

From Sanctuary to Opportunity 2025

Research consultation
Co-designing new initiatives for sustainable
careers for refugee and migrant communities

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Foreword

I founded ACH in 2008, motivated by my own experience of the barriers refugees face in securing housing, support, and a sense of belonging. Today, ACH stands as proof of what is possible when lived experience drives innovation. In 2024 alone, we supported over 1,000 people with tailored integration services—providing housing, training, employment and business support.

ACH's work shows the value of tailored integration support. Proper national and regional investment is urgently needed to ensure all refugees and migrants have access to appropriate English language training, skills development and meaningful employment opportunities.

The social and economic case is clear. There are 761,000 vacancies nationally, and evidence shows that investing in refugee integration could yield £1.2 billion in net benefits over five years. Supporting refugees and migrants to participate more fully across all aspects of society can enhance social cohesion and lessen community divisions by diminishing prejudice and promoting tolerance and mutual understanding.

This year's Refugee Week theme, Community as a Superpower, highlights the importance of connection and collective action. And the government's 2025 immigration White Paper recognises that proper integration support helps people find work and strengthens communities.

But refugees need more than **any** job—they need roles that match their skills. Today, too many face barriers like unrecognised qualifications, language gaps, and systemic bias. This is a loss of human potential we cannot afford.

ACH's Bridge to Employment project demonstrates the power of collaboration with employers to provide suitable support. Participants employed at Bristol Waste Company through the scheme reported a meaningful impact on their lives and feelings of belonging.

We know that solutions must be co-designed with those with first-hand experience. This research brings together the voices of 13 individuals with lived experience of displacement, and nine employers from across the West of England. This consultation outlines the initiatives we identified to translate potential into opportunity. We invite employers, policymakers, and community leaders to work with us to develop these initiatives and help transform them into reality.

Fuad Mahamed
CEO



Executive summary

This research from ACH aims to enable refugee and migrant communities to obtain good quality work so that they can make the best use of their existing skills and avoid being trapped in under-employment. This has clear benefits for individuals, families, businesses, communities and the wider economy.

Our research steering groups consist of 13 people with lived experience of migration, plus nine employers. The groups have been co-designing solutions to enable refugee and migrant communities to find sustainable work and to progress in their careers.

We found gaps in existing support needs and identified three key initiatives:

1. **A specialist career development service that is tailored towards individual career aspirations and requirements.** This includes general, holistic support to navigate the UK job market and application processes, alongside sector-specific mentoring, network building and work experience.
2. **A skills and qualification recognition and verification process.** This would provide individuals with a certificate confirming their skills which could be used for job applications. Employers would have a meaningful way of assessing candidates' suitability for jobs, potentially accessing a wider talent pool.
3. **A means to link and improve access to existing services.** This involves collating the relevant support currently available in the region, and enabling refugees and migrants to access appropriate support. It would facilitate partnership working and information sharing between support providers and employers.

This consultation provides an account of the research to date, and seeks to widen the co-design process to include further key stakeholders from business, refugee and migrant communities, support and training providers, funders and policy practitioners.

At ACH, we need your input to develop these findings as we invite you to continue to work with us to enable refugees and migrants to find sustainable work, progress in their careers, and to thrive, bringing benefits for business, the economy and communities.

Introduction

Our aims

People who seek sanctuary and a home in the UK bring a multitude of skills with them. To enable them to thrive and participate in society, and to help meet the needs of the economy, we need to remove the barriers they face and unlock their skills and potential. Together with lived experience and employer steering groups, ACH have been co-designing solutions to enable refugee and migrant communities to find sustainable work and progress in their careers.

So far, the research has involved 13 people with lived experience of migration (including five paid Research Assistants) and nine employers in our steering groups. We have found a number of gaps in existing employment and career support for refugees and migrants. We identified three key initiatives to fill the gap in current support needs. The next stage is to develop plans for new support services with input from more stakeholders. We are now eliciting responses from people in wider refugee and migrant communities via focus groups and interviews.

This consultation seeks to broaden the co-design process to include the voices of further stakeholders from business, refugee and migrant communities, support and training providers, funders and policy practitioners. Part of a two-year project, this research will develop funding bids to deliver new service provisions. The case for funding is robust because it is based on co-design with principal stakeholders – including people with lived experience of migration and employers. To increase the weight of our findings, ACH are strengthening partnership working between key individuals and organisations in the region.

This research consultation describes our progress to date and calls on partners and stakeholders to contribute their voices to develop the initiatives as we move forward with the research.



Mural workshop as part of the Community Climate Action project.

The case for new initiatives for sustainable employment for refugees and migrants

There are clear economic benefits for improving refugee employment outcomes. It is estimated that effective English language and skills support provided to refugees upon their arrival to the UK could generate a net economic benefit of £1.2 billion across five years.¹ Additionally, there are an estimated 761,000 job vacancies in the UK.²

There is a significant opportunity to harness the underused potential of refugees and migrants, who bring valuable skills, multilingual capabilities, resilience and are often highly educated.³ Employers gain from building a diverse workforce⁴ that contributes a wide range of experiences and perspectives, enhancing cognitive diversity.⁵ Greater cultural diversity in organisations can boost company effectiveness by better reflecting the varied backgrounds of customers and service users.

Furthermore, research indicates that access to the labour market is not a 'pull factor' for refugees.⁶ Instead, providing employment support delivers clear benefits – not only for individuals but also for communities, the broader economy and society.



Bridge to Employment programme with Pret A Manger

This research builds on ACH's previous research, which highlighted that the skills and qualifications of people from refugee and migrant communities are often under-used, resulting in much untapped potential. Migrants and refugees are more likely to be working in roles they are over-qualified for than UK-born people, and those with the lowest earnings are most likely to be over-qualified for their jobs.⁷ They are also more likely to be in worse quality jobs⁸, do shift work and to be on temporary or zero-hour contracts.⁹

ACH's 2024 research involved input from more than 160 people, including 72 with lived experience and a range of other stakeholders from training, employment, support and funding sectors. Our research highlighted the many barriers to finding good quality work, including:

- having non-UK qualifications
- experience outside the UK not being recognised
- lack of UK references
- English language skills
- mental and physical health issues
- understanding the UK work culture and job market
- obstacles to training and gaining new qualifications
- low confidence
- bias and discrimination.

The research identified priorities for improving training and employment outcomes for refugee and migrant communities. These included:

- better access to appropriate work experience opportunities
- a way of recognising prior skills and experience in addition to existing schemes
- more inclusive job recruitment practices
- boosting provision of ESOL (English for Speakers of other Languages) for work and academic study
- a common ESOL initial assessment process for the West of England
- integrated collaboration involving people with lived experience in designing solutions
- strengthening partnerships between employers, training and support stakeholders.

ACH's 2025 research aims to support people to find work that uses their full potential to avoid the trap of under-employment. To this end, we took the 2024 findings to our lived experience and employer steering groups and together we have been building on these by co-designing initiatives that will break down barriers to refugees' and migrants' access to sustainable work and career progression.

The policy landscape: Challenges and opportunities

Despite the current challenges for refugee and migrant communities and those who stand in solidarity with them, there are some positives.

Recent legislation may have reduced legal asylum routes for those fleeing war and persecution, but many people have still been able to seek sanctuary in the UK. Since 2014, some 64,900 people have arrived on refugee resettlement schemes, and recent visa schemes have allowed the arrival of 223,000 Ukrainians¹⁰ and 163,400 Hong Kong nationals.¹¹

Public attitudes appear to be more supportive of migrants and migration than can be inferred from popular narratives. Recent polling¹² shows that 45% of people do not want overall migration reduced and, of those who do want it reduced, only 10% want fewer people claiming refugee protection. More people (54%) prefer control over who comes to the UK to a system which deters people from coming at all (31%). In general, people tend not to want a reduction in students or people coming to fill a wide range of jobs. Some 59% felt that migrants living in the UK and paying taxes should not have to wait more than five years to apply for citizenship.

There is also continued support for refugees and migrants, as exemplified by the increasing number of charities in this sector.¹³ Communities across the UK have shown strong solidarity against far-right attacks and harassment, as demonstrated on 7 August 2024 when people united against proposed attacks on migration support organisations, as well as many other subsequent actions across the country.



Showcase Event - part of the Up-Collective programme

However, in some sections of society, the media and politics, anti-migration rhetoric, negative stereotypes and hostility towards refugees and migrants is on the rise.¹⁴ The riots stoked by the far right in 2024 which targeted migrants, Muslims and other minoritised groups, impacted many people's feelings of safety and belonging.¹⁵ This rise in hostility has coincided with previous and current government policy to reduce migration, eg the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, the Illegal Migration Act 2023, the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill 2025 and the Restoring Control Over the Immigration System White Paper in May 2025.

The rhetoric which heralded the 2025 White Paper links migration with a threat to community cohesion, depicting the UK as being at risk of becoming an "island of strangers". Prime Minister Keir Starmer also stated that "when people come to our country, they should also commit to integration, to learning our language".¹⁶

However, the commitment from refugees and migrants already exists. ACH and others in the sector know that people seeking sanctuary in the UK are keen to participate and contribute. There is a strong desire to learn a good standard of English, with many waiting a long time for ESOL classes. We also know that refugee and migrant communities have always contributed to the UK and have brought enormous benefits to communities and society as a whole. What is needed is to remove the barriers these people face to achieving work that uses their skills, enabling them to thrive and realise their potential, therefore maximising their ability to participate in the UK.



Firming Foundations Raising Roofs event



The Welcome Party - Bristol

In fact, there is government recognition that effective integration support for migrants benefits all communities: the White Paper highlights that this enables people to “access services, overcome educational and health inequalities, find jobs and contribute to social cohesion and community empowerment”.¹⁷

Additionally, a 2024 joint report by the All Party Parliamentary Groups for Poverty and for Migration stated that “there is a shared interest in ensuring that people who settle in the UK can thrive – a successful migration policy is one that enables people to integrate and contribute (economically and socially)”.¹⁸

These ideas are supported by a large body of evidence that increasing positive interactions between different groups of people can improve social cohesion by reducing prejudice, and fostering tolerance and mutual understanding.¹⁹ Therefore, interventions that allow refugees and migrants to participate more fully and in a wider range of spheres are likely to reduce division in communities.

Building more resilient and cohesive communities requires a move away from divisive rhetoric and a focus on inclusion and social justice. This means investing in resources that empower refugees, migrants and all residents to participate, feel a sense of belonging and thrive. Obtaining good quality work that affords a good standard of living, and the opportunity to contribute one’s skills and to progress, is an important part of this.

Migrants and refugees with disabilities can face particular systemic barriers as well as stigma and ableism. Employment and careers support must include proper investment in support for all people with disabilities, and this support must remove the obstacles these people face to achieving meaningful work.

However, some disabled refugees and migrants are not able to work. All disabled people in the UK have a right to equity and belonging and should be able to access the services they need. Acceptance and support for migrants and refugees should not be contingent on their perceived contributions to society. For a just and cohesive society, proper support and entitlements must be provided for all people who seek sanctuary in the UK.

Policy developments regarding skills and employment create opportunities for collaboration on initiatives to improve careers for refugees and migrants. The government's Skills England department aims to unite a fragmented skills system, working in partnership with local authorities, businesses and other partners.²⁰ The English Devolution White Paper proposes to give greater powers to MCAs to meet regional growth and skills needs.²¹

In the West of England, the Mayoral Combined Authority (MCA) states that its priorities include a more coherent employment and skills systems, with better access to employment support, good quality work and career progress for all.²² The MCA's Adult Skills Fund plan aims to support residents to overcome barriers to finding employment and progressing in work, with ESOL being established as a priority area.²³ Bristol City Council echoes the need for a co-ordinated skills system to unlock the potential of all residents, including supporting migrants to develop their skills and thrive.²⁴

ACH are seizing this opportunity to work towards meeting individual and regional needs by designing an evidence-based employment and careers support initiative. Tailored employment support is crucial to optimise job outcomes²⁵ and incorporating the expertise of stakeholders is key to this. Therefore, lived experience and employer voices underpin the design process.



Research methods

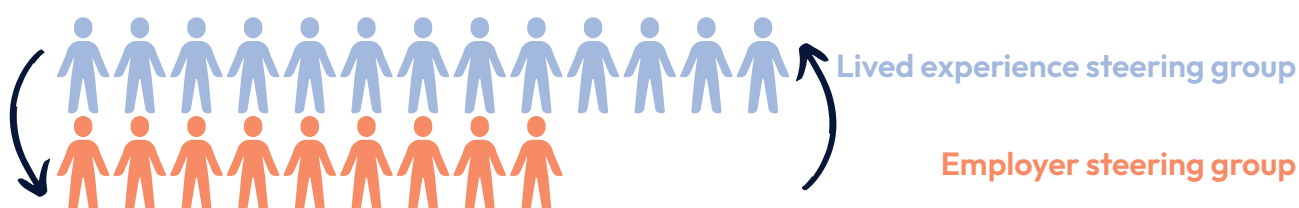
The 13 members of the lived experience steering group include five Research Assistants recruited for the project. The group consists of people from Afghanistan, Egypt, Hong Kong, Iran, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Turkey and Ukraine. This has ensured the meaningful involvement of people with lived experience of migration or displacement who have an understanding of trying to progress their careers. They all contribute personal and professional perspectives, as well as community language skills and knowledge of local refugee and migrant communities. Their collaboration is helping ACH to reach and engage a wider range of groups, helping to ensure the proposed service will address the unmet employment support needs of refugee communities.

The employer steering group consisted of nine decision makers from a wide range of business and organisations in the West of England.

Each group reflected on the findings from the 2024 research and conducted several ideation activities according to their expertise. The lived experience group explained what meaningful and sustainable work is and identified the support that is needed to obtain this. The employers described the skills needs in the region and their support needs for employing refugees and migrants. They also shared current good practices for inclusion and offered possible contributions to a new service. Both groups identified the main gaps in the current support and services and suggested services that might be needed.

The results of each steering group were fed back to the others, allowing for feedback and consideration of challenges and solutions. This resulted in the development and refinement of the three key initiatives.

Currently, ACH are conducting community research to gather input from wider refugee and migrant communities. The lived experience group have co-designed this community phase of the research, which is being conducted by the Research Assistants and ACH's Research and Policy Lead. The results from the community research will complement this consultation in refining and developing the design of these initiatives.



Research findings to date

“

“I have got other, you know, capabilities and experience other than going into a warehouse and doing shelving, which is not bad – I mean it’s a job – but... looking at my abilities, I might fit somewhere else. So because the outcome would be that I would go to the warehouse and I would work for the shelving for maybe two, three months, and then I leave that and find another job because I don’t meaningfully work for that journey – you see what I mean? And this way, both parties cannot benefit, like I work very short time... it was a kind of, you know, and I hate it for the employer as well – loses staff. So how Job Centres can, you know, I mean identify the qualities, capabilities, qualifications of the refugees and put them or do referrals for them somewhere that they can feel, you know, like they can do that job and they are meaningfully doing that and, at the same time, progressing towards their careers as well”. Ehsan*

“

“I’m now at the stage where I lost all the hope to go back to my previous life... It’s been three years and I’m not even close to where I was in my country”. Larysa*

“

“I have seen many examples in my fellows – they do have skills, they do have experience – but when it comes to self-confidence, or the confidence development, they are... I mean it’s quite natural as well, because they are refugees coming to a different tools and different environment and their loss ... in like confidence, or they worrying sometimes... They feel lost because they don’t know anything about the UK labour market and if it’s 100% different from their countries and their backgrounds.” Amna*



The Welcome Party - Bristol

*All names have been changed

What is meaningful and sustainable work? Refugee and migrant needs

The lived experience steering group members emphasised the need for refugees and migrants to achieve meaningful and sustainable work, and that, like all members of UK society, they should have the opportunity to fulfil their potential. This means working in a role where their existing expertise and qualifications are recognised and used and where they feel valued. They also expressed the importance of a job that aligns with their personal goals and values.

Feeling able to contribute and bring value to an organisation is also important. This includes contributing expertise and being able to input into company strategies and policies and bring new vision and ideas. This desire to do meaningful work and experience job satisfaction is strongly linked to feeling part of the wider society.

Achieving sustainable work brings benefits outside the workplace. It can increase financial security and independence and the ability to provide for one's family. Therefore, sustainable work means a good level of pay, a secure contract, regular wages, carers' leave and sick pay. It also means reasonable working hours, a good work/life balance and flexibility for caring responsibilities.

Sustainable work means a feeling of belonging in the workplace. A good relationship with co-workers, a supportive team and boss, mutual respect, intercultural understanding, inclusivity and equity between employees are all crucial.

The hope of realising one's potential is crucial for maintaining motivation because meaningful career progression can take time. It was also recognised that there are difficulties for all individuals in obtaining meaningful and sustainable work in the current economy. Therefore, meaningful work involves pathways to career progression. This could include opportunities for gaining skills and experience by shadowing co-workers, being supported to attend training, promotion opportunities, pay increases, support to identify career milestones, and the ability to expand networks and professional connections. Having work with a reasonable level of challenge is also vital for keeping motivated.

Employer requirements and support needs

Participants in the employer steering group recognised the enormous value in progressing initiatives that remove barriers to refugees and migrants finding employment and fully using their skills. There was an emphasis on the need for a more diverse workforce which brings diverse perspectives and thinking, as well as for accessing more talent, filling vacancies and closing skills gaps.

The group identified a variety of skills needs in the West of England. These include hotel staff, chefs, skilled maintenance assistants, health and social care roles, HGV drivers, engineering, construction and work with the built environment. Roles such as retail, administration, events management and project management were also cited, as well as tech, AI, data and analytics. Additionally, there is a need for transferable and soft skills such as resilience, customer excellence, relationship building, management, leadership and coaching skills, and analytical thinking. Sustainable and green skills are also required. This highlights that there are skills needs at all levels and in a range of areas and it confirms that supporting refugees and migrants to progress beyond entry level work and use their diverse skills provides real benefits for business and communities.

Employer participants expressed a wish to better understand the needs of refugees and migrants, with some concerns raised over how to improve recruitment practices, and how to support belonging, inclusion and the ability to thrive in the workplace. Some expressed a need for understanding prior qualifications and the UK work permits and visa system requirements.

The research highlighted good equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) practices in recruitment that support a more diverse workforce including: moving away from stipulating language level to focusing on communication skills; allowing candidates to see questions in advance; information sessions about the advertised role and interview expectations; holding community-based events where people can apply for jobs on the spot; extra training for recruitment managers; offering work experience and insight sessions; and offering mentoring and buddying schemes.

Key support needed

The research confirmed that there is a wide range of barriers that people coming to live in the UK face to finding good quality work, and therefore a variety of measures are needed to overcome these barriers.

Unsurprisingly, and consistent with our 2024 findings, the importance of securing good English language support was a strong theme. In the West of England there is a choice of ESOL and training provision, including courses that support employment and progression to further education. However, ESOL provision is fragmented and difficult to navigate for many.

Participants emphasised that there needs to be easier and quicker access to English language classes that meet the differing needs of learners, as well as flexibility to fit the classes around employment and caring commitments. The findings also confirmed the demand for increased availability of ESOL courses that incorporate training in skills for work and academic study.

However, there are plans underway to make ESOL in the West of England more streamlined and coherent and to re-think the ways it is delivered. This includes a common ESOL initial assessment tool developed by Bristol City Council Community Learning, the West of England ESOL Network, and the MCA's Adult Skills Fund Commissioning Plan for 2025-2026. ACH has been working with partners to support some of this work.

Therefore, we decided to focus the research on areas where suitable employment and career development support was felt to be the most lacking. Our discussions identified three main support themes, from which the following key initiatives were developed:

1. A specialist career development service
2. A skills and qualifications recognition and verification process
3. A means to link and improve access to existing services.

Below, we describe these initiatives and pose questions for stakeholders to help us develop them.

1. Specialist career development service

“

“I reckon the solution is ... if I were given a chance to be a part of some working process... like an internship or work experience, that employer can give me that accreditation. Well, I mean, like, any kind of certification, any kind of recommendation. Because now, not having a recommendation when you just come to the country is one of the biggest problems. I reckon that's the solution, it just lies here, if we find a way to get access to this internship, apprenticeship, work experience... so you can be accredited, you can get the reference”. Marya

”

“We need something created to connect people to the network of the specific industry or specific market, facilitate their communication with local employers and also get practical experience”. Tarek

“

“If you don't have any experience [in the UK] and it's gonna be your first experience, you are struggling to find references”. Lucy

“

“It's really important for all of us, some people it can help them if they give them the mentor ... to show them the way and what they need, what they love to be and show them the way step by step”. Farah



It was felt that current career support opportunities are often inaccessible to refugees and migrants, or do not enable them to find work which matches their skills and aspirations. There is a need for more support that is tailored towards individual career aspirations and requirements.

The lived experience steering groups described the difficulties in navigating a new employment landscape and culture. Migrants and refugees often do not know where to start when trying to find employment, especially work which is commensurate with their abilities. Lack of UK experience, qualifications and references often leaves people ineligible for jobs beyond entry level. An additional barrier is that many people who have experienced displacement and migration face mental health issues, perhaps due to previous trauma, precarious living conditions, loss of previous status and identity or anxiety about the future. Therefore, the research identified the need for a specialist careers support service that is geared towards enabling refugees and migrants to find work that matches their skills.

Participants highlighted the benefits of having a mentor or coach who could provide support in gaining a comprehensive understanding of desired job sectors and making professional connections in suitable local organisations. Being able to access insider knowledge is key. The support should help individuals to understand the UK job market and work culture, how to apply for jobs and how to tailor their CV to specific jobs. The options available were reported as being overwhelming, therefore support is needed to enable people to understand and make choices about their pathways to career progression.

To address the need for UK-based experience and references, work experience was identified as vital. While people gave examples of how volunteering had helped them gain a better job, it was felt there is lack of opportunities for work experience or internships which support career goals, lead to a reference and which is paid or, at the very least, expenses are covered. In roles where work experience may not be feasible, opportunities to shadow professionals were suggested as an alternative.

Across the steering groups, the need to increase access to apprenticeships was emphasised, especially for more advanced level or professional roles.

When applying for jobs, traditional recruitment practices often pose barriers to refugees and migrants. We need more ways to enable people without UK qualifications or experience to properly demonstrate their skills, other than in a job interview. For example, incorporating more tests or tasks into the recruitment process would offer more opportunities for people to show their suitability for the role. Current schemes for translating and validating qualifications (such as UK ENIC), where they exist, were reported to be difficult to access, confusing and expensive, so a need for support in accessing these was identified.

The costs of accessing training and volunteering opportunities can be a barrier to many, especially transport and childcare costs. The lack of affordable childcare spaces can be a huge hurdle when it comes to securing employment, especially for women.

Career development service delivery framework:

Each service user will be assigned a coach who is a careers advice and guidance specialist.

Strand 1 – General support delivered in groups. To include:

- Understanding and navigating the regional employment landscape, the UK job market and culture
- Job search and application skills
- Support understanding career pathways and how to progress towards goals
- How to get qualifications recognised by existing schemes where applicable
- Employability skills
- Confidence building
- Wellbeing support, linking to specialist support where necessary.

This strand would be delivered in roll on/roll off learning cycles to minimise waiting times, for example repeated every 10 weeks.

Strand 2 – Tailored support for specific job sectors delivered in small groups according to skills and career goals. To include:

- Sector/job specific advice and support, eg tailoring CVs to jobs
- Support making industry connections and expanding networks
- Connecting with mentor from relevant job sector
- Work experience or internship related to career goals
- Opportunity to get a UK reference
- Explore apprenticeship options.

Individuals may benefit from participating in Strand 1 before moving to Strand 2. Or, if they have a clear idea of their career goals, they could access both simultaneously. There is also the potential for mentees to train to become mentors for future cohorts. Funding for childcare should be built into the service.

This service would organise regular events with employers, industry specialists and training organisations to support individuals to identify potential career paths and opportunities, and facilitate network building.

As the project is likely to be reliant on finite funding, it is important that there is some ongoing support after the funding ends, so that people can continue to build on what they have achieved. This could be provided by setting up a peer support group which could then meet regularly after the project ends. Ensuring that the service establishes a firm foundation for people to support themselves afterwards is also important.

Potential challenges exist around sourcing and engaging sufficient employers and industry experts to provide enough opportunities to support the potential range of aspirations. Suggested solutions include starting with existing employer partnerships and then working to enlarge the cohort to widen the breadth of opportunities. ACH and our partners already have strong relationships with supportive employers. These employers have a range of experts and opportunities not just in their core business but also in areas such as marketing, HR and finance.



Existing career support programmes

There are a range of existing careers and employment support initiatives that provide models of good practice or present opportunities for collaboration to meet the needs of refugees and migrants. Babbasa and their Our City 2030 project support young people from low income or minority ethnic background to find work in Bristol. The Women's Work Lab supports unemployed mothers on benefits into work in the South West of England. Bristol Future Talent Partnership is a collaboration of leading organisations providing work experience opportunities for global majority young people aged 14-21.

The National Careers Service provides a wide range of advice and guidance on careers and training, although our research suggests it is difficult to access for many refugees and migrants. Migrant Leaders support disadvantaged young migrants in the UK to gain high level and leadership roles. Breaking Barriers provide employment support for refugees in a number of areas in the UK. Sector-based work academy programme (SWAPs), organised by Jobcentres, are short-term training and work experience opportunities which result in a guaranteed job interview in job sectors with a high demand for staff, for example in care or construction.

Consultation questions for stakeholders

What are the additional challenges to this service being effective?

How can we overcome these challenges?

What other solutions are there for enabling more refugees and migrants to find good quality jobs that match their skills levels?

Call for action and collaboration: how can you be involved in supporting this service?



2. Skills and qualification recognition and verification process

“

“You go to college and you get your certificate... and so you spend five years or six years and then when you come here you come with nothing so you need new experience in the UK or you change your certificate to that.... so for someone with my certificate, a degree and master I have in my country, and they say this thing is – maybe you make it from – someone is making it for you, maybe it is faked. And I spent my lifetime doing this! So should I start from zero again?” Aarifa

“

“I was looking for something like this, because I’m using like software in my job. And then I was feeling like I want just to go to any company and ... show them I can use it because I already have like eight years of experience with it. So I was looking for this and I couldn’t find it”. Nihal

”

“I have 20 years of my career behind and experience, all the education, which is not recognised in this country. I was not accepted for the first year to any decent jobs, just because I’m [from overseas] and because I didn’t get my education here, or just because a person who’s local is more preferred... Suddenly I became no one, not recognised”. Anna



A strong theme in our research is that many migrants and refugees come with a broad range of skills and experience but these are not recognised in the UK job market. Therefore, they are unable to find work that utilises these and they often feel forced into low-paid entry-level roles.

Currently, there are schemes for recognising existing qualifications for specific professions like healthcare and teaching. UK ENIC provides a Statement of Comparability for overseas qualifications, while Ecctis helps people validate qualifications in sectors like construction, plumbing and electrics. However, our research supports existing evidence²⁶ that many people face barriers to accessing these services, and qualifications may be recognised at a lower level in the UK than in the country they were achieved in. Moreover, these schemes do not address the needs of people who do not have, or cannot evidence, overseas qualifications, and it appears that there is a gap in support for this group. There is a need for a way to verify overseas skills and experience not recognised by existing schemes.

The proposal is to combine a digital tool with face-to-face support. Participants will receive guidance from advisors to access the platform. To maximise accessibility, the tool will genuinely be user-friendly and include instructions and tests in multiple languages with an option for text-to-speech.

Test participants will be able to demonstrate their job specific and transferable skills in practical tasks and situations using methods such as videos, images, questions and task simulation. The results will be compiled on a certificate detailing all employment-related skills that participants possess, and areas for development to pursue their chosen profession. This certificate can support applications for work, apprenticeships, training or work experience.

Besides helping individuals find jobs that use their skills, the process would help employers fill vacancies, address skills shortages and provide more accurate data on peoples' skills for better planning and policy development.

To be successful, the skills verification process must be recognised and validated by employers, training providers, professional bodies and regulators, as well as local and national government. Therefore, key stakeholders need to be involved throughout the design and development process to address employers' and trainers' requirements and challenges and ensure compatibility with job standards. The tool would also be co-designed by refugees with lived experience of navigating the skills system to maximise accessibility and relevance to potential users.

A robust research phase would be conducted to prevent duplication of existing schemes. The suggestion is for a regional pilot, testing the tool in one or two sectors, with future scalability to other sectors and regions. Of course, this type of scheme has potential benefits for other groups in society who have valuable skills but their lack of qualifications is holding them back from finding work.

An example of a successful model is MySkills, run by the German public employment service and developed by employers, academia and government specialists. It assesses all skills for specific occupations and involves practice-oriented tasks, giving employers an accurate picture of a candidate's suitability for the role. The assessment is available in several languages and 30 occupations, including building, construction, engineering and care work.

Consultation questions for stakeholders

- What are the additional challenges to this process being effective?
- How can we overcome these challenges?
- What other solutions are there for verifying refugees' and migrants' skills where they do not have a recognised qualification?

Call for action and collaboration: how can you be involved in supporting this process?



From Sanctuary to Opportunity 2024 report launch

3. A means to link and improve access to existing services



“[People from] refugee background, migrants, that they are coming and... some of them, they could not find which organisation is for what... there's lots here in Bristol. Lots. That's why the people are losing their way. The people they are like 'where should I go?' They are doing something in this organisation and it's not completed, then they are going to another, then it's not completed, they are going to another one to find out what's happening... [We need] like a menu... We have in Bristol many organisations”. Azyan

The research shows a need to make existing careers and support more easily accessible for refugees and migrants. Many are not aware of the range of opportunities or find it impossible to navigate them. Proposed solutions are a means to collate the support currently available in the region, and/or a service to facilitate access to appropriate support.

This would benefit organisations because it would support partnership working between employers, training providers, support organisations and public sector bodies, enabling knowledge sharing and mutual support. This could facilitate data collection on skills needs and vacancies, identify gaps in career support for refugees and migrants, and prevent duplication.

Existing support and partnerships

Existing employment support for all residents in the region includes Skills Connect – skills, training and career support; Future Bright – career development support, One Front Door – for unemployed people in Bristol, and Ways2Work – connecting employment support organisations. However, our findings suggest that refugees and migrants are often unaware of, or struggle to access, these platforms and that the variety of options are confusing and overwhelming.

ACH and our partners at BRASP provide a range of support for refugees, migrants and people seeking asylum in Bristol.



In terms of employer collaboration, Bristol City of Sanctuary Business Network is bringing together businesses with a shared interest in contributing to Bristol's ambition to be a city of welcome, safety and hope by improving employment support for people seeking sanctuary.

ACH has developed the Welcome Pledge, a pioneering initiative urging employers, training providers and businesses to help refugees and migrants access economic opportunities. Co-produced with businesses across the South West and members of the migrant and refugee community, and aligned with the region's Good Employment Charter and the Living Wage Foundation, the Pledge aims to ensure refugees and migrants are welcomed and empowered to thrive in the workforce.

There is also solid partnership working in the business sector more generally, as exemplified by Business West, Visit West and the West of England Good Employment Charter.

There is therefore a need to find a way to complement existing services and initiatives to make systems more streamlined and accessible. Suggestions include the creation of a single service or hub to help refugee and migrant communities navigate existing websites and services. This should include a mechanism for collaboration between employers, ESOL and training providers, refugee, support organisations, advice and guidance professionals, and public sector bodies.

The need for such an initiative is strongly supported by our 2024 research, which identified integrated collaboration and a single point of contact as crucial to meet training needs and tackle underemployment of refugee and migrant communities.

Consultation questions for stakeholders:

- What are the additional challenges to this initiative?
- How can we overcome these challenges?
- What other solutions are there for linking and improving accessibility to existing services?

Call for action and collaboration: how can you be involved in supporting this initiative?

The resulting new initiatives must fill a gap in existing services and add value to what is already available. It is essential to gain a proper understanding of potential service users' skills, experience and their goals. Evaluation and learning are crucial and must be built in from the start. To ensure we engage people who will benefit from the service, proper outreach is needed to maximise accessibility by removing barriers to participation. Meaningful involvement of people with lived experience of displacement in the design and delivery is important to facilitate this.

“

“And then if this project will be in place, then if you can hire ... people like us in this project, so they will work I think, because of their business experience and their understanding for the other people like them as well”. Ikram

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“So my point is how the refugee knows this happening? So we need to approach the refugees themselves because most of them they don't know these services exist. I know this is the research point, but when it happens they need to be approached in their communities, in their houses. Like some of the women, for example, they don't know services exist for them. They don't know their rights and they need to know this service is happening out there and to be encouraged. Because they might feel they can't do it, they need to know they can. Sudan woman”. Aarifa



From Sanctuary to Opportunity 2024 report launch

Next steps

We are looking forward to continuing this work with employers, funders, training, support and policy practitioners, alongside refugee and migrant communities. There are many ways you can engage with this work. So far, we have identified several partnership opportunities from employers, and have various offers and suggestions for contributions including staff time and expertise, mock interviews, work experience, 'insight days', coaching or mentoring activities, and a free space on an existing training programme.

Working together to improve opportunities for refugee and migrant communities to find work that enables them to fulfil their potential will enable greater participation in communities and the economy with benefits for all of society. This will help to counter harmful narratives and stereotypes – which we must continue to challenge.

The Restoring Control over the Immigration System White Paper, citing the upcoming Community Cohesion strategy, states the government's intention to "work closely with local authorities and partners to help individuals benefit from community cohesion".²⁷ The fall in net migration by nearly 50% in 2024, which was contrary to public expectations²⁸, provides a chance to shift the narratives and policies on immigration in a more constructive and positive direction.

This is a significant opportunity for a collective effort to create real change for refugees, migrants and all communities. Together with our partners, we are ready to work with local and regional governments to achieve this.



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