

A HEAD START TO A NEW LIFE

Asylum seekers are one of the most disadvantaged groups living in many towns and cities across the UK. They are often stuck in a legal and social limbo where their future is uncertain and they feel marginalised in their new communities. They have few rights as asylum seekers: they are not generally allowed to work and access to vocational training is very limited. Many asylum seekers spend many months and even years waiting for a decision on their asylum applications. By the time they are granted refugee status and therefore the right to stay in the UK, they have spent a long time just waiting and hoping, without the opportunity to work or study in the meantime to make the most of their time and prepare effectively for a new life in a new country.

With the adoption of the European Union Directive on the reception of asylum seekers¹, organisations working with asylum seekers hoped that the requirements of the new European law would make a difference at the national level. In response to the EU Directive, UK law was changed in February 2005: asylum seekers may apply for permission “to take up certain types of employment if, through no fault of their own, a decision on their asylum application has not been taken within 12 months”. However, hope has turned to dismay: many asylum seekers who have applied for this permission to work have been turned down. As a result, the new European law, despite its good intentions, does not seem to have made a significant change for asylum seekers in the UK.

Faced with this situation where they cannot make their own living, asylum seekers are forced into a state of dependency. They receive a minimum of support for their everyday needs through the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). However, they are offered no government support towards their professional, education and training needs which would help them prepare for their eventual entry into employment, and make their integration into wider society as a result, smoother and quicker. Such valuable and vital professional and educational support is only offered later on, when an asylum seeker receives a positive decision and becomes a recognised refugee.

In order to fill this void, non-governmental organisations and charities assisting asylum seekers in the UK are trying to help them make the most of their time spent in the UK from day one. The EQUAL programme has provided valuable financial support to programmes aiming to promote the socio-vocational integration of asylum seekers for which there is an urgent need. The **North London Aspire EQUAL Development Partnership** supports asylum seekers living in four North London boroughs by offering valuable services which aim to empower them to participate and contribute to their host community. “*Educational and vocational support must start from the day an asylum seeker arrives in the UK,*” explains Sarah Nansukusa, London Aspire Project Director. “*Asylum seekers cannot afford to wait for such support only when they are granted refugee status. All the valuable time in between would be lost. The goal of North London Aspire is to offer training and support to address their social and emotional needs, and keep people motivated.*”

The Partnership has developed several innovative training programmes specially designed for the needs of asylum seekers which provide them with the skills they need to build a new life once they have access to employment. These practical training courses aim to empower participants and make a positive impact on their lives by encouraging them to be active in their communities.

¹ The Reception Directive was adopted by the EU Council of Ministers in 2003. The EU Member States were required to transpose and implement the Directive into national law by February 2005.

The partnership is led by the Uganda Community Relief Association (UCRA), a refugee community organisation which has been serving asylum seekers and refugees in London for the past 25 years. The other DP partners include: the North London Partnership Consortium, Positive Care Link, Haringey Council, and the London North Learning Skills Council. The partnership offers its services in the North London boroughs of Barnet, Enfield, Haringey, and Waltham Forest where large populations of asylum seekers and refugees live.

VALUABLE SKILLS FOR A NEW LIFE

Asylum seekers are eager to learn how to make their own living and contribute to the host society as soon as possible. The North London Aspire partnership examined their needs and developed training programmes designed to give them the skills they need to enter a competitive labour market, either in the UK when they can eventually access employment, or in another country.

A 12-week training programme in entrepreneurship was successfully launched and completed this year. 20 asylum seekers from a variety of backgrounds learned how to run their own business through practical classes on business skills covering topics such as personal finance, developing a business plan, budgeting, communication skills, as well as personal development skills to build confidence and motivation. Group activities which encouraged participants to work as a team and develop socialisation skills. This training programme has empowered asylum seekers to take a proactive approach to their future by giving them the tools and skills to start their own business. Due to the success of the programme and popular demand, the training programme will run again early next year.

Another popular programme launched by the partnership is the training programme in multimedia which introduces digital and multimedia skills to participants, allowing them to master new technologies and learn how they can put them to use. Participants are introduced to digital media through the use of cameras, word processing and desktop publishing software. Using these media, asylum seekers are able to tell their own stories and communicate their experiences to a wider audience while making contact with the wider community.

Another innovative programme which focuses on empowerment is the partnership's community leadership training programme. Asylum seekers are encouraged to develop their leadership and motivational skills so that they can be more active and make a contribution to their local communities. The first step to becoming more involved at the community level is to learn how it works. Participants learn about regeneration and community policies, and how local, regional, national policies are formulated and implemented. Topics covering leadership theory, personal and motivational skills, communication skills, and team building empowers participants to realise their own potential and provides the motivation to engage and participate in their communities. Participants have the opportunity to put the skills learned during the training programme into practice through volunteer placements with community organisations. This gives participants a chance to work together with other members of the wider community and provides them with direct insight into local and national issues. 12 participants took part in the first round of the 12-week training programme, which will be repeated in the near future.

Dembe (not her real name) from Uganda tells how she was able to benefit from the training programme in community leadership: *"The course was an opportunity for me to learn about my community and how it works. I also learned how the government works, how the Council spends taxes and how laws are made. I didn't know my way around before and now I feel like I can stand on my own. The programme has also helped me on a personal level. It made me feel like I'm somebody and that I'm not stuck at home and have somewhere to go. I have made friends and met others who are in the same situation. I thought I was alone, but there are others in the same boat. I also found the volunteer placement very good because it gave me a chance to get some experience and also get references which can be useful in the future."*

THE FIRST POINT OF CONTACT

North London Aspire also offers a variety of orientation and information services to asylum seekers. It is the first point of contact for many asylum seekers arriving in the north of London from African countries such as the Congo and Somalia, as well as from China and many other countries across the globe. The men and women who come through their doors are not only new arrivals. Many clients are long-term asylum seekers, who have been in the UK for over a year or even much longer. Some have special needs or suffer from chronic health problems, including HIV/AIDS. Many face language barriers, problems of isolation and feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness.

Staff are on hand to offer all the information and guidance a newcomer needs when arriving in a new country including help with finding accommodation and information on community and healthcare services, as well as expert advice on the asylum application process. Specialised support is also provided for people living with HIV and AIDS. Social events and recreational activities like aerobics classes are held on a regular basis so that clients can be active and meet other people living in their community.

Services covering basic needs are complemented by training and courses which help asylum seekers to make use of their potential and develop new skills which they can put to use as soon as possible. The first step to becoming part of a new community is to speak the same language. English language classes are offered on an on-going basis so that asylum seekers can improve their everyday communication skills. Classes in basic IT, such as typing and how to use the Internet are also very popular. *“The aim is to keep people motivated and help them to retain their existing skills while acquiring new ones,”* says Nathan Williams, London Aspire Project Manager. *“Our activities also address social and emotional needs. Our clients come into contact with other people who are in the same situation and learn how they have been able to achieve. This is inspiring and motivating for them.”*

MAKING AN IMPACT FROM THE BOTTOM UP

Mainstreaming, or letting others know about successful results, encourages the transfer of good practices to other organizations working with asylum seekers and has the potential to influence and improve policies and practices. This is one of the most important objectives of the EQUAL programme.

The London Aspire partnership has included a mainstreaming strategy right from the beginning so that the key results and lessons arising from their activities and experiences could be communicated to the right audiences. Having local government bodies as partners helps: the London Aspire partnership includes policy-makers from the local authority as well as the North London Learning and Skills Council (LSC) which is responsible for planning and funding high-quality vocational education and training for all. By having such important partners contributing to the partnership, they are made aware of the value of the programmes and activities implemented during the lifetime as well as the positive results. This can help to ensure the continuity of these programmes. *“Impact starts at the local level,”* explains Sarah Nansukusa, *“The LSC and the Council are our partners. They see the results and impacts coming out of our activities directly. This can eventually impact on the regional and national policy levels too.”*

The London Aspire partnership's emphasis on empowerment is also included in its mainstreaming strategy. *“Participants are encouraged to participate and take an active part in mainstreaming events so that they can influence the policies which affect them,”* says Nathan Williams: *“Through meetings, conferences and other events, they come in direct contact with national policy-makers and are able to tell them about their experiences.”* The active participation of the asylum seekers who have benefited from the partnership's activities and programmes in mainstreaming events is an empowering and rewarding experience for them. This also strengthens the key messages directed to policy makers and service providers. By speaking about their experiences, participants have told others how they were able to benefit from receiving specialised training from day one.

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