

# Asylum Seekers – Improving Access to Basic Skills

By John Newson & David Lane (St Paul's Development Agency)  
Report for the ASPIRE Development Partnership

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ASPIRE - Asylum Seekers  
Pursuing Integration, Refuge  
and Empowerment



St Paul's Development Agency



St Paul's Community Development Trust  
73 Hertford St, Balsall Heath,  
Birmingham B12 8NJ  
0121-464-8660

# Asylum Seekers – Improving Access to Basic Skills

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## 1. Summary of the Project

The ASPIRE programme aims to promote the better integration of asylum seekers in Birmingham and Solihull. It is funded through the EQUAL Community Initiative Round 2 (European Social Fund).

ASPIRE asked St Paul's Development Agency to investigate ways of improving asylum seekers' access to basic skills; spoken English, literacy and numeracy.

We began by informing ourselves about previous studies about the barriers faced by asylum seekers and refugees and their learning needs. This research and its findings is summarised in section 2. It was not necessary to interview individual asylum seekers as this has already been done by other research, which is referenced in this report.

Since the previous research and consultation work has revealed some dissatisfaction among asylum seekers who have engaged with the existing courses for basic skills, we consulted with community organisations in Birmingham that work with asylum seekers, to obtain their views of the appropriateness of the courses offered by mainstream providers.

An approach to engaging asylum seekers could be through community organisations, so we considered their strengths and weaknesses in terms of helping people access basic skills provision (section 3).

Consulting with the main learning providers, we asked about their relationship with the community organisations (section 4).

From this analysis we developed a Strategy for Inclusion, whose 3 elements (described in section 5) are as follows;

- a. Improve the 'product' offered by basic skills courses and ways to market them via the community organisations.
- b. Improve communication between the community groups and the learning providers.
- c. Build the capacity of community organisations to be able to deliver basic skills themselves, or to assess and refer people on to appropriate courses.

We considered the emerging structure for voluntary and community organisations in Birmingham (the ChangeUp consortium) and found that it will offer an important new mechanism for connecting community organisations that work with asylum seekers to local learning providers. Ways to exploit this opportunity are described in section 6.

Resources to help with these problems are offered in the listings in section 8.

Methods for disseminating these results and recommendations for future action comprise in section 7.

## 2. Asylum Seekers as Learners

The number of asylum seekers in the West Midlands is estimated at just 5 -7,000 – a huge fall from the 20 -25,000 in the peak year of 2001-02, according to the West Midlands Strategic Partnership for Asylum and Refugee Support (WMSPARS).

This reduction in numbers reflects the national picture, where new claims for asylum have fallen sharply. The recent trend in UK government policy towards discouraging claims means that numbers of new applications in 2005 was only a third of the level of 2002, in fact there were fewer applications for asylum in 2005 than in any year since 1994 (Home Office<sup>1</sup>).

The status of the asylum seeker is very temporary, lasting only for as long as it takes to hear and decide on their claim. The UK government has an aim of reducing this time, and has been making progress with this; 88% of applicants have an initial decision within 4 months. Most asylum claims are not proved and the application is unsuccessful. In 2004 only 19% of claims heard were successful<sup>1</sup>. Recently, the high cost of deporting unsuccessful claimants has led to an offer of a payment of £3,000 to encourage failed asylum seekers to return to their country of origin. There is also the voluntary return scheme for paying travel costs.

Asylum seekers are very diverse. People claim asylum from up to 83 countries of origin, (LSC<sup>4</sup>). The predominant countries of origin change from month to month, depending on the degree of persecu-

tion of citizens in different states, civil wars and conflicts. Hence the cultural background and mother tongue of asylum seekers changes. For example, the number applying from Iraq has been falling steeply following the election of the new government<sup>1</sup>.

The educational background of asylum seekers is very varied, according to research<sup>2,3</sup>. It varies from graduate and postgraduate level to no formal education. Education may have been in a non European script. People may have been in highly skilled professions or not have had paid work. English language proficiency may be fluent or non-existent.

Studies of asylum seekers<sup>2,3</sup> show that they bring many problems with them from their country of origin, such as ill health, physical or mental, caring responsibilities for young or elderly family members. Being in a new country adds cultural disorientation, hostility, lack of relevant information, and probably inadequate accommodation. Asylum seeking then adds a burden of uncertainty and anxiety about their status that makes it hard to think about the future. They will be short of money and are prevented from working. They are in 'survival mode'.

- 1 'Asylum Statistics' 1st Qtr 2006 Home Office
- 2 Asylum Seekers' Skills and Qualifications Audit  
– by Fiona Aldridge & Sue Waddington for East Midlands Development Agency
- 3 'The Integration of Asylum Seekers and Refugees' Equal2 Cententus policy paper 1 (March 2006)
- 4 'Review of Support Services for Refugees'  
- Dr Jenny Phillimore etc,  
University of Birmingham (CURS)  
for Birmingham & Solihull LSC.

The situation facing the individual asylum seeker as a learner is daunting. They may be new to an urban environment. They may have transport difficulties. The colleges' requirements for form filling and time keeping may be challenging for them to fulfil.

Basic skills will be essential to an asylum seeker functioning in British society. If the person remains in the UK they will need spoken English, literacy, numeracy and IT. The same skills will be an asset if they

**Asylum seekers are highly diverse, having in common only that they have claimed asylum in the UK.**

New Asylum Seekers 2006 1st Quarter	
Top Ten Countries of Origin	
1.	Zimbabwe
2.	Eritrea
3.	Iran
4.	Somalia
5.	Afghanistan
6.	China
7.	Nigeria
8.	Pakistan
9.	India
10.	Sudan
'Other nationalities' comprised the remaining 30% of applications.	
Source; 'Asylum Statistics' 1st Qtr 2006 Home Office	

return to their country of origin, or a third country. However, the issues listed in this section mean that asylum seekers face great difficulty in participating in formal learning and qualifications.

Interviews have been conducted with refugees, i.e. successful asylum seekers, by the Trellis project 5, which aims to promote refugee employment in Birmingham. This study revealed that their experience of formal learning opportunities was a disappointing one. The interviewees were critical of existing courses in ESOL - English for Speakers of Other Languages - as being ineffective in helping them to integrate at the speed they want and need. Their expectations may be unrealistic in some cases; underestimating the time it will take them to acquire the skills they will need. However, the barrier that this lack of language skills presents to integration was strongly expressed to us by Trellis. Asylum seekers who cannot work or access the same range of learning opportunities as refugees are in a still worse situation.

We visited the Professional Development Centre in Birmingham who stressed that Britain and other developed economies are demanding ever-higher levels of qualified skills. The Basic Skills Agency has calculated that 98% of jobs require spoken English. It is increasingly the case that level 2 literacy and numeracy are required to progress beyond unskilled employment and low wages. Birmingham is becoming a 'knowledge city'. Basic ESOL courses do not deliver the level 2 skills that the asylum seeker will need to integrate and get into the labour market. They are being offered 'the lowest rung of a very long ladder' towards real employability.

5	'Progress in Implementing the Refugee Employment Strategy - the Birmingham experience' Trellis project 2006'
6	'Refugee employment – commissioning gateway prospectus - 2006-07 BCC Regeneration Services
7	'Refugee Employment in Birmingham' – Employability Forum 2005
8	' Employment & training for refugees – what works?' NICEC, 2005

## Conclusion

Asylum seekers are an intrinsically difficult category of learner to provide for, successfully, for all the reasons cited in this section.

Individuals frequently face a daunting step up to the level of skills needed to integrate into British society.

They are likely to need additional support as asylum seekers and this should reflect their specific origins. We therefore investigated the role of community organisations in supporting asylum seekers to access learning (following section).

## 3. Community Organisations – as a gateway to access learning

Asylum Seekers are mostly not from the former Commonwealth states that have a history of large-scale immigration to the UK. The refugee communities are therefore small 'new communities' in Birmingham. As a consequence they do not relate well to the standard ethnic classification used in UK; Black, White, Asian, Other. Therefore, statistics about these recent asylum communities tend to be inadequate and out of date, especially as people are also geographically mobile.

Nevertheless, in Birmingham we have identified a substantial number of refugee community organisations (RCOs), where asylum seekers may meet people from the same language and national background as themselves, and where they will naturally go to look for advice and guidance about opportunities available to them in Birmingham.

We consulted 'Windows for Sudan', who stressed to us that such RCOs as themselves offer an island of 'home' in a strange environment, and potentially a bridge into the wider society. This is an important social capital that does not exist in most of the UK, and which needs nurturing.

However, in some cases, divisions and tensions imported from the countries of origin mean that asylum seekers may prefer organisations that are not so strongly focused on one country or ethnic group. The individuals endeavouring to run the RCOs themselves suffer from all the burdens and barriers of refugees. Helping others will be another

er call on their time and personal resources. The needs of their clients are complex and wide-ranging, often including mental and physical trauma. A response to this is that 'My Time' Ltd is currently supporting the development of counselling services within RCOs. This is an outcome of the ASPIRE funded project that developed and delivered Basic Counselling Skills Courses to RCO staff and volunteers.

Ten local Development Agencies are supporting voluntary & community organisations, funded by the Birmingham & Solihull LSC. They have developed working relationships with some refugee community organisations; which are found to be frequently under-resourced and finding it hard to compete for funding, information and support. Only low cost premises are available to them. Often they have brought with them divisions from the country of origin; political, religious, etc. For example there are many Somali organisations reflecting the different clans in Somalia. An organisation's life may be short, due to these problems. The RCOs cannot easily progress to the kinds of quality standards increasingly being expected, e.g. in advice and guidance work.

Support is being offered to build the capacity of RCOs, for example another ASPIRE project offers residential courses in organisational development, run at Fircroft College in conjunction with Muath Welfare Trust who will provide additional RCOs Development Agency support.

RETAF (Refugee Employment & Training Advocacy Forum) is a valuable umbrella body trying to develop RCOs, but itself has very modest resources. RETAF have emphasised to us that it is very hard for indi-

vidual asylum seekers to survive alone; they naturally join a national group. Learning can be seen as learning by the whole group. Learning as a group, asylum seekers from a similar background can support each other and build their confidence. The process can begin in a familiar environment (language, culture etc) and work outwards into unfamiliar settings, language and information.

There are benefits from having a tutor who has had similar experiences, i.e. themselves from an asylum/ refugee background. (Although learners themselves sometimes request a 'real English person' to model correct pronunciation etc).

The premises used by RCOs are usually low rent and may be regarded as sub-standard. St Paul's Development Agency has given some of them assessments and advice on how to plan improvements to their premises. More such improvements need to be done.

Colleges offer superior facilities, but may be experienced by asylum seekers as too large, formal and intimidating, compared to the more 'homely' community venue. Community venues may be in walking distance, as communities tend to be geographically concentrated.

To conclude, there is no one right type of provision for asylum seekers to learn; choice is needed. This can benefit learners, by offering different learning styles in different venues; college, or community venue.

## 4. Basic Skills Providers and Provision

We consulted mainstream learning providers to see how they were responding to the needs of asylum seekers; South Birmingham College, Joseph Chamberlain College, City College and Birmingham Adult Education Service. These all meet as members of the Local Area Planning group of Birmingham & Solihull LSC.

A map of which organisations are currently providing ESOL is being prepared by Groundwork.

Opinion is divided as to whether asylum seekers can be treated like any other learners in a college setting. Some colleges told us this is what they try to do, e.g. Joseph Chamberlain College. Against this is the view that existing courses need to be substantially modified for asylum seekers, who have special needs compared with other students.

Some criticisms of existing provision were put to us by RETAF and Trellis, as specialist agencies that work with refugees and asylum seekers.

- ♦ A college setting may be experienced as bureaucratic and intimidating – an asylum seeker could feel lost.
- ♦ Learners with very different educational and skill levels will not form a ‘class’ just because they are all asylum seekers.

- ♦ Colleges have the qualified staff and can access mainstream funding. They could see refugees and asylum seekers as a ‘captive audience’ for courses that they want to run.
- ♦ If college tutors go to community venues it could be the ‘worst of both worlds’ for the asylum seeker – a low quality venue with a tutor who does not really understand their needs.

Such concerns may be met through innovation by learning providers. A search of the online ‘West Midlands Learning Directory’ identifies 2 courses (very new) specifically offering ‘English for asylum seekers’. These are at the Sparkhill Centre, and the Small Heath Youth & Community Centre. However, new work is going forward in Birmingham, aimed at improving the ‘product’ offered by basic skills courses. The ASPIRE programme is European Social Fund-funded and is supporting a number of initiatives, including the following;

- ♦ South Birmingham College to work on a ‘tailor made ESOL’ curriculum, combining English language with citizenship and welfare issues.
- ♦ Sutton Coldfield College to develop a combination of ESOL geared to employability, with work shadowing.
- ♦ The Professional Development Centre and Birmingham Refugee Council are offering training to existing teachers of ESOL in the needs of asylum seekers.

The issue will be how to ensure that these pilot schemes are widely known and their lessons learned, with the good practice being adopted among learning providers.

## 5. Strategy for Inclusion

Following the analysis given in this report, we propose the following strategy to include asylum seekers in basic skills provision:-

Individual assessment

- 5.1 Community organisations and colleges should be encouraged to record a person's asylum status and keep this up to date.
- 5.2 Early assessment of the asylum seeker is essential, to record their skills, experience, difficulties and aspirations and this is regarded as a degree level 4 task.
- 5.3 (South Birmingham College has a programme to upskill those who initially advise newcomers at community venues.).
- 5.4 A comprehensive handbook - 'Skills Audit for Asylum Seekers and Refugees' - enables an organisation to assess an individual's skill level, but front line staff will have to learn how to use it accurately.

## Course Content

- 5.5 ESOL courses for asylum seekers need to be available that are fast track and intensive, due to their temporary position and immediate need to survive. Learning needs to have a clear focus and aims. They need the most immediately useful content and vocabulary. This will motivate learners and allow best use of resources.
- 5.6 Basic skills should be taught in combination with practical knowledge, and relating to everyday life in Britain, and the asylum seeker's welfare needs, using situations found outside the classroom.
- 5.7 Learning should be driven by the learners' needs, not the requirements of existing courses. One suggestion for asylum seekers could be to have 'learning groups' that investigate life in Britain by drawing on a variety of outside speakers, rather than learners being passive consumers of a set 'package'.
- 5.8 Learning should lead towards work, as this is key to an eventual integration in British society. Although asylum seekers are not allowed paid employment, their interest in basic skills relates to a goal of being able to work, when their status is decided. Language learning should relate to likely vocations.
- 5.9 Measures of quality for courses and the benefits to participants need to be developed, alongside simple quantitative measures of attendance.

5.10 Television and films could be used to learn about realistic situations and language.

5.11 Opportunities for practicing English conversation should be in realistic situations, such as by trips out or through an RCO's activities.

## **Role of Community Organisations**

5.12 Community organisations, especially refugee communities, should be involved in formulating the content and the methods of new and innovative courses. Any courses that have involved refugee organisations in choosing the content and methods will have a 'flying start', in terms of the latter's awareness, approval and willingness to refer clients.

5.13 New courses aimed at asylum seekers will need to be marketed to the community organisations, which seem to have a low level of awareness of the new initiatives, from our contact with them. Recommendations for this are in section 7 of the report (below).

5.14 The new courses will have to be evaluated in 6 or 9 months and any evaluation should involve the asylum and refugee community. Have courses delivered as promised? Have the learners progressed as planned? What is their perception of the course? Can tutors who have not been through the asylum experience truly understand these learners?

5.15 Community organisations need capacity building to assist asylum seekers become learners. The Development Agencies (DAs) have been funded by LSC and could assist community organisations to signpost or refer people to appropriate learning. DAs will need to know what courses are available. Means for achieving this are outlined in section 7 of this report. To assist the DAs to fulfil this role a 'toolkit' is being produced (May 2006) by the Professional Development Centre of Institute for Social Entrepreneurs in Birmingham. LSC funding for DAs is however ending (March 2007) and any alternative funding may not put the same emphasis on promoting learning.

5.16 This leads community organisations through the choice of either;

- ◆ Hosting a tutor from a mainstream provider, or
- ◆ Recruiting and employing a tutor, or
- ◆ Becoming a Basic Skills Centre, that assesses and refers people.

5.17 Community organisations will need more resources if they are to become educators. Much language learning has been done by teachers who do not have the relevant qualification in basic skills delivery. By 2010, all teachers will be required to be qualified to level 4 (degree level) in basic skills delivery.

The Professional Development Centre has a key role in raising standards of basic skills tutors (but their funding is insecure). Many resources exist, often free, but community organisations will often not be aware of them.

- 5.18 Services of advice and guidance are increasingly expected to conform to a quality standard, such as PQASSO, or Matrix, or one being developed by the Refugee Council. Funding will increasingly be linked to such standards. The Development Agencies Network is available to those that are willing to help them make progress.

### **Volunteering as a learning experience**

- 5.19 Volunteering can offer a rich experience, which could make asylum seekers feel that they have some place in British society. Placements within the voluntary and community sector could breakdown isolation and give opportunities to practice English language skills in a sympathetic setting. This could be the motivation that is needed. If voluntary work is found that relates to the person's previous experience, then vocabulary appropriate to that area will be learned. Groundwork Birmingham and Black Country has been funded to produce a guide to volunteering for asylum seekers (May 2006). Trellis project and the Muath Trust have also done some work relating to volunteering.

- 5.20 Voluntary learning mentors recruited from the local area, or the refugee community will be valuable. Churches and mosques may be a network that can help with this. The Time Bank principle is being explored to recruit mentors by a project run by Trellis. Befriending is encouraged by the Save the Children's BUMP project.

- 5.21 Volunteering or mentoring, or boarding with a family, are all learning opportunities, but they can also help to reduce fear and suspicion on both sides; so assisting asylum seekers' integration and providing 'good news' stories for the media.

### **6. Mechanisms for Joint Working & Signposting or Referral**

The community organisations form a first line of contact with asylum seekers (along with certain cafes and similar social venues). Formal learning providers such as colleges constitute a very different world – there is naturally a knowledge gap between them. We have considered how the links can be made to;

- a) Ensure community organisations are aware of and can refer people to appropriate courses
- b) Ensure that mainstream basic skills providers have the involvement of community organisations in designing, delivering and evaluating their courses.

Good communications cannot be assumed. Specific channels must be created, and if necessary resourced.

We have found that community organisations are not altogether aware of 'the offer' in terms of courses for asylum seekers and how they are being improved. For example we visited an advice centre which did not seem to be aware of a course 'English for Asylum Seekers' being run in the adult education centre that is literally across the road.

There are websites that allow community organisations to search for courses, for example [www.nextstepbirmingham.solihull.org.uk](http://www.nextstepbirmingham.solihull.org.uk)

But, out of the many providers offering ESOL, it is not easy to select one that will be appropriate for asylum seekers. Only 2 courses currently in Birmingham are described as 'English for Asylum Seekers'.

The Birmingham Refugee Council is training ESOL teachers in the needs of asylum seekers and refugees (from Sept. 2006). How will RCOs identify the teachers who have had such awareness raising?

The Development Agencies could act as disseminators of information about learning for asylum seekers, to the extent that they work with RCOs, but first they would need to be better informed about the courses on offer by major learning providers.

It seems that the learning providers do not have a listing of community organisations, or a way of identifying those that work with refugee and asylum seekers, so as to market their courses. Birmingham New Communities Network provides an online directory, but it is not comprehensive, nor broken down by geographical areas  
[www.bcen.net/bncn](http://www.bcen.net/bncn)

We spoke to the LSC's Local Area Planning Group whose members include; South Birmingham college, City College, Joseph Chamberlain College, Birmingham Adult Education Service. They asked us to provide them with a listing of such community organisations. We aim to collaborate with the Muath Trust Development Agency to compile this listing (see Recommendations).

The ChangeUp consortium in Birmingham will unveil its 10-year investment strategy in June 2006. This will include developing a website that will give details of the whole voluntary and community sector. The Birmingham & Solihull LSC needs to be aware of this and help to publicise it to learning providers who will find it a very powerful marketing machine that should transform the situation. There may be a case for LSC to help resource the website to make sure its potential to market learning opportunities is realised.

St Paul's Trust's involvement in the Birmingham ChangeUp consortium makes us believe that this will be the mechanism for the future. ChangeUp is planning a web-based system that will integrate the voluntary and community sector and link it to sources of expertise, including basic skills.

The model is shown in the Chart below. It is to have local fieldwork hubs, which may well be the Development Agencies. They will get to know and give general help to community groups in building up their resources, knowledge and capacity. Fieldwork hubs will provide the human face and human contact.

Development Agencies are working towards a standard 'organisational health assessment' for voluntary organisations. This should include a section on basic skills. The PDC toolkit for Development Agencies already provides a model for this.

The ChangeUp plan also involves specialist 'hubs' of expertise. One is to specialise in 'Equalities', with a mission to assist excluded groups including asylum seekers and refugees. Others will be for Volunteering and for Workforce Development. The local hubs will be connected to the specialist hubs through the ChangeUp website.

The website will offer an online database of learning providers and links to their websites. Development Agency Staff will be trained to show community organisations how to create their own web pages on the ChangeUp site.

## 7. Recommendations for Future Action

### a) Dissemination of results

- ◆ This report and its findings will be given to LSC ASPIRE programme and the constituent partners.
- ◆ A printed version of this report to be published.
- ◆ A pdf version to be posted on the following websites; St Paul's Trust, ASPIRE, EQUAL, ChangeUp

- ◆ The report will be shared with the Local Area Planning Group (LAPG)
- ◆ The list of community groups will be shared with the main learning providers who have requested it and any others who do so.

### b) Joint working

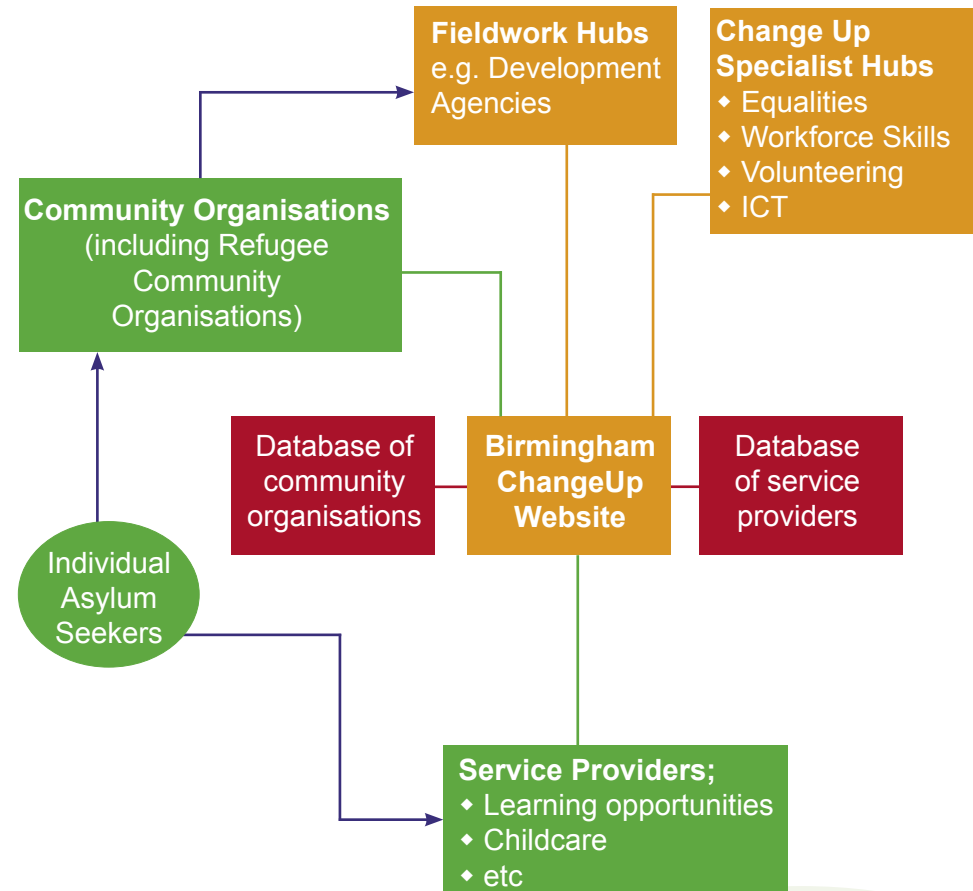
- ◆ A directory of community organisations that work with asylum seekers to be produced – with one page per organisation – research, compile and produce. This in printed form and on website. This will be so that learning providers can market their courses to RCOs.
- ◆ We recommend that the report be shared with the Change Up consortium and they be engaged, especially on the development of the Changeup website to maximise its value for groups wanting to access or provide basic skills learning.
- ◆ The Development Agencies Network should be made aware of the report and its findings in regard to their potential role.

c) Assistance to RCOs

Some well-established RCOs in the Central area should be assisted in the following ways;

- ◆ A Marketing course to be run to help them market their services to and for asylum seekers.
- ◆ Assistance to create a web page for each RCO on the Birmingham ChangeUp website.
- ◆ The RCOs premises to be assessed as a learning site. Plan with them physical improvements that will upgrade them for learners (possibly through LSCs Neighbourhood Learning in the Communities fund).
- ◆ Assistance to be given to develop volunteering opportunities for asylum seekers, which include English language practice.
- ◆ Support to reach a quality standard, especially in information, advice & guidance.

## 8. Change Up Model for Voluntary and Community Sector in Birmingham



## 9. List of Organisations referred to in this report

LSC	Learning & Skills Council (Birmingham & Solihull)	<a href="http://www.lsc.gov.uk/birminghamsolihull">www.lsc.gov.uk/birminghamsolihull</a>
ASPIRE	Asylum Seekers Pursuing Integration, Refuge and Empowerment	<a href="http://www.aspire-birmingham.org.uk">www.aspire-birmingham.org.uk</a>
ChangeUp	Birmingham ChangeUp Consortium	<a href="http://www.changeupbirmingham.org">www.changeupbirmingham.org</a>
PDC	Professional Development Centre	<a href="http://www.i-se.co.uk">www.i-se.co.uk</a>
RETAF	Refugee Employment and Training Advocacy Forum	Email ; <a href="mailto:retaf.forum@hotmail.com">retaf.forum@hotmail.com</a>
St Paul's Trust	St Paul's Community Development Trust	<a href="http://www.stpaulstrust.org.uk">www.stpaulstrust.org.uk</a>
ESF	European Social Fund (of the European Union)	<a href="http://www.esf.gov.uk">www.esf.gov.uk</a>
EQUAL	An initiative of the European Social Fund	<a href="http://www.equal.ecotec.co.uk">www.equal.ecotec.co.uk</a>
Trellis	The Trellis Project	<a href="http://www.employabilityforum.co.uk/refugee-employment/trellis.htm">www.employabilityforum.co.uk/refugee-employment/trellis.htm</a>



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