote shared ownership and resist one organisation leading

- recognise that some organisations will not get involved or will attend intermittently

- address difficulties openly, understand others' perspectives and seek win-win solutions.

Being action focused, addressing issues practically and developing a united voice is successful.

Set up the partnership before submitting funding bids.

A clear point of contact in referral agencies makes it easier to ensure appropriate referrals and to avoid duplication.

A culture of continuous learning and improvement - a willingness to be open, to act on constructive criticism and to understand organisational constraints - has enabled partners to overcome tensions and generalised perceptions between statutory and voluntary organisations.

Setting up

Access First started as a result of three consultation groups with refugees and asylum seekers - with men, with women and with young people. It was clear from these that men in particular wanted help with accessing work and training.

The project then did a survey of the skills and aspirations of local refugees and asylum seekers. Eight refugees and asylum seekers were trained to do the interviews, in nine different languages, both with members of their communities whom they already knew, and with volunteer interviewees referred by other agencies. This enabled us to find out what support for employment people wanted, and gave us a potential group of initial clients.

We visited *Refugees into Jobs* in London to learn what worked and what did not. We needed to adapt their good practice to fit the lower numbers and specific circumstances of refugees and asylum seekers in Oxfordshire – it was much harder for us to group people from similar work sectors. We did, though, with specialist partners, set up a refugee health professionals project which now exists in parallel with Access First.

Refugee Resource, local ESOL providers, and an adult information advice and guidance service then drew up a draft programme (see p10 for more details).

What worked

User consultation - workshops and a nine-language survey conducted by refugees and asylum seekers themselves to

- identify skills and aspirations
- identify specific needs
- highlight issues within the local context
- define the project goals

Drawing on existing professional expertise – advice about

- course content from a very experienced advice and guidance specialist, eg positive language for transferable skills and progression options
- course delivery from ESOL specialists, eg integrating work on jobsearch with language progression
- barriers refugees and asylum seekers face from an organisation with expertise in refugee and asylum seeker issues

Publicity materials

- short, clear, simple, different languages, later versions used student quotes

Location

- being at the heart of the community where many refugees and asylum seekers live – clients could contact staff easily

Resources

- Community English School – staff, volunteers, learning materials were already in place and further resources were developed for the course (see publication by Lucy McConville, reference on p19)
- Refugee Resource - an open access resource area was set up with information about finding work, eg bank accounts, vocational training, handling interviews

Pilot course

- valuable as a learning tool for the trainer
- helped to develop materials for subsequent courses.

Learning points

Use refugees and asylum seekers where possible in project design and setting up.

Timetabling

be aware of work shifts/ childcare issues/ religious times/ other classes
provide extended support around class times.

Be very clear about funder requirements

it took some time to design record forms that met the needs of both the funder and the Community English School

we were not aware of exactly what documentary evidence the funder would need in terms of client eligibility and recording soft and hard outcomes - putting in place the missing paperwork in retrospect was very time consuming.

It is easy to slip into being driven by funder requirements but it is essential to stay client-centred.

Partnership issues

Staff need to be clear about line management – a close relationship between operational staff in different organisations supported by a close relationship between managers is very effective.

Clarify how outcomes required by funders will be shared between organisations.

Services offered by Access First

Services offered included

- one-to-one advice and guidance
- coaching in jobsearch skills
- training in how to do application forms and CVs
- interview practice
- unpaid work placements – usually 2-3 days a week for eight weeks
- a resource area with newspapers, a computer set up for jobsearch and information about careers.

A core part of the project was a 60-hour Work Preparation course, jointly developed in very close partnership with the Community English School. This provided

- ESOL-supported group work in jobsearch, applications and interviews
- information about the British workplace covering tax, equal opportunities, health and safety, relationships at work and other issues.

Refugee health professionals were supported by a parallel project dedicated to their particular needs.

Provision

- 75% took the Work Preparation course
- 10% were referred to a specialist health professionals course
- 15% had individual programmes only

Training and achievements

- 76% completed a CV (some already had CVs)
- 57% gained a health and safety certificate
- 53% obtained at least one job interview (some obtained jobs without interview)
- 50% gained a nationally recognised computing certificate
- 24% gained an Open College Network certificate
- 17% completed a work placement

“The presentation based on our past...employment enabled me to see myself as someone capable of achieving what I put my mind into. It helped me see that I do have skills that can be transferable. In my preparation for this presentation I saw myself as assertive - with SELF ESTEEM.”

Participant on work preparation course

“Writing a CV was a problem because in my culture you don’t sell yourself. You let others say good things about you.”

Participant on work preparation course

‘I was stressed when I had the practice job interview with Sarah from Sainsbury’s because I didn’t know her – she wasn’t my teacher. A few days after that I was thinking to myself: ‘why did I say this, why did I make this mistake in language?’ Now I speak more with English people and I don’t think I will have a problem in a future job interview.’

Mohammad Zazai, Afghanistan

“I learned a lot of things on the Work Preparation course. They told us about the culture of the English when they are at work. How to save time at work, like doing a job quickly and safely and in the best way. A lot of things are different in our country when you’re finding work. In this country giving all your details, all your background on an application form – the first time I saw this I thought ‘OK, what’s going on?’”

Habib, Afghanistan



At the end of the Work Preparation Course participants were awarded a certificate showing their achievements during the course, such as the Health and Safety certificate, an Open College Network accreditation, an IT qualification

What worked

ESOL input

- specific support with language needs for seeking employment
- diagnostic assessment of all four language skills
- learning plan mapped against National Curriculum
- three external (national) and one internal form of accreditation.

Groupwork backed up by one-to-one support in

- careers advice and guidance
- jobsearch skills
- CV and application form writing
- interview practice.

Practice interviews

- a focussed practice one or two days before the real interview, using the selection criteria of the job being interviewed for.

Links with the outside world through

- external speakers
- employers
- partners.

Placements (for more detail see p16)

Learning and pastoral support

- tutorials – making time as needed in one-to-one sessions, to listen to what the student wants/needs to say
- pastoral support
- extra support for 16-19 year olds
- extra support for students with disabilities
- having professional counselling available for those in need.

Financial support

- childcare
- transport to classes and to placements
- lunch while on placement
- access to a bursary fund for other expenses (eg course fees, books).

Learning points

Refugees and asylum seekers are likely to have many more disruptions and uncertainties in their lives (eg insecure housing, bad news from home) than other ESOL students and this has an impact on their learning. Asylum seekers are also more likely than the average ESOL student to be absent from classes or to miss appointments because of having to attend meetings, eg at the Home Office, with solicitors.

Patience is essential - staff need to expect and accommodate mood swings (and occasionally volatile behaviour) and be ready to move two steps forward and one step back. There are times when it is not possible for clients to progress because of what is happening in their lives. Often there is nothing an advisor or tutor can do to change the situation.

Manage client expectations - it can take a long time for a job to be up and running. Work at a lower level or part-time work can lead to something more fulfilling in time.

Some everyday language and basic literacy was needed before starting the Work Preparation course. Providing it at a lower level was not appropriate as those with very limited English were very unlikely to get work.

Partnership issues

The Work Preparation course tutor and staff offering the one-to-one support at Refugee Resource met regularly to ensure that the provision for each individual was coherent and to discuss any difficulties or absences and how to handle them. It worked best to meet after every 10-15 hours of group input. On the most intensive course (60 hours over three weeks), where this was not possible, the group work and the one-to-one support were less integrated and the overall support to clients was less effective.

Delivery



The pilot Work Preparation course was 5 hours a week for 12 weeks. In response to student requests later versions of the course were 10 hours a week for 6 weeks.

An employment advisor from Refugee Resource visited the course very early on to invite participants to make appointments for one to one support with finding work, and the course tutor also took the group to visit Refugee Resource's office and resource area.

Some refugees and asylum seekers preferred to complete the course before taking up one to one appointments, others did both concurrently. All participants were told about placements and the benefits they offered but few wanted to take them up.

What worked

Assessments

in-depth assessments for students before joining the course, during and at the end of the course so that the course could be shaped to their needs.

Flexible structure

the core course was the same for all groups but additional elements depended on the needs of each particular group.

Professional, qualified teachers

able to adapt to different needs of clients

working in an established ESOL centre offering a range of services to learners eg. mini-Certificate Presentation Ceremonies.

Being learner-centred and focussed.

Using a range of teaching and learning styles - visual, verbal, etc.

Advice and guidance about what work is available at what level in the local area, and what is required to obtain it.

Individual intensive jobsearch help.

Application form help

one-to-one for specific jobs.

CV help

valuing experience, sometimes not from paid employment, in own country eg describing transferable skills and previous experience in own country.

Interview practice

in class

- using employers
- recording on video so students could evaluate their own performance and receive employer, tutor and peer feedback.

individually, a day or two before a real interview.

Placements (see p16).

Involving employers and outside speakers gave the whole programme an invaluable 'real' feel, and a seriousness which clients clearly responded to.

Preparing appropriate vocabulary before specialist outside speakers.

Responding to client evaluation forms at regular stages throughout the project and making changes to the programme as a result of direct feedback.

Learning points

Manage expectations

some clients expect no help and are extremely grateful for what they receive; others expect an agency helping with work to have jobs instantly available. It is important to be clear from the start with each client about what it is realistic to expect from organisations and what the individual's role is in achieving their goals.

Be aware of cultural issues

fear of failure can be very marked in cultures where status and pride are important
some clients answer questions with what they think the tutor wants to hear rather than the 'truth', and may claim more or less experience than they have
selling oneself is an alien concept in most cultures.

Provide specialised support for particular groups, particularly health professionals.

A lot of work has to be done to find out what experience people have from their home countries and to persuade them that it is relevant – most see the system in the UK as being so different that they do not value what they have done previously, and sometimes do not mention experience of skills for several weeks.

Many clients are in receipt of benefits so not entitled to study more than 15.5 hours a week. Jobcentre Plus agreed to recognise the Work Preparation course as jobsearch so that those also taking English classes did not lose benefit.

A more intensive course (60 hours over 6 weeks rather than 12) worked better for retention of students but was more demanding on staff in terms of making time for one to one support and finding placements.

Partnership issues

Close partnership working was important to ensure co-ordinated provision and minimise "falling through the system" when clients are in touch with more than one agency.

Close communication between the key delivery partners (the Community English School and Refugee Resource) at both strategic and operational levels was essential.

"At first I didn't know how to answer the questions on the application form. After I spoke to Rachel and Bridget I spent four hours thinking about the questions. I wrote too much and Refugee Resource explained about more specific answers – I was a real pain, going back and forth, but they were patient. I got an interview and Refugee Resource made me do an interview practice. It was very hard but it helped me get the job."

Jolandas, Lithuania

Employers

Access First built up good relationships with a range of local employers. Some employed more refugees and asylum seekers than average because their need for manual workers meant they were able to employ people, soon after they arrived, whose English was not yet fluent. In many cases these employers were interested in understanding more about the issues, including documentation, affecting refugees and asylum seekers, and Access First did bespoke presentations to human resources and other staff.

Other employers were keen to employ more refugees and asylum seekers because they recognised the value of a diverse workforce that reflects the local community, and they were prepared to invest in training workers to enable this to happen. They alerted us to their vacancies, and were active in identifying unpaid work placements that could give an individual experience of the UK workplace and an employer's reference (and, in some cases, lead on to paid work).

Some employers did not see the value of a relationship with Access First and turned away any attempts to work more closely.

"The refugees we have taken on have made excellent members of staff, with a willingness to work, a willingness to learn and a willingness to achieve. Their reliability and ability to do the job has been first rate. Of the ten employees we have taken on since January, between them they have had only one day off sick."

Peter Hunt, Recruitment and Training Manager, Stagecoach, Oxford

What worked

Getting to know an employer's particular needs, so alerting them to candidates whose skills may particularly interest them. Once an employer trusted us to understand their needs they were more prepared to value a reference from us.

Being absolutely honest about an individual's strengths and weaknesses so the employer could make an informed decision about whether they were prepared to invest in the training required.

Briefing human resources staff about issues that might arise in recruiting refugees and asylum seekers, eg the possible need for more follow-up questions in interviews, as 'selling oneself' is an uncomfortable experience for people from many cultures.

Briefing human resources staff about issues that might arise in employing refugees, such as the request for most of the annual leave entitlement to be taken at once.

Being prepared to answer employers' questions about immigration statuses and documentation.

Active membership of the Oxfordshire Employers Race Equality Network

Learning points

In the early stages of the project we were over-optimistic about how an individual would fit in with an employer which led to some difficult placements. We learnt over time to make better matches between individuals and particular posts.

Key individuals within companies were crucial to good relationships. When a key contact, who had been prepared to accept references from us, left, their replacement was not necessarily interested in our work.

An important source of employment for refugees can be through their own friends and contacts.

Placements

Placements were on offer to all participants but take-up was lower than expected. Each placement was set up individually in order to give the trainee experience and references in an area of work that matched their job aspirations. The responsibilities and roles of the employer, the trainee and Access First were made clear from the start.

Most placements were two or three days a week (or five mornings or afternoons) for eight weeks, though by mutual agreement some were shorter and some much longer (the longest being eight months).

Throughout the placement Access First staff stayed in touch with the employer and the trainee, usually by phone or sometimes by visiting the workplace, to check that everything was working well. Where there were difficulties, such as erratic attendance, or a trainee able to do markedly more or less than expected, Access First staff worked with the employer and the trainee to resolve problems.

Some employers contacted Access First to offer specific placements which we then arranged with clients who could benefit from them.



Habib Hosseini on placement at Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service workshop

"Giving work placements to refugees and asylum seekers is an educational and enriching experience for both parties."

Bridget Morton, Oxfordshire County Council

What worked

Placements helped in finding satisfactory employment. Most of those who undertook placements found paid work either immediately or soon after and all thought their placements had been helpful.

Much goodwill was engendered through placements and employers valued the experience of diversity in the workplace.

Learning points

It was difficult to persuade clients of the value of placements. Most said they wanted to get into paid work quickly and that a placement might prevent this, though often several weeks jobhunting could have been more productively spent in a placement.

- Encourage placements earlier

- Find better ways of communicating the value of placements, especially by those who have done one talking about their experience.

Forging relationships with potential employers/providers of placements was time consuming but worth the effort.

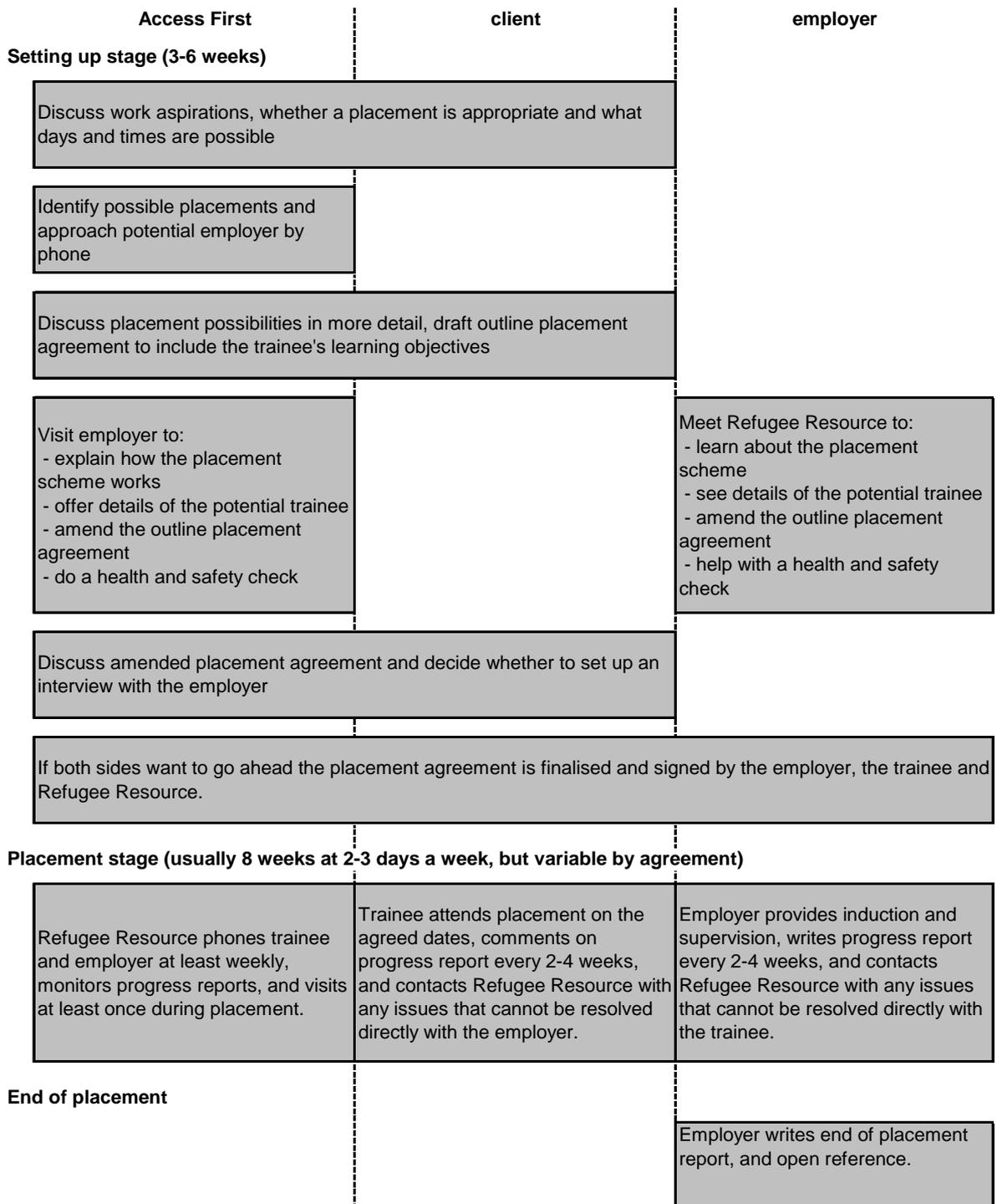
Once a placement was up and running it needed regular monitoring. Sometimes both parties were so keen for it to work that they did not acknowledge difficulties early enough, so Access First learnt to ask follow-up questions when either the employer or the trainee said that everything was fine.

Some placements led to temporary work with the same employer. The client then needed extra support with jobsearch as the temporary period was drawing to an end.

Partnership issues

Close partnership with employers is essential. It is important to recognise the burden that supervising a placement can be for an employer, and to ensure that the trainee has something to offer that the employer will value.

Placements



Resources

Refugee Resource had a private interview room with a range of careers guidance resources. It also had a drop-in resource area with

- current local newspapers
- materials on
 - work and training opportunities
 - opening bank accounts
 - applying for driving licences
 - sources of funding for training
 - a computer set up for jobsearch and learning driving theory

The Community English School had
spacious classrooms
a well-equipped IT suite
facilities for videoing interview practices



Finding a Job – looking for work, applying for work, starting work, by Lucy McConville, published by Oxfordshire County Council, ISBN 1-84281-039-1 (Core Work Preparation course materials at entry levels 2 & 3, mapped to ESOL and Adult Literacy Core Curricula)

Driving theory courses with ESOL support were especially popular.

What worked

- Group work so that participants could support and learn from each other
- Self-access resource area with newspapers, internet jobsearch facilities, training information etc
- Large, well-equipped classrooms and a good library
- Good IT for staff and students in the classroom
- Video
- Trained ESOL volunteers
- Learning materials based on the National Curriculum
- Access to
 - 'enrichment' activities with ESOL support - football, silk painting, gardening, etc
 - Community Education and other local courses, especially IT courses
 - bursary fund for courses, books, equipment for work

Learning points

Learning materials need to be at more than one level. Like most ESOL, Work Preparation course groups included students at different levels, and resources continuously needed adapting and revising.

Partnership issues

Most clients needed extra help with IT – it was very useful to know about local courses and drop-in facilities for referral.

Other support

Most clients who came to us for help with finding work had a range of other needs. Some faced housing difficulties, some did not have a national insurance number, or were not getting the benefits they were entitled to. Some had immigration difficulties or were in need of therapeutic support. Refugee Resource is a small organisation and for most of these needs we enlisted the help of partner organisations. Refugee Resource however also runs the 'Woodpath Project', which provided therapeutic support (in most cases individual confidential counselling, with an interpreter if necessary) to those who wanted it. Clients had the opportunity to work on Refugee Resource's allotment and take responsibility for a piece of land to grow organic produce. Woodpath also offered a creative arts project.

The seamless interface between Woodpath and Access First was extremely valuable for some people. As they progressed through counselling some felt able to start to think about work, and we aimed to make the transition from Woodpath to Access First easy and supportive. In some cases the move was in the other direction, as clients Access First was supporting felt they could benefit from emotional and psychological support.



Clients interviewed by Michael Bell Associates

"First of all the Refugee Resource helped me with counselling which made my life better, which was a great experience as well and, secondly, it helped me with learning the use of computer and knowing a lot about the UK work places."

"Because I came to them to get counselling, they gave me that plus much more, which I did not know about them. I received a great service."

What worked

Seeing our clients all the time as human beings, whose jobsearch would be affected by other difficulties in their lives and who needed support to try to resolve those difficulties.

Staff training

The Work Preparation course was led by an experienced ESOL tutor supported by an ESOL IT specialist. Specialists were brought in for

training on tax and national insurance (the local tax office)

health and safety training (providers included the local council, the further education college, and a freelance trainer)

interview practice (local employers)

One to one employment advice was provided by experienced staff who were also trained teachers, either in ESOL or basic skills.

All key staff had experience of living with cultural differences.

Staff attended professional courses and conferences to update knowledge and skills and to learn from others.

What worked

Specific input from the adult Information Advice and Guidance service on current language and approaches for effective jobsearch, up to-date CV format etc.

Regular ESOL training for course tutor at ESOL Centre

Networking with other ESOL tutors and the ESOL manager about options for students' learning, progression, accreditation

Learning points

All staff in contact with refugees and asylum seekers from reception to senior management need relevant training. An awareness of and sensitivity to cultural/ race/ language issues is essential.

Staff need training in working with people in distress.

Many training courses about work with refugees and asylum seekers assume minimal knowledge so cover ground that is already known.

Most conferences include a lot of 'lectures' (even in so-called 'workshops') and not enough time for discussing experiences with other practitioners.

Organisations need to be discerning about what training and conferences their staff spend time attending.

Partnership issues

Some peer training was provided by all members of the partnership getting together and discussing how they would handle particular case studies, which helped identify appropriate places and occasions for referral. The group had particular queries about the New Deal programme so Jobcentre Plus talked about the programme from their perspective and various organisations raised ways New Deal had helped or created difficulties for their clients. All participants learnt about constructive ways of using New Deal.

Management



Partners contributing to the Access First evaluation

Refugee Resource is a registered charity managed by six trustees. Strategic management for the project was provided by a trustee sub-group and the Director of Refugee Resource in very close collaboration with the Head of the Community English School, who also served on the Access First steering group.

The Access First Steering Group, which met quarterly, comprised management staff from

Jobcentre Plus

Oxfordshire County Council Social and Health Care Asylum Seeker Service

Employer Coalition

Asylum Welcome – another voluntary agency supporting refugees and asylum seekers in Oxford

The role of the steering group was to monitor progress against targets and make adjustments to the project as necessary. It also offered a forum where difficulties could be aired and potential solutions found within the partnership which would not have been available to any one organisation in isolation. Specific initiatives were also planned jointly.

An advisory group made up of six refugees and asylum seekers also met quarterly, just before the steering group so that their views could be incorporated into strategic decision-making. This group was invaluable and significantly shaped the project at various stages. They had the opportunity to send a representative to the steering group but did not see the need.

The Access First Project Co-ordinator line managed an employment advisor, both of whom were employed by Refugee Resource. It was essential to liaise regularly, usually weekly, with the course tutor, who was recruited specifically for the project and employed by Oxfordshire County Council's Community English School.

What worked

Frequent honest communication.

Genuine consultation, with members feeling their contributions were valued.

Addressing difficulties as soon as they arose, eg over changes to the budget that needed to be agreed with the funder.

Partnership steering group monitoring progress against targets and making adjustments to the project as necessary.

Learning points

Initially there was some confusion over who the course tutor should be answerable to but this was quickly resolved and did not pose difficulties.

Partnership issues

Partners value the experience of involvement in the Access First steering group and say it has an impact on work within their own organisations.

Consultation is perceived as genuine – people feel their contributions are valued which encourages them to contribute more.

Funding and sustainability

In the early stages having no track record made fundraising difficult and bids needed to stress the abilities and experience of the staff and trustees rather than the experience of the organisation. Access First received early funding from East Oxford Action, the local organisation administering the Single Regeneration Challenge Fund programme and from Oxford, Gloucester and Swindon Cooperative Society. As a result of this faith in our organisation we were in a stronger position to apply for European Social Fund (ESF) money. Applying with experienced partners was also an asset, although the matchfunding requirement (55% of total budget) was time-consuming to administer. When our original ESF funding came to an end, the Work Preparation course was mainstreamed and became part of Oxfordshire County Council's provision. To continue the individual support we bid to Jobcentre Plus under their new ESF co-financing scheme and won a contract until March 2007 to support refugees and asylum seekers into work.

As the Department for Work and Pensions recognises in its March 2005 refugee employment strategy, *Working to Rebuild Lives*, "Voluntary sector participation in partnerships is crucial if we are to address the employment needs of this very diverse group." (p13)

"Jobcentre Plus has a key role in helping refugees to find work, but ... it cannot do it alone and ... local effective partnerships are critical to success. Voluntary organisations will continue to provide specialist advice and guidance to refugee professionals and this strategy recognises the key role that the voluntary sector as a whole will play in its delivery." (p6)

Learning points

The difficulty for voluntary sector organisations is that many funders want innovation, and are not interested in funding an established service that is building on its success.

Although some programmes, or parts of programmes, can be adopted by the mainstream, the funding generally continues to come from the public sector. For a service to the disadvantaged, sustainability, in the sense of becoming income-generating, is extremely difficult.

The outside world

The aim of the Access First project was to enable refugees and asylum seekers to resume their lives and make their independent way in UK society. They were far away from home, family and friends and in some cases knew they had lost them forever.

Asylum seekers who are not granted indefinite leave to remain are uncertain about where their future will be, and many face financial and housing difficulties as well as concerns about their spouse's and children's wellbeing. It is especially difficult for parents and children separated from each other.

Many succeed in overcoming enormous barriers such as learning a new language and learning how to behave in a very different culture with very different cultural values. In our experience almost everyone approached this positively and recognised that they had to adapt. When they faced unfriendliness, hostility, aggression or racism, either in the street or in the media, their task was made much harder.

Access First did a lot of work with the local media to make sure they heard about good news stories and could present a positive and accurate image of refugees and asylum seekers to balance the predominantly negative images. Several refugees and asylum seekers were willing to talk to the media and to present their experiences. We issued press releases with quotes from those involved in the story.

Sometimes when asylum issues were topical the media asked to be put in touch with a refugee. We did this if we knew someone who was happy to be in the media spotlight, but otherwise, even though it was to our advantage to maintain good contacts in the media, we said that it was not possible (usually because of the short deadlines requested) and explained why refugees and asylum seekers are often unwilling to talk.

It is always important to support any refugee or asylum seeker exposed to the media and make sure they understand what may happen. We made sure no one felt coerced into talking to the radio, TV or newspaper, and that if they chose to do so, it was on their own terms, whether that was being anonymous or simply saying that certain questions were unacceptable.

Comments by refugees and asylum seekers

"Usually I stay away from asylum seekers because of the things the papers say. I have made friends with English people...I don't like the Social Services building or the asylum seekers around there, even though I am one, because of everything that is said."

"Sometimes you get hated because you don't speak the language. They look at you as though you are a very strange person. You just feel that you are isolated."

"I didn't tell anyone that I was a refugee. I really thought they might have treated me differently if they knew. I felt they might not employ me. Some people think asylum seekers are not genuine."

What worked

Preparing press releases with quotes and letting key media contacts know of a good story.

Being very clear in advance who is happy to talk, who is happy to have their photographs taken, who is prepared to be named.

Developing good media contacts.

Statutory agencies being willing to present positive and balanced stories in collaboration with the local refugee voluntary sector.

Learning points

When issuing a press release build in enough time in the office to handle the phone calls and requests for interviews. TV interviews are likely to be at the story location so time for travel needs to be available.

Partnership issues

Make sure that partners know what you are about to say to the media if it could have an impact on them.

Published June 2005 by
Refugee Resource
Hooper House
3 Collins Street
Oxford OX4 1XS

0845 458 0055 / 01865 798280
info@refugeeresource.org