

FUTURES

Refugee Employability Programme

Our Lasting Impact

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Refugee Employability Programme (REP) was a two-year initiative commissioned across England, aimed at supporting refugees on their journey to self-sufficiency. The programme was designed to enhance the integration and employability of refugees, helping them build long-term lives in England.

Futures were commissioned by lead prime for the East Midlands, Twin Training. The partnership structure saw Futures delivering the employability and integration elements of the contract in Nottingham and Nottinghamshire, with Twin providing bought-in English Language provision.

The Refugee Employability Programme ended in June 2025. The programme has made a profound difference in the lives of service users, providing hope and support to refugees. The demand for such services is substantial and growing, and the end of REP will leave a significant gap in support for refugees in Nottingham.



Why Futures – our purpose and intent

We blend nationally commissioned programmes with local initiatives to create a customised path for our customers. This path includes unbiased information, job help, and learning that sets all customers up with the right skills and tools for life and work. Our ambition is to empower disadvantaged individuals and communities, helping them improve their education and job prospects in collaboration with our local partners.

We support vulnerable young people and adults who have the most significant barriers to education, employment and training, and are furthest away from the labour market. Our aim is to ensure that local people are supported to upskill, find training or retraining, find and sustain meaningful employment or to develop softer social, life or basic skills. We do this by providing specialist and bespoke support that empowers disadvantaged and vulnerable customers through a range of locally commissioned programmes and services.

THE REFUGEE EMPLOYABILITY PROGRAMME

In March 2021, the UK Home Office published the New Plan for Immigration. The goals included the building of an enhanced integration package to support refugees to integrate and become self-sufficient more quickly.

The programme had three main components:

- **Tailored Employability Support** including skills courses, support with CV writing and job applications, access to employment-specific language courses, and work experience opportunities
- **Additional English language provision** over and above that available in mainstream provision including access to formal or informal classes, access to online learning and resources, and providing access to conversational classes
- **Integration support** is provided for those who do not already receive it. This includes support to access appropriate mainstream services (such as a GP or a jobcentre), signposting to local community groups, and signposting to appropriate mental health services.

Programme overview

The REP was designed to support refugees and those granted protection to build their long-term lives in England.

People eligible for support from the REP include: UK Resettlement Scheme, Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme, Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy scheme, Community Sponsorship Scheme, Mandate Resettlement Scheme, those granted Refugee Permission to Stay (Group 1 Status) and those arriving under Refugee Family Reunion (as long as their sponsoring refugee is eligible for the REP).

REP was not open to those arriving via the Homes for Ukraine scheme, as they are currently granted temporary leave, or arrivals under the Hong Kong British Nationals (Overseas) visa as they are required to fulfil economic conditions to be granted leave.

It was therefore envisaged that many of the REP's beneficiaries would be from the Middle East, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa

The Customer Journey

REP service users mainly engaged with the programme via the job centres. Our advisers were based in the centres each week with dedicated space to talk to customers and use language skills to break down communication barriers. Advisers also engaged with new customers via the Refugee Forum.

The customer journey for REP participants included the following stages:

- Signposting
- Onboarding
- In-Service Support Activities
- Exit Interview

Service users were signposted to REP, contacted the programme, and provided information for an eligibility check. Once eligibility was confirmed, they received a welcome pack, were allocated an adviser, and had an introductory meeting. A Personal Development Plan (PDP) was created and reviewed every 20 days. Employment activities, integration activities, and English language learning were part of the support provided. Case worker contact was maintained at least every 10 days, and in-work support was provided for a minimum of three months.

Reflections from the delivery team



Each day begins with a **big smile** and a **heart full of purpose**, wondering if it will be as challenging and fulfilling as the day before. And every time, it exceeds my expectations leaving me eager to discover what tomorrow will bring. No two days are the same when working with refugees in an advisory role; each day is diverse, dynamic and filled with meaningful challenges.

Usually my day involves a blend of structured appointments either face to face or by phone call, responsive casework and advocacy, liaising with job centres, housing providers, schools and health provisions. All aimed at **empowering refugees** to overcome barriers and secure employment.



Flexibility is essential when working with refugee communities, where needs can shift rapidly and unpredictably. A session booked for job search may turn into support with applying for travel documents or resolving a housing issue. Or a job opportunity with an imminent deadline. I make it a priority to address these needs in the moment even if it means extending the session or arranging a follow-up appointment.

Strong **communication** mainly in community languages, a great deal of **empathy** and the ability to adapt to individual circumstances has been critical in my role. Staying up to date with local knowledge and networking with support organisations has enabled me to assist with practical needs like housing, healthcare, and education and helping service users navigate complex systems with dignity and confidence.



At the end of a busy day at work, I feel full of positive energy and proud that I have helped someone take a step forward in life and that that my support is **making a real difference**. I often see service users who say hello when passing by or share good news like finding a job or starting college. Teenagers I have supported to get into school or college, their smiles, growing confidence and gratitude warm my heart. I feel exceptionally proud when they speak to me in English, something we once struggled with when they first come to the UK as family reunion and we only communicate together with their first language. These moments remind me of the incredible journey they made and the privilege I have in walking alongside them and their parents.



OUR DELIVERY MODEL

The programme was delivered through a case-working model, with each refugee allocated to a Futures adviser to assess their needs and develop a tailored plan to improve their employability. The delivery model addressed several barriers faced by refugees, including:

- Lack of awareness of the UK labour market and employment rights
- Vulnerability to financial and criminal exploitation
- Basic English language skills and communication
- Qualification equivalency
- Cultural orientation and access to services
- Discrimination and stereotypes

Our engagement with service users identified specific barriers:

- Refugees in general are over **20%** less likely to be in employment than the rest of the UK population. For refugee women, this employment gap is even higher with employment rates over **30%** lower than UK-born women.
- Our service users generally had low levels of English which caused them significant barriers in terms of engaging effectively with employers.
- There were high levels of homelessness and those experiencing housing difficulties. This reduces levels of work-readiness and impacts on their mental health and vulnerability to exploitation and discrimination.
- Service users were often used to more informal means of gaining employment. Understanding the more rigid UK systems can be confusing, particularly around tax and benefits.



Reflections from the delivery team overcoming barriers

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We understood that service users who were homeless would not focus on employment or learning, so we worked with external stakeholders who provided housing and focused on eliminating the barriers, and then focused on employment.

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We supported with securing school places for children, and liaised with schools on behalf of the service users who had a language barrier. Parents were able to focus on their learning and employment when their children were at school.

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No two days were the same working on REP, days were hectic, but service users looked forward to the support they received, they described it as ‘there is no other place where we can go for this kind of support, we feel cared for with this support’.

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ENGLISH LANGUAGE

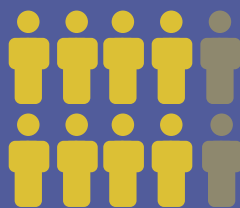
A significant number of service users had limited spoken and written English, which formed a barrier to understanding labour market information and engaging with employers through applications and interviews.

We encouraged and supported service users to engage with a range of opportunities to develop their English language skills:

1. Conversation cafes are informal dialogue opportunities that invite attendees to take part in discussion about a range of topical issues. Locally, our participants attended the Conversation Café at Nottingham Playhouse with other refugees and people seeking asylum for a hot drink and a chat in a relaxed comfortable setting. Some also joined the Red Cross conversational ESOL cafes.
2. Our regular group sessions enabled service users to benefit from peer-to-peer support, to build social links and practice English language skills at Futures. The sessions were very well attended and there was always demand to know when the next session would be.
3. Advisers developed a range of resources to develop language skills through conversations at appointments. This included pictorial resources and use of Google Translate to help them understand key documents. Whilst use of other languages formed part of the approach, all advisers recognised that using some English in sessions had a broad benefit to the customers in helping develop their understanding.
4. In addition to understanding key documents, advisers helped customers develop their digital skills and use digital technologies to find work; many customers were more used to word-of-mouth to find a job and not familiar with providing information about themselves as is the norm in the UK recruitment process.
5. Advisers worked with partners at both Nottingham College and West Notts College to secure ESOL course places for customers, facilitating enrolment events at Futures and College sites. Often waiting lists exist for ESOL courses in Nottingham and we encouraged customers to recognise there are other providers who can help.

Twin Training ESOL provision:

42 service users engaged with Twin Training's ESOL Support throughout the programme. This is in addition to those taking ESOL through other providers, either formally or informally.



Eight out of **ten** service users have achieved a re-assessment score in excess of **70%** (this is the benchmark learners are aiming to achieve).

70% of those service users improved their initial assessment score to above **70%** (the benchmark set for all learners), sometimes jumping from around **35%** to around **75%**, which is a huge jump in terms of confidence and understanding.

Mean average at initial assessment (E1) - **42%**

Mean average at re-assessment (E1) - **78%**

Mean average at initial assessment (E3) - **59%**

Mean average at re-assessment (E3) - **79%**

Learning English language skills - customer stories:

- 1 Fars was supported to enrol onto ESOL provision with Twin and has also completed a pre-employment training course to develop employability skills. He was also supported to secure a council flat where he is now settled. Jepta also supported Fars with acquiring his Home Office interview so that he can apply for the family reunion visa for his wife and is in the process of job applications and job search in hopes that he will secure employment. His CV is up to date, and his level of confidence has improved as a result of the support he has received to settle into life in the UK.
- 2 When I first met Mohammed, he was claiming Universal Credit, and his job coach had warned him to the payment would be suspended if he does not find a job. This was a stressful situation because he could not speak English well, had no work experience in the UK and did not have the required qualification. He had low aspirations, so I reassured him about our ability and desire to support him through the settlement process in Nottingham by finding an English language course and employment.

To find an English language course, I collaborated with Nottingham College, CTP and TWIN school that admitted him into an ESOL course. This course enabled Mohammed to improve his English proficiency. While he was learning English, I signposted him to various training opportunities until he successfully completed an apprenticeship with Boots warehouse, where he is currently working as a warehouse operative.
- 3 Diana's asylum claim had recently been approved when she was first referred to REP at the job centre. She could communicate in some English, but her understanding was not sufficient. She had low self-esteem and was upset and overwhelmed with the quick eviction notice from the hotel. She felt responsible for herself and her husband whose English was very limited. As her adviser I had to rely on visual things, body language and Google Translate to secure accurate communication. Through using my existing networks I managed to find housing for Diana and her husband. Diana undertook an assessment of her English and Maths in preparation for enrolling on a Health and Social Care course. Unfortunately, she did not pass the assessment as she said it was on a computer and her IT skills did not allow her to perform. Diana was disappointed but was supported to look at alternative options and eventually found a place in ESOL provision. Diana has made tremendous progress in believing in herself, her confidence was shown on every PDP appointment, and this made her more determined to achieve and make a difference in her life and her husband's. There is proven evidence by her ESOL Tutor, Louise, that she is doing well in her English class and will progress to the second level in less than 7 weeks.

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The **support** I have been given has made a **significant difference** to my life. Helping me find an English class and with matters relating to my refugee status. My adviser has been **incredible** throughout.

EMPLOYABILITY

Improving employability outcomes for REP participants started with our engagement with employers. There is some reluctance and some widely held misunderstandings around what it means to employ somebody with refugee status and there has been a lot of work involved in breaking down these barriers and introducing a new narrative to employers.

We worked closely with employers, providing them with training and guidance, and working together to facilitate employment interviews with participants at our centres.

This has helped increase the number of work outcomes and also provided a wider benefit to the business as new employers become aware of the support we provide.

Advisers advocated for their customers to have access to training provision and worked to overcome the narrative that they were not eligible due to their immigration status. This involved some gentle challenge and persistence and in some cases resulted in decisions not to offer training to be overturned. Without this level of persistence and understanding from the advisers these customers assumed they were not eligible for the training they were in real need of.

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My adviser is a **very friendly** and **respectful person** who helped me find a job. I now have a good CV and have been helped to apply for lots of jobs.

Our impact – the numbers

Total Sign-Ups
at the end of
the project

192

Total into Work
(with Evidence):

52
(28% conversion)



HOUSING SUPPORT

The majority of REP service users experienced housing challenges. Advisers used their local knowledge and language skills to engage with local authorities and private landlords and advocate for our customers.

A high number of service users are in supported accommodation; gaining employment can immediately push rents up which disincentivises formal employment and can push service users into the type of employment opportunities which are linked to exploitation.

We launched a learning programme for colleagues across all services at Futures to support their understanding of employment rights and labour exploitation and in turn better support their customers.

Housing support – customer stories:

1. One service user was living in supported **accommodation**. His wife and children were due to join him in the UK and he was worried that they would have nowhere to live. This was understandably very pre-occupying for him and was impacting his time and motivation to find work. He was also struggling to understand his rights to access accommodation. Zakia used her language skills to advocate for the customer and secured housing through Erewash District Council. The messages of thanks she received from the customer show that her support had a life-changing impact on the customer and his family. Zakia understood the sacrifices and trauma the family had experienced to get to the UK and felt very strongly that they should at least have a place to live.
2. Upon enrolment Mohammad was facing **homelessness**. He was struggling to find work and was facing sanctions from the job centre as his engagement was poor. Jepta was able to work with him to build a better understanding of JCP expectations, which improved his attendance and with it, levels of anxiety decreased. Jepta also enrolled him onto a conversational ESOL course which then led to an application for the SIA badge SWAP which Futures Skills ran in Mansfield. Mohammad has now secured employment in the security industry, and with Jepta's support has applied for and secured his own property.



Thank you for helping me find a home. I was homeless and even though your work was over you continued to support me to find a room to live in. I **appreciate** that so much.



OUR WIDER IMPACT

Our reputation in the community:

Futures advisers are seen by service users as reliable and trustworthy. Advisers receive frequent messages from their service users and are often asked to support in a number of ways - we are often seen as *'the only ones who really help'*.

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Without your **support** I could still be sleeping on the street, so I am **very happy** with support received from you – Thank you.

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I would like to **thank you so much** for helping me communicate with the council and **helping me secure a house** for my family and a school for my daughter... also for the **advice** you gave with the difficulties she experienced in her first grade. Without your help I would not have known what to do.

Many service users speak with their friends and family and we often have them coming to appointments together as a result. There is a sense of community within REP:

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I feel a **part of the community**, thank you to God who allowed our meeting, it was God given.

Keeping our customers safe

The 2024 'protests' by right-wing groups had a significant impact on our service users and advisers and made them feel as though they were not safe attending their appointments. They already face discrimination in a number of ways – often passive or covert – but they were genuinely fearful of their place in society. We adapted our delivery model to ensure we could still keep in contact with them and give some reassurances that Futures is a safe space for them to access.

'One adviser was approached by a lady at the Job Centre saying she had heard of REP and needed some help. Though she was not signed up to REP she knew that the adviser spoke Arabic and felt that they were trustworthy. She disclosed that she felt her life was at risk from her husband. The adviser was able to speak with her about her experiences and concerns and ensured that she was referred to Women's Aid. Working in partnership with other Job Centre Staff, the adviser was able to keep her safe when her husband arrived at the Job Centre to look for her. She has now been housed away from her husband and though she is no longer in the area she has expressed her gratitude for the support and understanding she received that day. Though she was not a REP participant, the reputation of the programme gave her the confidence to come forward. This demonstrates the wider impact of the programme and the excellent reputation the advisers have.'

E-Visa

Our service users had to change to an E-Visa; our advisers trained to understand the process and the impact on customers and how they can support. Whilst this is not necessarily part of the 'remit' of REP, the advisers felt very strongly that if they failed to understand the process and were unprepared to help then it could become a significant barrier for service users. All advisers have offered support with the E-Visa process and the levels of gratitude from service users and their families has been evident. These extra sources of support provided by the advisers underline our reputation as being a supportive organisation that does the right thing and goes the extra mile, even when it's not in the job description.

LONG TERM IMPACT

Although the REP has ended, the skills and expertise developed through the programme continue to benefit customers and colleagues at Futures. Advisers remain available to support REP customers and ensure they are supported into other services.

'On 3rd June, advisers attended the Welcome Event for Asylum Seekers and Refugees arriving in Nottingham. The event aimed to ensure that those arriving in the city could speak with key services and gain an understanding of the support available to them. We knew that attending this event would not have any bearing on REP contract outcomes as we could no longer take referrals, but being on-hand to provide information about Futures services and direct anxious parents to sources of information about their children's education and post-16 options was very gratifying. REP has established Futures as a trusted ally within the Refugee community, and our visibility at events such as this ensures that we remain a source of support beyond the end of REP.'



Final thoughts

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Whilst it's sad that REP has now finished, all three advisers have been retained by Futures and continue to offer support to the Refugee community through their current roles. Ahmadou will be working with customers placed in NEST, an alternative provision for Asylum Seekers and Refugees and is also working on the TYF LAC contract with a focus on Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers. Zakia continues to support REP customers who have not yet accessed another service, she is actively supporting them into other areas of the business and helping them find opportunities in education and employment. Zakia has also supported other advisers in terms of translation for their customers. Jepta has started a new role supporting care experienced young people, amongst the cohort is a large number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers. It's important that we're able to maintain our positive standing within the community and continue the positive work we started through REP.

Adam, Delivery Manager

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Refugees often carry the weight of trauma. Their journey is not just for survival it is also to seek hope, to build a new life where their families feel safe and valued. As an adviser who worked on such a unique programme, I believe that REP has been a beacon of hope and certainly made a profound difference in service users' lives. The demand of such services for refugees is substantial and growing. The end of REP will definitely leave a significant gap in support for refugees in Nottingham. Refugees risk being set back in their progress and even facing increased barriers to employment and integration.

Zakia, Adviser

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