

NATIONAL THEMATIC NETWORK - UK

JOINING FORCES TO ACHIEVE MAXIMUM IMPACT

Many EQUAL partnerships under the Asylum Seekers Theme work in difficult policy contexts where asylum seekers do not have the right to employment. EQUAL partnerships set up in the UK have had to face such a challenge. Asylum seekers are not allowed to work in the UK for the first twelve months of their stay, and until recently employment was forbidden during the entire asylum procedure¹. As a result, many asylum seekers have faced months and often years of poverty, inactivity and uncertainty where they have been forced into dependency while they wait for the outcome of their asylum applications. Despite these challenges, EQUAL partnerships in the UK have been successful in creating opportunities for asylum seekers to play an active role in their new communities. Partnerships have been able to come up with innovative methods and practices to help asylum seekers make the most of their time in the UK by learning new skills which they can put to use if allowed to stay or in the event they return to their home countries.

It's important to give asylum seekers a chance to participate and be active in society as soon as possible after their arrival as this accelerates their integration in the community and helps ease their transition to the labour market once they are allowed access to it. *"People tend to forget that refugees were asylum seekers before they became refugees, just as adults were once children,"* points out Maggie Lennon of the Bridges Project, ATLAS Scotland. EQUAL partnerships have been working to give asylum seekers the chance to prepare for their future as soon as possible after they arrive in the UK.

The Bridges Project, an activity of the ATLAS partnership provides valuable work experience through an innovative work shadowing scheme set up in Glasgow, Scotland. The Project has continued in Round Two. During Round One, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) one of the project partners of the ASSET UK partnership developed and implemented a skills audit tool which examined the skills and qualifications of nearly 1000 asylum seekers living in the East Midlands to determine the potential contribution they could make to their local community. A high percentage held vocational and professional qualifications and many had valuable employment experience. These are just some examples of the myriad of activities put in place by EQUAL partnerships.

It's not easy to be an asylum seeker in the UK. Policies relating to asylum seekers and refugees have become increasingly strict and restrictive. In 1999, the introduction of the dispersal policy forced asylum seekers to relocate to other cities and regions across the UK often at very short notice, where the necessary support services did not exist at the time. In 2002, the right to employment after six months was removed. In 2004, significant changes were made to the asylum appeals process and legal support was reduced. Further changes were introduced in 2005 when fast track processing was introduced reducing the time between the first interview and the initial decision from 2 months to two weeks. The number of asylum seekers arriving in the UK has been decreasing. In 2005, the number of applications fell to the lowest level since 1994. This reflects a trend across the EU where asylum applications have dropped by 16% in 2005 from the

¹ Following the transposition of the EU Reception Directive, provision has been made in UK law as of February 2005 to allow asylum seekers to apply for permission to take up employment if, through no fault of their own, an initial decision on their asylum application has not been taken within 12 months. Though this is an improvement of the situation prior to transposition of the Directive (when employment was strictly forbidden during the entire application process), it is less favourable compared to the situation before 2002 when asylum seekers in the UK were allowed to access the labour market after six months.

previous year. In 2005, most applications for asylum in the UK were lodged by nationals from Iran, Somalia, Eritrea, China and Afghanistan.

EQUAL partnerships working under the Asylum Seekers Theme in the UK find mainstreaming to be a challenge in this context where asylum policies are becoming increasingly restrictive and government authorities are not open to making policies more positive for asylum seekers. In such a policy context, it can be difficult for EQUAL partnerships to find the right platforms to communicate the results and lessons which have come out of their activities and experiences to a wider public, and initiate positive change as a result. The national network set up in the UK (the Thematic Networking Group) for EQUAL projects working under the Asylum Seekers Theme was created to ensure that mainstreaming takes place at both horizontal and vertical levels to make an impact on regional and national policies affecting asylum seekers in the UK. The network has lived up to the challenge and succeeded in communicating its key lessons and experiences as well as good practices to policy-makers. *“Through the Thematic Networking Group we have been able to exchange experiences and share results and good practices, as well as explore ways to best showcase them in order to get messages out to those who need to hear them,”* explained Jason Bergen, one of the partners of the LASAR DP in Liverpool under Round One.

PLANNING THE BEST WAY FORWARD

There are four Development Partnerships operating under Round Two of the EQUAL programme in the UK, based in London, Birmingham and Glasgow. ASPIRE (Asylum seekers pursuing integration, refuge and empowerment) – Birmingham, North London Aspire, EASI (Empowering asylum seekers to integrate) – London, and ATLAS in Glasgow, Scotland. With only four partnerships operating under the EQUAL Asylum Seekers Theme in the UK, it can be a challenge to make a significant impact. Also there are significant regional differences with regard to context and policy with each partnership operating in a different policy environment. For example, in Scotland where there is a significant shortage of workers, there’s a strong case to allow asylum seekers to access employment. As a result, each partnership within the network needs to target different actors at different levels of government i.e. regional or city-level.

The UK national thematic network provides an opportunity for EQUAL partnerships to exchange their experience, information and strategies for mainstreaming. They identify successful outcomes and results and review good practices to determine “what works well” and plan the best ways to disseminate them. They also examine how they can pool resources to make mainstreaming more effective. Meetings are held twice a year. A representative of the national support structure chairs the meetings which are also attended by the UK EQUAL managing authority. A representative of the Home Office is also invited to attend so that EQUAL partners can come in contact with officials responsible for policy-making, and provide an opportunity for a direct exchange of results and policy impacts.

Together, network members have contributed to the development of a mainstreaming strategy. The strategy has incorporated ideas and actions which have come out of Round One and new developments which have appeared during Round Two. The aim of the strategy is to disseminate the innovative approaches adopted by the partnerships and encourage other organisations working with asylum seekers to adopt the good practices which have proven to be particularly successful in order to improve the quality of their own services. Such a strategy provides a framework to guide partnerships in planning and delivering their networking, dissemination and mainstreaming activities. Activities can include relevant research and evaluation activities, publications and reports, publicity and marketing activities, the organisation of meetings, events, workshops, conferences and study visits, and the production of websites, databases and other resources. The mainstreaming strategy focuses on four main areas which have been identified as priorities for Round Two: the delivery of effective language support, improving community cohesion, orientation, information, advice and guidance, and pre-vocational support.

MAKING AN IMPACT

Mainstreaming is an on-going activity which takes place during the duration of EQUAL projects. The UK national thematic network has been particularly successful in identifying the good practices development by EQUAL partnerships and disseminating them to a wider audience. Specific events and activities have also been timed to coincide with government consultations,

and events organised by the target audience to “be at the right place at the right time” and achieve maximum impact. Some examples of successful mainstreaming events and activities include:

- The ASSET Development Partnership organised a mainstreaming conference in March 2005 which showcased successful practices relating to English-language training, tutor training and support, on-line information, advice and guidance, skills audits and volunteering. During the conference, beneficiaries told participants about their experiences and how they have been able to benefit from activities organised by EQUAL projects. These testimonials created a positive and lasting impact and provided concrete examples of successful practices.
- The ATLAS Development Partnership held a conference in Glasgow in June 2005 entitled: ‘Asylum matters for Scotland’ which attracted a diverse variety of participants. This was an opportunity for mainstream organisations to learn how they can include asylum seekers in their activities and services, provide practical learning and include people who influence policy and funding decisions. An innovative aspect included exhibition stands set up by ATLAS organisations which encouraged interaction and learning between the participants. Nine workshops provided an opportunity for free debate and discussion and accelerated learning.
- A good practice and awareness-raising event “An Equal Future for Asylum Seekers: Investing in Inclusive Communities”, sponsored by the Home Office, was held in London in September 2005. The event showcased the achievements, key outcomes and results of EQUAL partnerships under Round One. Round One partnerships were able to share their lessons and experiences while learning about the plans of partnerships operating under Round Two. Participants included local, regional and national policy makers. The event was chaired by Jean Lambert, MEP.
- In November 2005, the EASI Development Partnership organised a conference on “Exchanges for an Equal Europe: Asylum Seekers and Volunteering” in London. The aim was to promote volunteering as a pathway for the integration for asylum seekers, and to exchange good practices in setting up and running volunteering schemes among projects from different EU Member States. Organisations working with asylum seekers across Europe gave insights into their experiences of volunteering for asylum seekers which highlighted differences as well as common features and challenges faced. Asylum seekers also provided testimonials of their experiences with volunteering. Workshops focused on training for volunteers, volunteering for work experience, volunteering and empowerment and capacity building for community organisations.

EQUAL partnerships are now busy planning the following mainstreaming and dissemination activities to be implemented in the next stage:

- The EASI DP is planning a transnational conference on empowerment in October 2006 in Paris. The conference will showcase the activities carried out by EQUAL projects in Hungary, the UK and France which have aimed to empower asylum seekers and develop their autonomy and confidence during the process of their integration into the host community.
- The UK national thematic network is planning a major dissemination event in London during Refugee Week in June 2007.
- The ATLAS partnership is making plans to widely disseminate a DVD of a BBC documentary about asylum seekers in Glasgow, Scotland entitled *A place of refuge* which features asylum seekers who have benefited from the project. The film has received a media award from Oxfam. The DVD will be distributed to relevant organisations across Europe and to key policy-makers.
- Other mainstreaming and dissemination activities planned by the ATLAS partnership includes: a policy conference planned for September 2007; empowering workshops for women asylum seekers who are not ready to enter into a work-shadowing activity and

need to develop specific skills in September 2006; work on an accreditation pilot of the work-shadowing scheme is on-going and is to be disseminated in 2007.

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