

# Breaking Barriers

Meaningful employment  
for refugees



## Effective employment support for refugees: Breaking Barriers approach



Breaking Barriers Project Catalyst is part funded by the EU Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund. Making management of migration flows more efficient across the European Union.



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# Introduction

## Our vision

Breaking Barriers exists so that every refugee can access meaningful employment and build a new life.

## Our mission

We welcome refugees into meaningful employment with advice, experience, and education. We believe in the power of responsible business to change society for the better through our innovative partnerships.



## Project Catalyst

This report is being delivered as part of Project Catalyst – Supporting Integration Across the Capital. This project provides employment support to aid the successful integration of Third Party Nationals. Third Party Nationals as defined by the project as persons who do not have citizenship of one of the European Union Member States, nor the citizenship of one of the countries associated with the European Union (Iceland, Lichtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland).

The project helps Breaking Barriers clients gain the skills, confidence, and experience needed to obtain stable and meaningful employment. By offering bespoke employment support, English language, and IT training it supports unemployed clients into work and underemployed clients into employment that is better paid or more suited to their skills and aspirations.

Our clients consist of refugees and people under other forms of protection with the right to work who live in London. This includes people under humanitarian protection, non-EU victims of human trafficking, people who are in the UK on family reunification visas and those with discretionary leave to remain. Our support is open to people over 16 years old with no upper limit.

The project is part-funded by the European Union Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund. It was originally designed to run from January 2020 until the end of December 2022. However, thanks to the funding extension, we can now provide our services for a further 12 months.

# Refugees in the UK and barriers to employment

At the end of 2021, 89 million people worldwide had been displaced from their homes because of violence or persecution. With the war in Ukraine, this figure will have increased significantly. The majority of those seeking asylum are currently living in developing countries (with the largest proportions living in Turkey, Columbia and Uganda, which between them host around 7 million refugees).

There were an estimated 135,000 refugees living in the UK in 2021 (although some estimates are as high as 374,000). Since then, with the onset of the crises in Afghanistan and Ukraine, there has been a considerable spike in new asylum applications. Over 70,000 people claimed asylum in the year up to 2022. Of these, only 17,000 have been granted right to remain in the country so far (on average our clients waited nearly 3 years to hear the outcome of their cases). It is estimated that nearly 130,000 people currently have asylum cases pending in the UK.

Refugees living in the UK face a variety of barriers to employment, including language barriers, non-recognition of qualifications, cultural differences, and discrimination. 84% of refugees reported that they did not have sufficient English language ability to get a job. Support for these issues is very limited – in some places, waiting lists for English classes are two years long, and the majority of those in classes say that the classes they are doing are not sufficient to learn the language.

As a result, refugees in the UK are 4 times more likely to be unemployed than people born here, and on average earn about half the amount per week that UK nationals do. This is despite high levels of qualifications and skills (38% of refugees from Syria living in the UK have a university degree, for example).

## Breaking Barriers' solution

To support refugees and people of refugee background to overcome these barriers and challenges we offer a range of interventions:

Barrier faced	What we offer
Low level of English language	English classes at all levels focused on building confidence and proficiency in professional environments
Gap on CV created by lengthy asylum process	Work experience placements, shadowing and job opportunities
Lack of networks within UK job market	Career insight events, sector-based networking and mentoring
Limited knowledge of UK job market	Employment Foundations training programme covering essential knowledge for finding and applying for work in the UK
Digital exclusion	Digital skills and IT classes at beginner, intermediate and advanced levels and access to laptops through local partnerships

# How clients access our support: outreach, referrals and onboarding

To reach clients that need support and ensure our programmes are accessible we do outreach to advertise our services, create new referral partner relationships and develop existing relationships.

## Referral

Referrals come from other charities, job centres and NHS services

Client refers themselves

Referral partner refers client

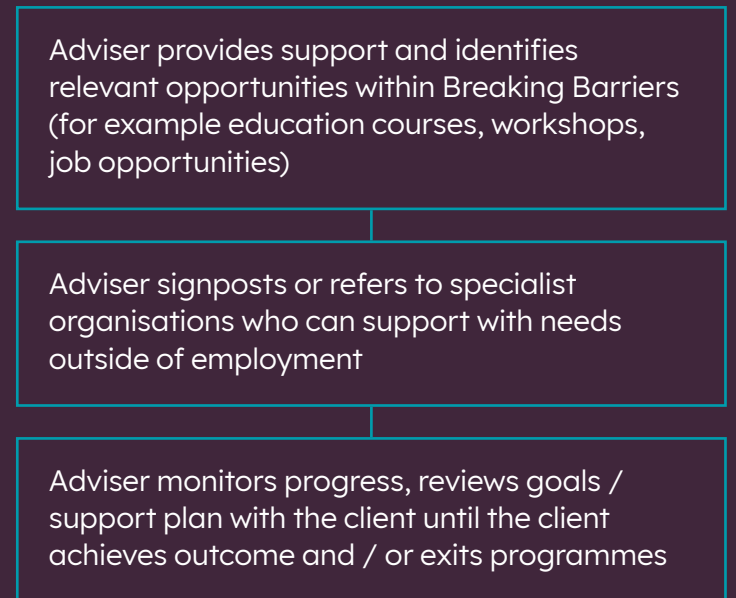
Client joins waiting list

## Enrolment with Adviser



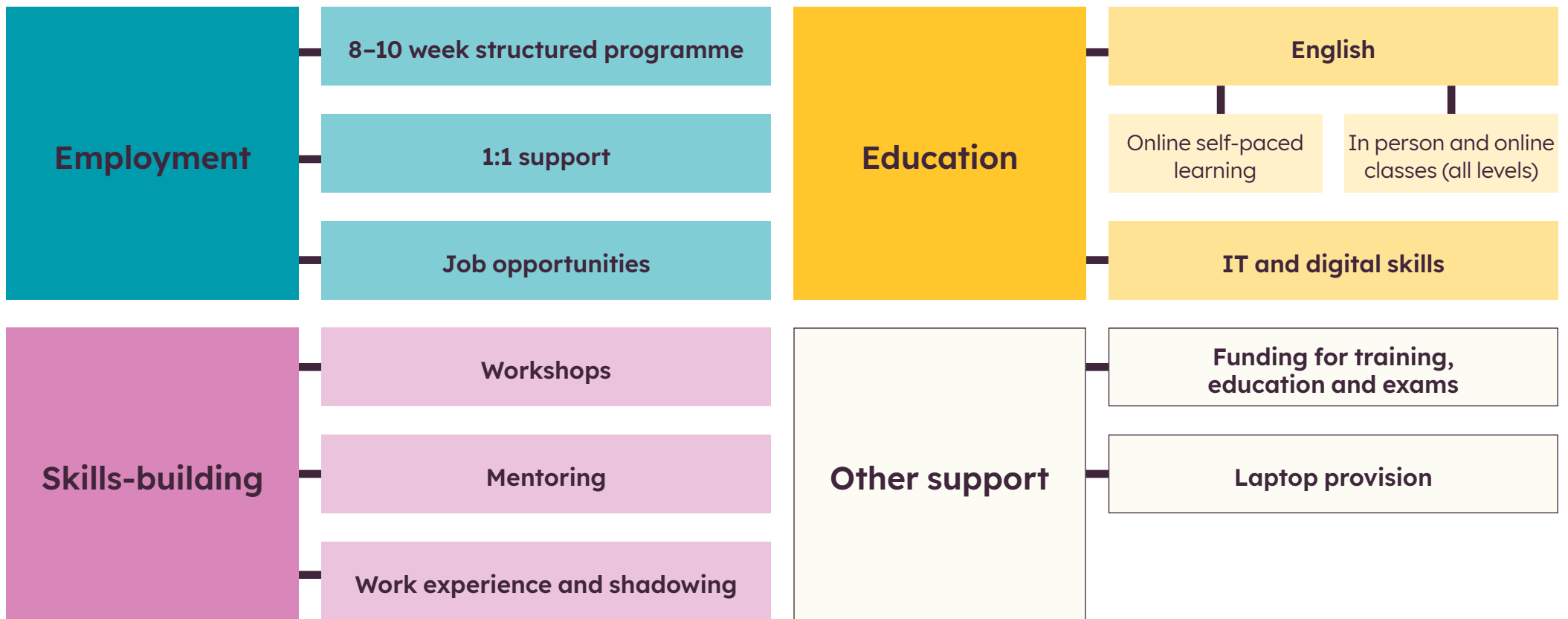
Client joins Adviser's caseload

## Client's support journey starts



# How we deliver support

## Our programmes



## Employment

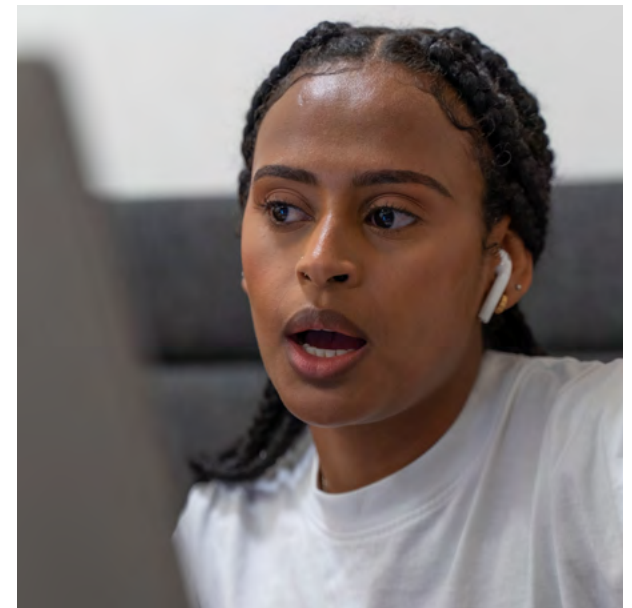
Once enrolled, clients are assigned to Employment Adviser's caseloads. Each Adviser manages a caseload of between 25 and 35 clients, up to a maximum of 40. The Adviser remains the client's primary point of contact at Breaking Barriers, liaising with other teams who may be supporting the client to maintain an overall view of their progress, goals and needs, and ensure they are accessing relevant opportunities. The Adviser is also responsible for signposting or referring clients to other organisations who can help with issues outside of employment, or supporting a client with any safeguarding concerns.

Caseloads are reviewed on a regular basis with a Programme Manager to ensure that an Adviser's workload is manageable and to pre-empt or address any wellbeing concerns. Clients vary in the nature and intensity of support required, with some needing very intensive, regular support and others needing minimal support from the Adviser (for example, if they are only interested in accessing Breaking Barriers' English classes). While best efforts are made to ensure continuity of Adviser, or to match clients and Advisers by language skills if required, clients can be transferred to another Adviser's caseload to moderate capacity and protect wellbeing if needed.



### One-to-one employment support

The main way of providing support to clients is through Information, Advice and Guidance sessions (IAGs). These are one to two hour appointments that take place to achieve a specific task that will help a client progress towards a goal. This could be: working on a CV, practising digital skills, making a college or university application, applying for funding, researching a specific sector, or preparing for a job interview. IAGs can take place remotely or in-person, depending on the client's preference.



## Education

Our education courses deliver English language, IT and digital skills support in weekly classes lasting between 1.5 - 2.5 hours (depending on whether they are online or in-person), in four-to-eight-week blocks.

The curriculum is based on bespoke Breaking Barriers content, that has been developed by experienced volunteers with oversight from the Education team and informed by client need and feedback. Each course or class is designed to be suitable as a standalone module so that clients don't need to attend one course or previous classes to attend another.

All our course content is designed with our strategic focus on employment in mind, so that all courses, regardless of level, are centred around skills that will ultimately help clients to access work and training. In this way, our courses are intended to complement rather than duplicate ESOL and statutory provision.



## Skills-building

Effective working between the Employment and Corporate Partnerships team is key to ensuring outcomes for our clients. We have a dedicated role within the Employment team - the Hiring Coordinator - to act as a bridge between functions, ensuring that business development is informed by client need, and that job opportunities are quickly and clearly communicated with clients and Advisers.

When job opportunities with corporate partners go live, the Hiring Coordinator works with Advisers to identify suitable clients and provides direct support to clients in IAGs to support their application if needed.

This model allows us to regularly share client trends with the Corporate Partnerships team and to ensure a client-focused approach from the early stages of planning potential partnerships.





## How we use volunteers

Volunteers are a fundamental part of our support model in terms of the skills and experiences they bring to our clients and how they enable us to run our programmes at scale.

Our main volunteering roles within our employment programme are:

- Advice and Guidance volunteers work with clients one to one during IAG sessions to support them with progressing towards their goals.
- Sector volunteers are matched with clients based on professional background or aspirations so that they can provide sector-specific insight and expertise.
- Mentors work more independently with clients over a longer timeframe and are carefully matched according to client need.

Following any meeting between a client and a volunteer, the volunteer completes an appointment summary detailing what was covered and actions agreed during the meeting, so that the Adviser can maintain an overview of progress and inform the support plan accordingly.

Volunteers are also a vital part of our education programme, developing the curriculum and teaching classes. Volunteer teachers and teaching assistants are TEFL/CELTA qualified. Like all our volunteers, they undergo a rigorous screening and induction programme to ensure they are suitable and prepared for working with our client group.



# Our approach to data and monitoring and evaluation

The data we collect and store on our CRM is a critical tool for tracking progress and informing support on an individual level as well as measuring impact and programme decision-making on a wider level.

At enrolment, we ask clients for relevant personal data to confirm eligibility for support, and build a picture of their support needs as well as gather data for funder reporting. This includes:

- Demographic data
- Data related to their immigration status and date of arrival/right to work in UK
- Housing arrangements and means of financial support
- Employment status
- Education level
- Language skills
- Previous work experience and history of job searching
- Access to electronic devices and the internet
- Additional needs outside of employment
- Short- and long-term goals.

We create records on our CRM to log client activity, whether that's IAGs, education classes, workshops, research on behalf of a client or informal check-ins. This allows us to track individual support journeys, as well as a breakdown of our total output of activity across programmes and the number of clients that have received support in a given timeframe.



A key metric for Breaking Barriers to evaluate the success of its programmes is if a client enters employment, receives a promotion, starts an education or training course, or a voluntary role - we call this an employment outcome. We gather additional information about outcomes to allow us to understand the stability and security of the role, in line with our focus on supporting clients to achieve meaningful employment.

Alongside these 'hard' outcomes, Breaking Barriers also uses 'soft' outcome metrics. Soft outcomes refer to clients building their employability without entering into job roles or entering courses/placements. Clients self-assess their own employability via impact surveys sent to them by Breaking Barriers, in which they are asked to reflect on how their skills, motivation, confidence and knowledge have improved since they started the programme. During the project we have experimented with various survey timings and have optimised it over the years and it's available in a range of languages including English, Arabic, Somali and Amharic, Persian, French, Spanish, Urdu, Turkish, Tamil and Tigrigna.

Here's an example of some of the questions we ask our clients in the Impact surveys:

**After receiving support from Breaking Barriers, how motivated do you feel about meeting your short-term and long-term goals?**

- Much more motivated
- More motivated
- Neither more nor less motivated
- Less motivated
- Much less motivated

**After receiving support from Breaking Barriers, how confident do you feel about meeting your short-term and long-term goals?**

- Much more confident
- More confident
- Neither more nor less confident
- Less confident
- Much less confident

**After receiving support from Breaking Barriers, do you feel that your chances of finding a job are:**

- Much better
- Better
- Have not changed
- Worse
- Much worse



# Lessons learned

During the development of Breaking Barriers' approach to providing employment support there have been many lessons we've learned along the way as to how we can be more effective. This report highlights what we believe are the five key things we've learned and insights from the teams working directly in these areas.

## 1. Hybrid delivery

Prior to March 2020, our support was delivered in-person. Like most organisations, the pandemic forced us to swiftly adapt our programming and logistics to be able to support clients remotely.

As we developed and improved our remote support offering, we discovered benefits and challenges of online-only support that are by now well-known (for example, while removing travel time offered greater flexibility to our clients, many were unable to effectively access or engage in our support due to lack of equipment or digital skills).

In February 2022 we started re-introducing in-person delivery at a limited scale to assess client demand and programme effectiveness. Initial results from a review of this suggest that while a minority of clients in London are seeking in-person-only support, those that do find it very valuable – particularly those with low levels of English or digital literacy. We boosted our monitoring and evaluation in these areas to understand our clients' needs around digital access and how we could continue to support them.

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Having our services online and face-to-face has enabled us to increase access and reach of our support. It has particularly benefited clients who were prevented from receiving face-to-face support due to issues with transport, childcare, jobs, or classes. Employment Advisers have also benefited from flexible delivery as they can now offer shorter, more regular check-ins in addition to the more structured IAG sessions. This has provided us with better understanding of team capacity.

Helen, Senior Programme Manager



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Breaking Barriers' move to a hybrid delivery model created new opportunities for volunteers to work with us and engage with our clients. Previously, our volunteering programmes were restrictive and required a significant time commitment simply to attend an appointment. Now, we can recruit volunteers from a range of professional backgrounds that were closed to us which is a benefit to our clients. Our volunteers now have the flexibility to work with us in a format that suits them personally and fits with their professional commitments.

Mike, Volunteer Manager



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Our main finding is that while our model of hybrid delivery may look different region by region, as it should be informed by local client demographics and need, our default delivery mode will remain online, with in-person support available to those who need it. In the past three years, we have invested in digital inclusion programmes to provide clients with the equipment and skills they need to access remote support, and this should remain the priority given that these skills are an important part of work-readiness, not to mention wider social integration.

## 2. Standardising our support – developing Employment Foundations

Previously, our support was delivered on a highly individualised basis, all support plans were bespoke to that client and planned around a client’s specific needs at a specific point in time. Therefore, there was no set pathway for support and no set timeframe or endpoint to a client’s journey with Breaking Barriers.

In 2021 Advisers piloted the introduction of a standardised, module-based training programme that broke up the foundations of employment knowledge into a set of sessions in a logical order to provide them with a strong base of UK employment knowledge. This covers an introduction to the UK labour market, job searching, making applications, employment rights, and so on.

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We found that clients who had undergone the training said it improved their employment knowledge, ability to work independently, confidence and motivation. There were clear benefits of clients working with volunteers for a set period of time and following a course of materials that could be tailored to the client’s individual needs. Many of the clients achieved outcomes after completing the training. Based on learnings from the pilots, we made a number of changes including making the resources more accessible and versatile for clients from a range of professional backgrounds and sectors. We are now focusing on adding a work experience component following completion of the training, and piloting the delivery of the training in group workshops.

Cosku, Senior Employment Adviser



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Our learning from this is that although our approach will always be client-led, there are many parts of clients’ employment journeys that look similar, and that there are benefits both in terms of internal efficiencies and client engagement to delivering these skills and knowledge as part of a structured support package. We are now exploring opportunities for further standardisation of our programmes where possible and appropriate, to improve the quality, consistency and scalability of our programming.

### 3. Streamlined support pilot

In May 2022, we piloted a streamlined referral and enrolment process to allow clients to access a specific opportunity or area of support without waiting to join an Adviser's caseload. This process was created to support clients to access job and training opportunities and online, self-paced English language courses through our partners. Rather than through an Adviser, support is coordinated and provided directly by a Hiring Coordinator, the Education team and volunteers. This means that during periods of increased demand or reduced capacity our waiting list and caseloads don't become a bottleneck for clients accessing support.

These pilots have proved successful on a small scale so far, and our provisional learning is that the benefits of this model lie in the speed at which we can respond to opportunities and client need, rather than any saving in terms of internal capacity. Even though clients supported through this approach bypass the longer enrolment process and don't receive as intensive support from Advisers, we must still allocate sufficient staff capacity to ensure a safe and successful experience for clients. The key takeaway is that through better information-gathering at referral and triage of our waiting list, we can allocate clients internally to make sure that their needs are met sooner by the right team.

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Streamlined support has allowed clients to access training and employment opportunities quickly without compromising the high level of employment support offered to clients. We've faced challenges with the high levels of admin and coordination required to support clients in this model but are improving processes as we go. We see loads of opportunities to support clients and help them achieve their employment goals quickly whilst feeling well supported in the process.

Summer, Hiring Coordinator



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## 4. Timings of impact surveys

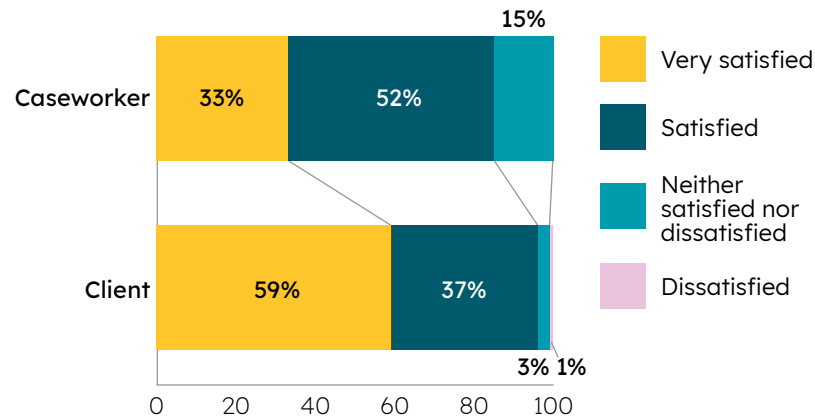
A key challenge we faced was when to send the impact survey to clients. There was a trade-off between the granularity of data we wanted and the sample size we could expect – the more regularly we sent the clients the survey, the more they would experience ‘survey fatigue’, and the fewer of them would respond. This problem was made even more challenging by the variety of our clients’ experiences. Some clients arrive at Breaking Barriers relatively job-ready, and simply need signposting toward a relevant role and some support preparing for an interview. Others, meanwhile, have much lower levels of English and have limited previous experience in writing CVs. By the time the latter group of clients have started to see real benefits from Breaking Barriers’ support, members of the former group will likely have moved on.

Initially, we asked the clients to complete the survey in their 1st, 4th and 7th IAG appointments. With the onset of remote delivery during Covid, IAGs started to vary much more in duration, so we switched to sending the clients the survey after 3 hours of support and then again after every further 5 hours. This gave a comprehensive view of clients’ journeys and ensured that almost all clients did the survey at least once. However, this system placed considerable demands on clients that were asked to complete the survey many times. Moreover, in seeking to ensure all clients completed at least one survey, many clients were responding before we could have reasonably made an impact on them. We are therefore considering a new system whereby most clients will only complete the survey once, after a meaningful amount of support has been provided.

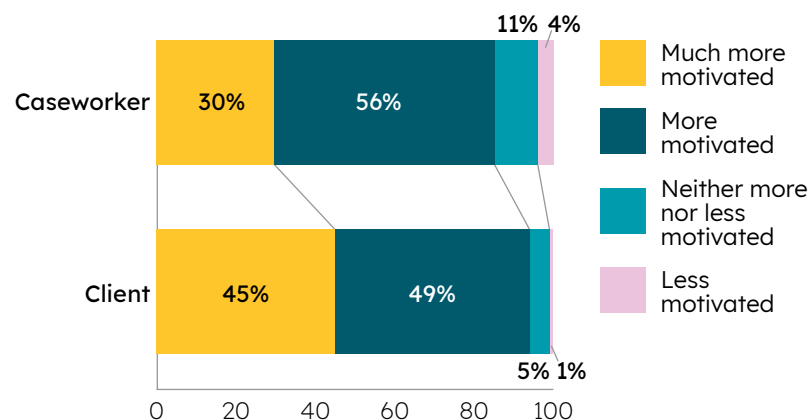
## 5. Accompanied or unaccompanied

With Covid-19, we transitioned from clients completing the impact survey with an Employment Advisor present to clients often completing the survey independently. We needed to know whether this change affected clients' responses, so we added a question in the survey to check whether an Advisor was present at the time. Intriguingly, we found clients were more likely to give negative responses about their experiences when an advisor was present (rather than the Advisor's presence pressuring clients into answering more positively, as we might have expected). This may be because Employment Advisors exerted a moderating influence on clients' results, or because those that completed the survey with an Employment Advisor present had more challenging support needs than other clients.

### Satisfaction with Breaking Barriers services by respondent type



### Motivation to achieve goals by respondent type



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At Breaking Barriers, our approach to monitoring and evaluation has evolved through various stages over the years, reflecting both learnings from our data and improvements to our programme delivery. We are not yet at the end of this journey and we are still finding ways to fine-tune our systems. This is central to what makes Breaking Barriers an evidence-based, mission-led organisation.

Toby, Senior Impact and Innovation Manager



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# Impact

## Our clients

The impact statistics on the following three pages represent the 827 clients we supported from January 2020 to June 2022. 347 of these clients were being supported through Project Catalyst. The data provides a breakdown of who we supported, how we helped them, and what the outcomes were.

From January 2020 to June 2022 (the end of our financial year), we supported **827 unique clients.**

# 827

Clients came from **69 different countries**, the most common of which were Syria (128 clients), Iran (86 clients), Afghanistan (82 clients), Eritrea (79 clients) and Sudan (56 clients).



The majority of clients were between the ages of **25 and 40**, with one in five between 35 and 40.

>25 | 40<

The majority of clients were **proficient in English** (according to the CEFR ranking system) and **96% knew at least some English.**



# 59%

59% of clients had at least **3 years of prior work experience** when they enrolled, and over a quarter had previous management level experience in their country of origin.

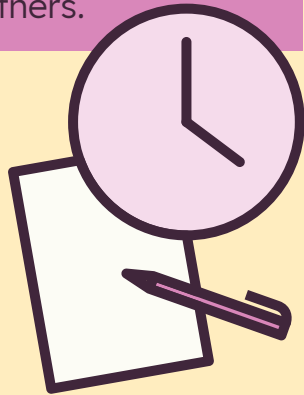
## Our support

**12,450**

We delivered **12,450 hours of support** to clients across over **6,700 individual activities**.

**6,700**

This included **7,200 hours** of one-to-one support, **4,036 hours** of education classes and **1,215 hours** of workshops with corporate partners.



**14**

During the three years of running the Catalyst Project, Grant Thornton hosted 14 workshops. They covered a variety of topics including employability and interview skills, confidence in presenting, communications and sales, speed networking, goal setting and how to manage one's time, and entering the accountancy sector.

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Refugees are often unaware of the unwritten cultural rules accompanying a job search in the UK. Therefore, building employability confidence is central to our workshop experiences delivered with Breaking Barriers. Together we develop refugees' interview, networking and presentation skills, which has proven popular with participants and volunteers alike. We look forward to supporting more refugees to move one step closer to meaningful employment.

Daniel Arda, Sustainability Manager, ESG and Sustainability, Grant Thornton



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Grant Thornton

## Our impact



**188 clients started new jobs** during the programme (23%), including 160 clients leaving unemployment, 32 clients changing employment, 21 clients completing internships, 2 clients beginning apprenticeships and 2 clients receiving promotions.

In addition to these employment outcomes, **89 clients started a qualification / education course**, 55 clients completed a training course and 24 clients participated in volunteering or work experience.



Overall, 291 clients (35%) achieved **452 outcomes** of one kind or another.

# 452

In addition, clients gave the following feedback after receiving support from Breaking Barriers:

92% were **more or much more motivated** to achieve their career goals

## 92%

88% felt more or **much more confident** that they would achieve their career goals

## 88%

81% felt their chances of finding a role were **better or much better**

## 81%

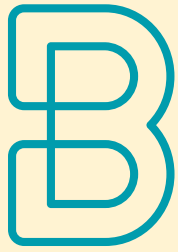
86% felt they had **better chances** of achieving their education goals

## 86%

95% were **satisfied or very satisfied** with the service Breaking Barriers provided

## 95%





# Breaking Barriers

Meaningful employment  
for refugees

Thank you for reading this report. We'd like to thank the EU Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund for funding our employment support, English language and IT training services to aid successful integration of refugees and people under other forms of protection.

If you have any questions about our programming please contact Louise Thomson at: [l.thomson@breaking-barriers.co.uk](mailto:l.thomson@breaking-barriers.co.uk)

If you have any questions about the data in this report please contact Toby Gill at: [t.gill@breaking-barriers.co.uk](mailto:t.gill@breaking-barriers.co.uk)



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