

Afro Innovation Group (AIG)

Base+ Project

Interim Evaluation Report

July 2025

3 Worlds Consulting

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Acronyms

AIG	Afro Innovation Group
OISC	Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner
SMT	Senior Management Team
VCS	Voluntary and Community Sector

Introduction

Background to the project

Afro Innovation Group (AIG) is a Leicester-based organisation that delivers a range of advice, support and empowerment services for vulnerable people in Leicester and surrounding areas, with a particular focus on ethnically diverse communities, refugees and asylum seekers. The BASE+ programme began in 2016, providing information, advice, and advocacy support to help service users address a wide range of challenges, including those related to housing, healthcare, employment and immigration. This programme has evolved considerably over the years, reflecting service user needs and rising demand. Base+ has been funded by the National Lottery Reaching Communities Fund since its inception and has just completed the second year of its current three-year funding programme. An interim evaluation, exploring service delivery over the last two years, has been conducted, with a view to describing the journey of the project over recent years, alongside capturing key learning to inform the years ahead.

The Base+ Programme

The current programme was designed to consist of three broad stages of support:

The first stage, delivered through the drop-in advice clinic and ongoing case work support, aimed to help individuals and families address their immediate support needs. It was understood that this would cover a wide range of support topics including housing and homelessness, welfare benefits, mental and physical health and immigration issues.

The second stage, delivered through planned one-to-one support, aimed to help individuals overcome longer term challenges in order to live happily and well in the local community. This would include helping individuals to strengthening English language skills; access education, training or volunteering opportunities; strengthen their employability and employment skills and access employment opportunities.

The third stage sought to address the acute social isolation that many service users experience, particularly refugees, asylum seekers and recent migrants to the UK. This included a befriending project, alongside group-based peer support sessions. The purpose of these activities was to link individual service users with others within the AIG community and to promote opportunities for emotional and practical peer to peer support, thereby strengthening sustained community integration.

Diagram 1. Structure of the Base+ Programme



Excerpts from AIG's Strategic Framework 2025

"Afro Innovation Group (AIG) is a small but impactful charity based in Leicester City. Founded in 2006 by former refugees and migrants, AIG was established to support others arriving in the UK to settle, integrate, and thrive. Its purpose is to offer information, support, and guidance to help people build meaningful lives, whether they choose to stay in the UK or return home with new skills and knowledge."

"For many refugees and migrants, arriving in the UK does not immediately bring a sense of arrival. People often live in limbo, unsure of their future, uncertain about belonging. Many are afraid, disoriented, and deeply isolated. AIG offers a lifeline, helping people to find their footing and agency in unfamiliar terrain."

"Fourteen years on, AIG has established itself as a trusted, high-quality provider of services for refugees, migrants, and the wider BAME community in Leicester. Its work is driven by lived experience and a deep understanding of the barriers new arrivals face, especially those who carry the weight of displacement, loss, and trauma."

"(AIG's) mission continues to evolve, grounded in empathy, solidarity, and a belief in the right to belong, wherever people find themselves in the world."

The Evaluation

The independent evaluation was conducted over the period May to July 2025.

Evaluation activities included:

- A preliminary meeting with the CEO and Operations Manager to review the development of the organisation over recent years, and to plan the evaluation workplan
- A series of meetings with the staff team including the CEO and Operations Manager, a senior caseworker, and a sessional caseworker
- A focus group with seven volunteers who support the advice drop-in
- A focus group with nine service users who have been supported through the general drop-in and broader casework support
- Analysis of 'informed estimates' of service delivery data, provided by the staff team¹
- An online survey with partner organisations, with two respondent².

Findings from the evaluation activities, including recommendations for the future, are presented in the following report.

¹ As described by the CEO: "The information was compiled based on discussions with our volunteers, sessional workers, frontline staff, and senior staff. Everyone was asked to estimate the number of service users they supported daily and the types of needs addressed. We then used this feedback to generate a representative average, which was further cross-referenced with referral emails, case notes, and partner correspondence to help validate the data."

² Due to the very limited number of responses, answers to open questions have been included for illustrative purposes. Quantitative question responses have not been included.

Service User Engagement

Service user numbers

Over recent years, AIG has seen a dramatic, and sustained increase in demand for its core services. Prior to the Covid pandemic, the drop-in service saw in the region of 30 service users per day. By 2023, this rose to 50 per day. In recent months, this has increased further to 60 or more service users at each drop-in session. The team estimate that they have supported 4,980 individuals over the last 12 months alone, double the level of two years ago.

There appears to be a number of drivers for this exponential growth in demand:

- When service users have a positive experience, they will tell others; word of mouth has been a major source of referrals. Further, service users come back to AIG time and again over the years as new challenges in their lives arise. As a result, the number of service users grows year on year as new arrivals add to the sizeable number of long term service users.
- Staff believe that there has been an increase in the number of refugees being housed in the area. The staff team have observed waves of new service users arriving at the drop-in who have just been awarded leave to remain.
- A number of local third-sector services have closed in recent months, leaving service users with fewer avenues for support.
- Statutory sector services are under considerable and growing pressure. As a result, it is understood that many statutory sector workers are signposting service users directly to voluntary sector services, including AIG. The staff team value this collaborative partnership working. However, some concerns have been expressed that this approach has, in effect, displaced some elements of statutory sector responsibility onto third sector organisations.

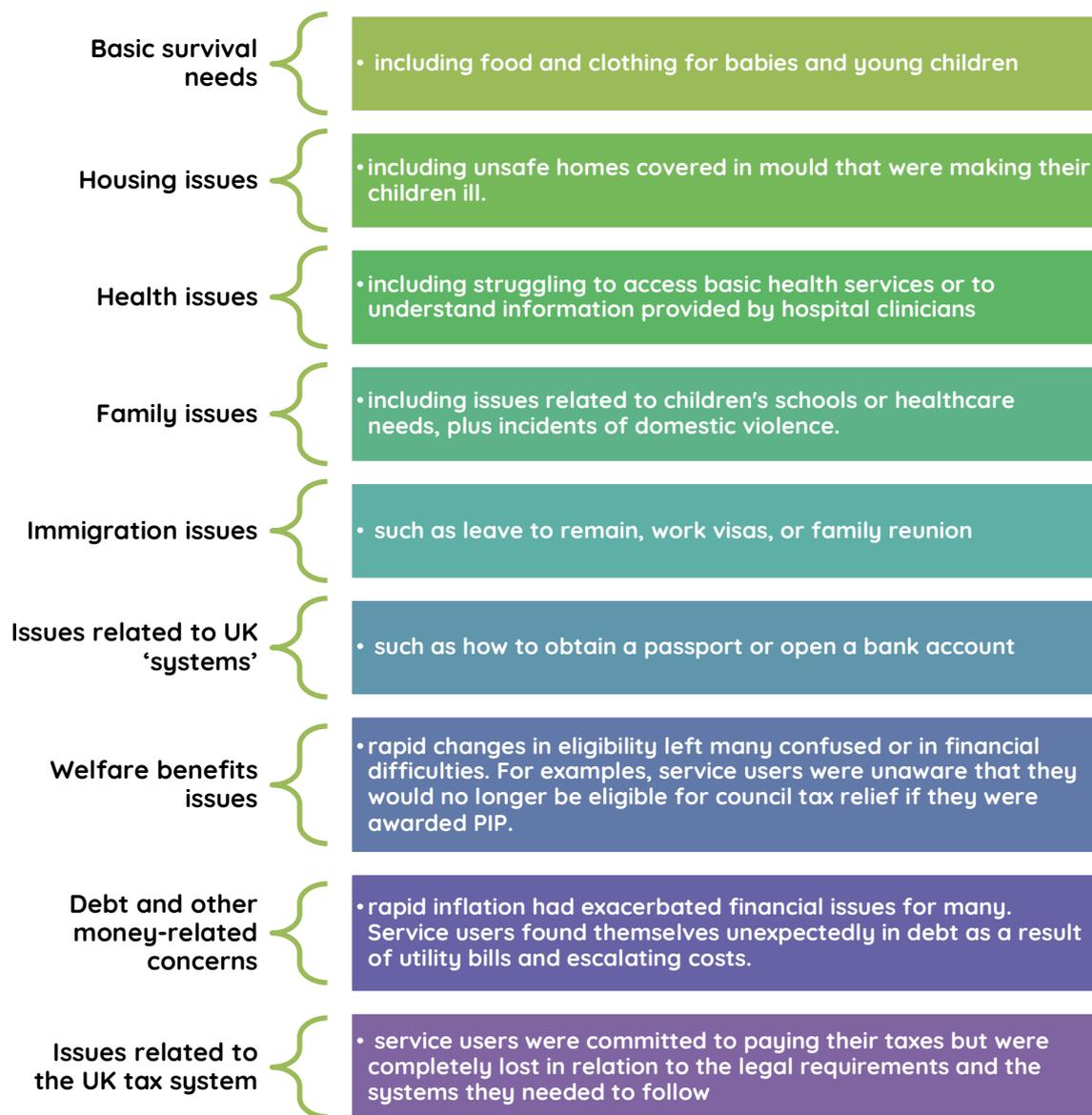
Support needs

Service users present with a very wide range of support needs, related to all areas of their lives including housing issues, debt, welfare benefits, mental and physical health issues. Examples are summarised in the diagram below.

Many service users came to the service very distressed, feeling overwhelmed with the challenges they faced. Service users interviewed through the evaluation described feeling “complete hopelessness” and “totally alone” prior to attending the AIG drop-in. Service users commonly reported significant mental health challenges. Many had experienced profoundly traumatic events in their recent past, compounding their feelings of distress.

Service users were desperate for help with no idea what to do or who to turn to. Through the evaluation, service users described their sense of utter despair at being unable to meet the basic needs of their children; several broken down and cried as they described the horrors of their past experiences. One service user noted, *“When I came here I was crying, I didn’t know what to do,”* whilst another said, *“I was crying all night”*.

Diagram 2. Examples of service user support needs



Language barriers were at the heart of most service users' issues. Some had no English language skills at all, making them feel completely “at sea” in a new place. Even those with good spoken English struggled to understand formally worded letters or to complete official documents and application forms.

Loneliness and isolation were significant and debilitating issues for many. Some came to the drop-in simply for reassurance and human contact. Many who were new to the UK felt lost in an alien country, where everything felt different and daunting with no one to help them.

Many didn't recognise issues until it was too late. This was particularly noted in relation to periodic payments, such as utility bills, that might only be charged after three or six months. Unaccustomed to these systems, service users could find themselves in hundreds or thousands of

pounds in debt. Service users might have been contacted by email to inform them of accruing debts, however, unfamiliar with this type of communication, many misunderstood these messages. Some were only alerted to their situation when a court summons letter arrived.

Many service users were completely unaware of their rights. This was particularly the case when cultural barriers restricted access to information. For example, many women experiencing domestic violence were unaware of the law around abuse or the services that could help them.

Many service users were fearful of statutory agencies, particularly the police, as a result of negative experiences in their countries of origin. As a result, many were afraid to contact statutory services or to have their personal details recorded on public sector registers.

New refugees had a particularly complex set of urgent and life changing support needs.

At the point of receiving leave to remain, new refugees have a very narrow window of time to leave asylum seeker accommodation, register for universal credit, and access private accommodation before financial support is stopped and they become homeless. For many this is an impossible 'Catch 22' situation. In order to apply for universal credit, refugees need a bank account in their own name, however, they cannot set up a bank account without an address, and landlords will not provide accommodation until refugees can demonstrate they have secured welfare benefits. All of this must be resolved within a matter of weeks. As a result, many new refugees find themselves destitute and homeless.

Service Delivery: Operational Structure

Service delivery locations

Base+ is primarily delivered through AIG's centre-based general advice drop-in. This provides a 'one stop shop' for all types of advice and casework support. Sessions run four days per week, Wednesdays and Thursdays being the busiest days. The vast majority of individual support is delivered through this drop-in. Whilst the project was designed in terms of two stages of support, in practice, the bulk of individual case work is delivered through the drop-in, where longer term employment support runs alongside service users presenting in crisis.

Over the current programme, new outreach advice clinics have been introduced³. These operate from a variety of community locations, including libraries across Leicester city plus the Hinckley Hub. The introduction of these clinics appears to have increased access to AIG services.

Drop-in support is complemented by group activity sessions. This includes weekly employment skills group sessions, which run alongside the drop-in, and peer support group meetings.

Centre-based services are delivered from a suite of rooms in an office building in the heart of Leicester city centre. This space is comprised of a central waiting area, a larger office, a small office, and a group work room which was, at one time, designated as a family room given the significant number of service users who attend with young children. The vast majority of advice and case work support is delivered from the larger office.

This space is functional, but inadequate for the current scale of activity. Service users, staff and volunteers huddle around six desks in the larger office which fill this busy working space. The level of activity can be overwhelming; individuals sit shoulder to shoulder with one another. While the staff team do everything in their power to provide service users with individually tailored and confidential support, conversations can be easily overheard and there is limited space for private discussion of sensitive topics. A lack of ventilation also results in uncomfortable working conditions in warmer weather. Due to the scale of demand, the team have been forced to reappropriate some rooms. The Operations Manager now provides service user support from a small office room which was previously made available to service users as a business incubator space. The family room continues to be used for group activities, however, this is also used as an overflow waiting area. The toys and resources previously available for children in this room have been removed to make space for chairs.

Overall, this creates a challenging environment for both staff and service users. The senior management team are well aware of these issues and are actively seeking alternative office space in the same building which will give them more room. It is hoped that this new office space will become available in the coming months.

R1. It is recommended that the new office space include at least one interview room where service users can discuss sensitive issues in privacy. If this is not possible, some form of partitioning should be installed to allow for greater privacy.

³ It is not possible to comment on the scale of activity delivered through the outreach clinics as service user engagement work records do not distinguish between centre-based and outreach clinic activities.

R2. It is recommended that the new office space include appropriate heating and ventilation to ensure a safe and comfortable environment for staff and service users.

R3. It is recommended that the new offices include at least a modest amount of space for toys and equipment for babies and young children to use whilst they are waiting and to support social activities at the centre.

Staffing structure

General approach

The Base+ service is delivered by three paid staff. This includes the Operations Manager, who is the lead immigration case worker and oversees the befriending service; plus two senior case workers, one of whom has overall responsibility for the volunteer team, whilst the other leads on the development and delivery of broader projects alongside her service user casework.

Staff members are supported by a large team of volunteers. The number of volunteers varies from day to day, however, staff report that there tend to be between two and nine volunteers supporting each drop-in session. The degree of knowledge and responsibility within the volunteer team varies. It is comprised of experienced volunteers, a small number of whom have progressed into becoming paid sessional workers, alongside short term work experience volunteers. Tasks are allocated based on knowledge and experience. For example, simpler form-filling tasks are allocated to work placement volunteers who are closely supervised by the lead caseworker, whilst experienced volunteers work independently and are allocated more complex tasks.

Staff and volunteers alike are deeply committed to their service users. It is evident that they feel a profound sense of personal connection to the people they support and feel personally responsible for ensuring that they receive the help they need. This underpins their ability to meet the overwhelming demands on the service.

However, the intensity of this working environment does put considerable pressure on the service delivery team. It is evident that staff and volunteers feel overwhelmed at times. As noted by one volunteer, *“There are so many people! You don’t get a chance to stop and process your emotions.”* Staff often work through their lunch breaks and there is a risk of burnout amongst the staff team. The SMT are well aware of these concerns and strengthening staff wellbeing is a key strategic priority for the organisation. Some measures have already been introduced to promote staff wellbeing. Staff now work from home on Fridays, which gives them time to focus on case work, giving some respite from the busy drop-in environment. On quieter days, staff are also encouraged to go home early once the waiting room is clear. Staff are also encouraged to take additional paid leave days when they are struggling.

R4. The emphasis on promoting staff wellbeing is welcome and demonstrates the SMT’s care and concern for its team. However, it is evident that expanding the capacity of the staff team will be essential to maintain current levels of service delivery. This should be the organisation’s primary objective in the coming months.

The Volunteer Team

Expanding the volunteer team is recognised as a key strategy to meeting the overwhelming demand for the service. The organisation has been creative in this regard:

- **Job Centre scheme** - AIG has developed a six-week volunteer placement scheme in partnership with the Job Centre. Four to five individuals are engaged at any one time. These volunteers are offered individual employability support alongside their volunteering. It is understood that they meet with the senior case worker responsible for volunteers on a weekly basis to develop a workplace journal in which they identify what they've learned and the skills they have gained each week. The staff team will also help them to write CV's, to explore their employment aspirations, and to connect with external employers.
- **Schools work experience placements** - for pupils aged 14-16 have also been developed. Placements last for one week with several young people volunteering at any one time. At the end of the week the Operations Manager will meet with them individually to talk about their life goals and offer employment-related advice and practical support to build skills. In some cases this has resulted in quite intensive support including brokering introductions to external education or employment providers, and meeting with young people's parents to discuss practical ways to move forward towards their goals.
- **Higher education volunteers** - The team have sought to engage longer term volunteers through colleges and universities, creating work experience placements that complement their academic training. The team have been particularly keen to recruit volunteers through this channel who speak diverse languages.
- **Service user progression** - the team actively encouraged service users to progress into volunteer roles. This creates opportunities for people who are unable to access employment to utilise their skills and abilities.

These approaches to volunteer engagement are innovative in the reciprocal nature, ensuring that the work placements are at least as impactful to the volunteer as they are for the organisation.

Over the last 12 months, the team estimate that they have engaged and supported 86 Job Centre volunteers and 102 young people. This is a significant number of people which may well have added significant capacity to the service delivery team⁴. However, this is a sizeable undertaking, which must have placed a significant demand on core staff's time and attention during the working day.

Longer-term volunteers expressed a heartfelt connection with and commitment to the people they served⁵. A group of longer term and higher education work placement volunteers were interviewed during the evaluation. Some of them already had a connection with the organisation and its work. For example, one volunteer's mother was being supported by the service, and another was already informally helping people in the community. They admired the ethos of the organisation and wanted to feel part of a broader team. They expressed a powerful desire to help others. All of these volunteers had been immigrants to the UK themselves, and all of them knew what it was like to need help to integrate into the community. This lived experience

⁴ Data regarding the number of volunteer hours worked and tasks completed is not available.

⁵ There does not appear to be a process to capture feedback from short-term work placement volunteers, and it was not possible to interview any of these volunteers during the evaluation activities, therefore, comments are centred around the long-term volunteers who were interviewed.

gave them heartfelt empathy for others. Comments include, *“Many of us are not native British. We can empathise with them,”* *“I had times when I needed help”*. As a result of their own experiences, volunteers felt a profound sense of personal responsibility towards AIG service users. As noted by one volunteer, *“People are so desperate. If they say they are homeless they are genuinely homeless. It hurts when we can’t help.”*

Volunteers thoroughly enjoyed the experience of working with AIG and spoke enthusiastically about their work with the service. As noted by one volunteer, *“The first time I came here, I fell in love with the place.”* Volunteers reported that AIG feels like a family and that volunteers were treated with the same kindness and care offered to service users. They recognised the mutual benefit of volunteering, particularly in the case of service users helping one another, bringing a community together. Volunteers were confident that they were having a positive impact at AIG, one noted, *“I know I’m making a difference here. It warms my heart.”*

Volunteers were involved with a broad range of tasks in the advice drop-in. This appears to have focused on more straightforward tasks such as translating and filling out forms. However, it is understood that relatively inexperienced volunteers were also given tasks to do that carried some degree of risk if completed incorrectly. For example, one student volunteer stated that she was tasked to help a service user apply for UK citizenship, however, she was not aware of some of the basic requirements of this process⁶. Volunteers noted that, if they asked for support, staff members were happy to check any forms they had completed before they sent them off. However, it appears that this was at the volunteer’s discretion. There does not appear to be a routine quality checking protocol.

The process for supporting and supervising volunteers was reasonably informal. Throughout the day, volunteers were supervised by the core staff team. They noted that staff members kept a watchful eye on them to make sure they were comfortable. They felt genuinely cared for by the staff team. If they had any questions or concerns, volunteers reported feeling confident to speak to a staff member for help. They stated that staff members were proactive to intervene if they were struggling. However, it should also be noted that some volunteers reported hesitancy to ask for help, recognising how busy the staff were, and not wanting to burden to them.

Volunteers learned on the job; training at induction or an ongoing basis was limited. When volunteers first arrived, they were introduced to the organisation and its services through a relaxed conversation. Concepts of confidentiality were discussed, and they were directed to the volunteer handbook that outlines the organisation’s policies and procedures. Through informal discussion, staff members ascertained the volunteer’s level of knowledge in order to direct them towards appropriate tasks. However, it appears that volunteers did not receive more detailed training in relation to the key tasks they would undertake, and they did not have access to any written guidance materials. Further, there did not appear to be a systematic approach to informing volunteers of changes in the technical requirements related to key pieces of work⁷. Rather, guidance on how to complete specific tasks was shared verbally and in the moment as volunteers strove to complete their allocated tasks.

⁶ She did not know that they needed to complete the citizenship test first.

⁷ Such as changes in the law or in welfare benefits form completion requirements.

Volunteers did report a number of challenges in their roles. They stated that some service users can be unhappy when they are allocated a volunteer rather than a staff member. They suggested that greater access to training in technical topics would help to strengthen their knowledge and give service users greater confidence in them. Volunteers also noted some challenges in contacting external services, external professionals expecting them to have more knowledge than they do. Despite these challenges, it was evident that volunteers valued this opportunity, one noting, *“If it’s work that you enjoy, what more can you ask for?”*

In light of these findings, a number of changes are recommended to the structure of the volunteer programme. These are summarised in the text box below.

Recommendations for Strengthening the Volunteer Engagement Process

1. It is recommended that the SMT conduct a ‘cost-benefit’ assessment of each of AIG’s approaches to volunteer engagement to identify the value add provided by each volunteering scheme, vis-à-vis the time required to provide effective support and supervision.
2. It is recommended that the SMT reflect on its processes for inducting and training volunteers. This should include more formal in-person induction training, covering general topics of confidentiality and safeguarding, alongside practical information regarding how to complete key pieces of work. This session could be recorded for people to view remotely as required.
3. It is recommended that the SMT review the range of tasks appropriate for inexperienced volunteers and ensure that this is being strictly adhered to.
4. It is recommended that written ‘how to’ manuals for key areas of work are made available to volunteers, which include detailed guidance on how to complete key tasks accurately and in accordance with current laws and guidelines.
5. It is recommended that a quality checking process be introduced to ensure that no work is sent out that has not first been approved by a suitably experienced staff member.
6. It is recommended that the SMT review data recording processes related to volunteers to ensure that all volunteer recruitment, training, support and service delivery data are being systematically recorded to ensure effective volunteer support and safe working practices.
7. It is recommended that a volunteer work log be introduced, to ensure that volunteers accurately record the tasks they have completed with each service user. These logs could then be entered onto the database by a volunteer in order to strengthen record-keeping.
8. It is recommended that monthly group supervision sessions be introduced for volunteers. In the session, volunteers would have the opportunity to raise any questions or concerns. Staff would use the session to share new information and service delivery requirements.
9. It is recommended that volunteers be given a lanyard to make it clear that they are a member of the service delivery team, but in a different colour from staff members to make it clear that they are volunteers. (Volunteer suggestion)
10. It is recommended that the team explore new ways to show recognition of volunteer efforts. This could include a certificate of achievement after six months or offering volunteers access to accredited courses through the organisation. (Volunteer suggestion)
11. It is recommended that the organisation promote the work carried out by volunteers by showcasing volunteer testimonials on the organisation’s social media and website.

Service Delivery: Immediate Needs Casework Support (Stage 1)

The Assessment Process

As service users present at the drop-in, they are triaged by a staff member to identify their support needs, prioritised and allocated to the appropriate staff member or volunteer.

Service users are seen according to the urgency of their support need. As a result, service users with complex support needs requiring the attention of a staff member, or whose issues are deemed to be lower priority, may wait for many hours or be asked to come back another day. It is evident that this situation is challenging for both staff members and service users.

An informal waiting list process has been established. It appears that this was initiated by the service users themselves. Service users routinely arrived at the centre in the early morning and write their names on a list. They then go back home, get their children ready for the day, and return to the centre once it has opened, hopeful that their name will be towards the top of the waiting list. This approach is pragmatic given the very high levels of demand, however, it is an arduous and unsustainable solution to this problem.

The staff team have tried different approaches to manage high demand at the drop-in. This has included closing the door to new service users in the middle of the day⁸. It is understood that the staff team have tried to introduce appointment times alongside the drop-in⁹, however, they state that this did not work well and that service users tended to just turn up at the drop-in instead of their planned appointments. The team's heartfelt compassion for their service users made it extremely difficult for them to turn people in distress away.

All new service users are seen by a staff member who conducts a needs assessment. A comprehensive assessment tool was designed some years ago and has been revised over time. This includes wide-ranging questions regarding the service user's current circumstances and factors associated with their support needs, such as employment status and housing situation. It is evident that staff members pay careful attention to service user holistic support needs in order to offer meaningful and impactful support. Unfortunately, it appears that the details of needs assessment are not, at present, being uploaded onto the organisation's database. As a result, there are very limited records regarding service user demographics or the needs assessment findings. It is understood that the intense pressure of service delivery is the driving factor behind this regression in record keeping.

R5. It is recommended that the SMT, as a matter of urgency, review current operational practices around record-keeping to ensure that robust assessment processes are routinely implemented and that the results are recorded on the organisations database.

⁸ Staff state that they often have to close the door by midday or 1pm to ensure that all service users in the waiting room will be seen before 5pm.

⁹ Two staff members work by appointment only on Tuesdays and Thursdays, whilst others deliver the drop-in as usual.

Topics of Support

Through the drop-in general advice service, service users were supported in relation to a wide range of topics, as summarised in diagram 3 below. This included:

- **Emotional support** – at the heart of every support session was sincere care and concern, helping service users to overcome their feelings of hopelessness and distress
- **Basic survival needs** – including referrals to food and clothing banks
- **Housing advice** – helping service users to address household maintenance issues, access temporary or permanent accommodation, plus practical support as they move in
- **Debt advice** – developing payment plans and advocating with creditors
- **Welfare benefits advice** – including benefits applications and supporting appeals
- **Issues with taxes, bills and payments** – including helping service users with council tax issues. to set up payment plans or obtain discounts
- **Immigration advice** – including general advice plus work in relation to visas and citizenship
- **Help to access external services** – particularly in relation to specialist immigration advice beyond the expertise of the team, health care, and domestic violence support. For example, service users were supported to access therapy with local mental health service providers, and to read and understand letters regarding their hospital medical treatment

The severity of individual support issues, and amount of support required, was unpredictable and could vary greatly. Service users might present with one simple problem, whilst others presented with a whole host of issues requiring urgent action. Some issues could be addressed very quickly, for example, by translating a letter or through a short phone call to a utility provider. However, other issues, particularly those related to immigration, domestic violence or welfare benefits, might require intensive support over many weeks. The team might start working with the service user on one relatively straightforward issue, only to uncover numerous broader support needs. For example, one service user came to the service seeking help with a debt issue, however, in working with her they discovered that she was fleeing domestic violence requiring much more intensive support. The team sought to be flexible and creative, finding ways to meet every service user's needs. In fact, the team expressed surprise and frustration that other services appear to be unwilling to think 'outside the box' in order to meet relatively straightforward support needs.

Whenever possible, problems were resolved on the spot. However, in some cases, service users would be required to come back several times in order to complete time intensive tasks so as not to block the flow of service users through the drop-in sessions. This was particularly noted in relation to the completion of welfare benefits forms and immigration casework. This proved frustrating for both staff and service users.

The same basic approach, of short drop-in clinic sessions, was used for all types of support work across the week. As a result, staff members would jump between a wide range of different topics and tasks, under the intense pressure of seeing everyone in the waiting room before the end of the day. It is the evaluator's view that this is not the most efficient way to deliver specialist casework support and that this approach places unnecessary pressure on staff members.

R6. It is recommended that the staff team consider a more structured approach to the drop-in which would differentiate between quick interventions from those that require time-consuming or intensive support. (See recommended changes in text box on page 17)

The team have developed a particular expertise in relation to immigration advice. The Operations Manager is qualified to OISC Level 3, and one of the senior caseworkers is currently working towards her Level 2 qualification. In recent years, it has become increasingly difficult to access specialist immigration advice; many providers of free immigration advice have closed down, and the team have observed service users coming from all over the country to seek help. In some cases, service users have come to AIG to seek basic guidance before going back to private solicitors for specific pieces of work. Others, who were unable to afford a solicitor, have sought help from AIG to address all of their immigration issues. Immigration case work is extremely time intensive, requiring the compiling of detailed documentation and records, which put particular pressure on the service.

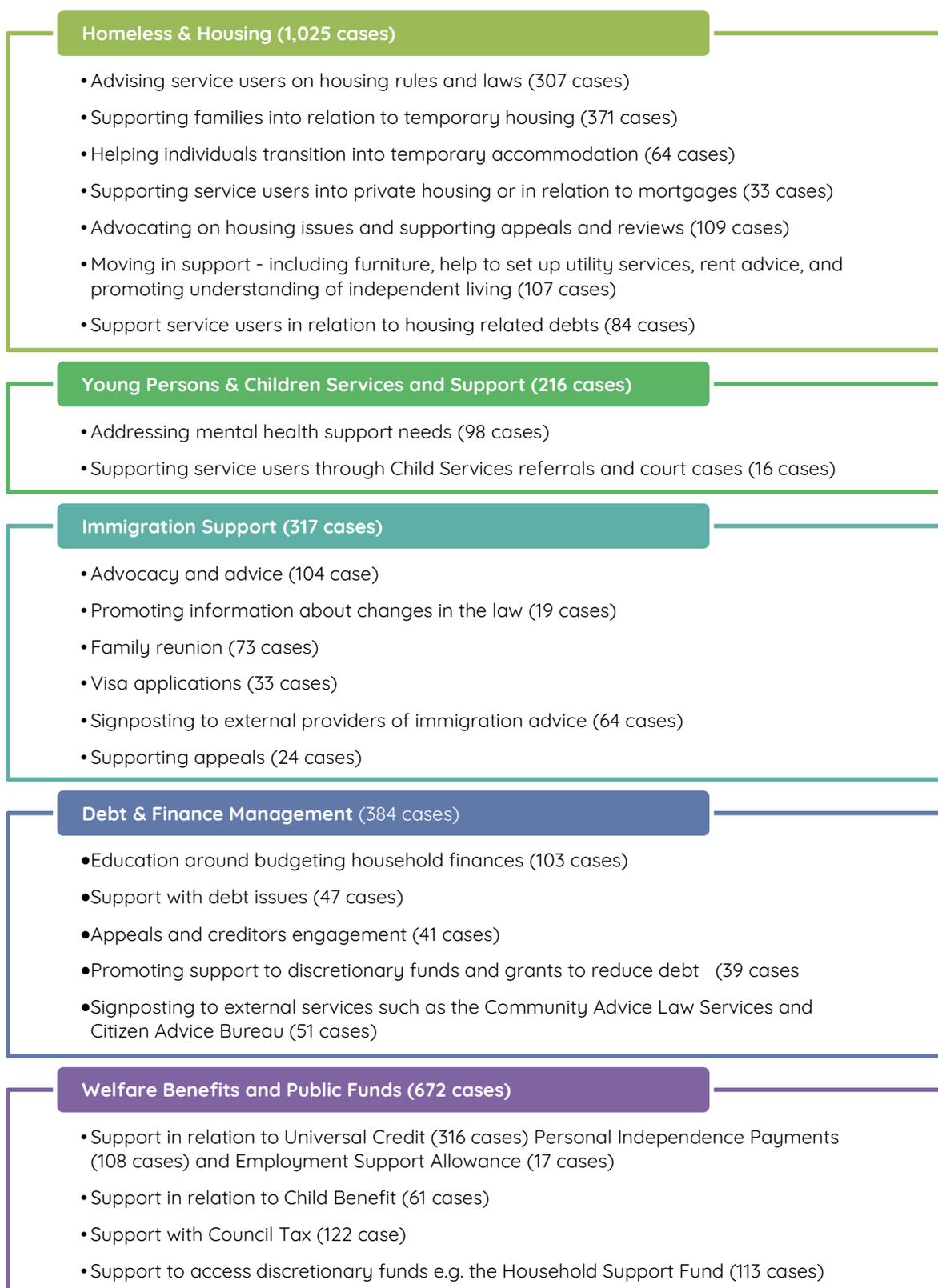
It was evident that the team were mindful of the extent of their technical knowledge and the legal requirements and boundaries around certain areas of work. If the team were unable to meet a particular need, they would actively look for an external specialist that could provide suitable support. For example, a service user came to AIG for advice in relation to a criminal law issue. The team were clear that this was beyond their expertise but, rather than sending them away, they identified an affordable solicitor.

Advocacy support was central to all areas of work. This varied in intensity, from making a phone call on behalf of the service user to more intensive lobbying and active challenge on their behalf. AIG staff are practiced in challenging decisions and supporting appeals, and have approached MPs for support in certain cases.

A positive and enthusiastic approach to partnership working was central to the team's working practice, making advocacy all the more effective. The team were highly proactive in building connections with other services in the public, voluntary and private sectors, particularly refugee and asylum seekers services, domestic violence services, housing offices, council tax offices and Adult Social Care. Staff members sought to identify, and build relationships with, named individuals in a variety of external services who they could call on for advice and support when required. Subsequently, these positive and mutually respectful relationships make it possible for the team to challenge external services when required.

When referring service users to external support their case would not be closed. Rather, an AIG staff member would continue to offer alongside support in order to help them prepare for, and engage fully with, the external service. For example, the team worked in close collaboration with Women's Aid to support survivors of domestic violence. Women's Aid provided emergency housing, whilst AIG caseworkers continued to provide support related to cultural barriers and immigration issues. The team referred service users to the Red Cross for support with asylum claims beyond their area of expertise. However, they continued to work jointly to ensure that the service user's broader support needs were met.

Diagram 3. Examples of general advice case work over the last 12 months (June 2024–May 2025)¹⁰



¹⁰ ¹⁰ Figures were estimated by the staff team on the basis of observed service user numbers, emails and work records.

Diagram 4. Examples of service user case work

A service user came to the drop-in after receiving a letter from her health visitor that she did not understand. She in a great state of distress and desperate for help. The team helped her to understand the letter. In doing so it became clear that her husband was not working, and that she was unable to feed or clothe her twin babies. Further, she disclosed that her home was unsafe, covered with mould which was making her babies sick. AIG staff took immediate action, with referrals to food and clothing banks. They contacted the Local Authority and advocated on her behalf to access a new home, and supported her to apply for housing benefit. A few years later, when she was pregnant again, the team helped her apply for a visa so that her mother could come to visit and support her.

One service user was settled in Leicester. It had been several years since she had needed help from AIG. She had recently been diagnosed with cancer and received an unexpected letter from an oncologist. She didn't understand what it meant or what she had to do. She was awake all night worrying, fearful for her future. She came to the drop-in where a staff member was able to explain the contents of the letter. They then contacted the oncologist and supported her to ask questions and share her concerns. The service user felt greatly reassured, confident that she would be able to access the healthcare she urgently needed, and that she was not alone during this very challenging time.

Challenges

The team have found housing issues increasing difficult to resolve. The local authority has a significant housing shortfall, and waiting times for social housing have increased significantly, to the point where only those in the highest priority band have reasonable hope of being housed. As a result, citizens are being encouraged to seek housing from private landlords who are often unwilling to accept tenants on universal credit. To address this issue, the staff team developed relationships with a number of estate agents and landlords known to be 'friendly' towards this service user group. AIG offered ongoing support to service users referred into their housing and worked collaboratively with landlords to address any problems that arose. This approach enabled landlords to 'take a risk' on these service users.

Providing documents to support new refugees has become more challenging. For example, in previous years GPs provided letters of support as evidence of their address. This was key in helping new refugees access housing or welfare benefits. However, GP surgeries, overwhelmed themselves, no longer offer support.

Some service users are being referred to AIG with severe mental health challenges. For example, over the last year, a service user who had been sectioned was sent straight to AIG after being released from hospital. Waiting for hours to be seen, some service users became distressed and agitated, resulting in aggressive or challenging behaviours towards other service users and staff. At times, staff members were concerned for their safety. AIG have installed CCTV cameras in the waiting area and intend to deliver refresher training for staff in relation to personal safety and behaviour management. However, reducing waiting times is essential to address this challenge.

The staff and volunteer team is highly diverse, making it possible to support service users in their first language in the majority of cases. However, there continue to be shortfalls in some language speakers, particularly Kurdish and Arabic¹¹. The team have tried to use Language Line, however, they have found it difficult to access the service. Service users are encouraged to bring a family member or friend to interpret for them, however, this is far from ideal, particularly where technical language is being discussed.

R7. When seeking to expand the staff and volunteer team, particular priority should be given to Arabic speakers in order to meet this support need.

Due to the overwhelming demand for the service, staff members have found it difficult to stay on top of record-keeping. As a result, the organisation's database only captures a fraction of the activity conducted over the last two years. This lack of data makes it difficult to evidence the scale or quality of support provided and undermines the continuation of work started on an earlier date. This is particularly worrying in relation to welfare benefits and immigration processes in which detailed records are essential to ensure positive outcomes.

R8. As a matter of urgency, it is recommended that the senior management team review data recording processes, identify the barriers to effective record-keeping, and seek practical and logistical solutions to address them.

Recommended Restructure for the Drop-in Clinic

It is recommended that the drop-in advice clinic be reduced to two days per week, running from 9am to 2pm each day. These sessions would be focused on triage and needs assessment, with support provided on the following basis:

- 1) Simple support needs could be addressed immediately, completed by volunteers, all tasks being quality checked by a staff member before completion.
- 2) Crisis support needs could be addressed in the afternoons of the same days, delivered by experienced volunteers and staff members.
- 3) Issues requiring intensive case work support would be identified at the drop-in and a case work appointment would be made for one of the remaining days of the week in order to complete the required activity in one longer session. Appointments could be booked for service users to meet with staff of volunteers who speak their preferred language.

This approach would allow staff and volunteers to concentrate on one service user or activity type at a time and would allow time to complete work records on the database. Within this structure, staff and experienced volunteers could be encouraged to develop greater specialisation. This would allow team members to further strengthen their expertise in key areas, and to develop clear operational protocols and guides for the completion of key tasks.

Within this structure, one-to-one and group-based employment and skills support work would be scheduled for days when the drop-in is closed, allowing a quieter and more focused working environment. Social and peer support activities would also be scheduled for these days, offering a more relaxed and peaceful environment. It is understood that transitioning to this approach would take time and care, with strategies in place to support any staff required to turn service users away.

¹¹ One staff member who speaks Arabic, works two days per week. Service users are specifically referred to her when they need support in Arabic however, as a result, she is overwhelmed with cases, particularly related to immigration support.

New developments in case work service delivery

It is evident that the senior management team are driven to provide effective support to service users, embracing every opportunity to innovate and introduce new service activities to complement the core service offer. Over the last two years this has included the following:

- **Diversifying the range of partner organisations engaged in case work** – AIG has a long history of working with a broad range of partner organisations, however, the team report that this has been significantly diversifying over the last two years, resulting in a growing number of active collaborations with voluntary sector and statutory sector services. This has included seeking opportunities for service users to access creative and cultural activities being delivered by sister services in the community.
- **A new in-house mental health service has been introduced which runs with the drop-in.** When a service user is identified as needing therapeutic support, they are referred to the qualified mental health nurse who provides an in-house clinic on a semi-regular basis, running two or three-times per month. She conducts individual assessments and then refers service users to external services where appropriate. She also delivers some mental health support groups within the organisation. This appears to have provided an invaluable addition to the core advice support offer. However, this service is delivered as a voluntary, individual initiative and therefore it is delivered as and when the practitioner is available.

R9. It is recommended that AIG develop collaborations with external mental and physical health services and seek opportunities for them to deliver clinics within the centre.

- **Collaboration with the Police** – The team are in the process of developing a partnership project with the police to help to build relationships between service users and local officers as a means to addressing service users' fears. It is also hoped that these activities will encourage more people from the refugee community to enter the police force.
- **New digital partnership hubs have been introduced** - staff now contribute to these hubs by delivering one-to-one support sessions remotely on Fridays.
- **Expanding influence and case work through remote working** - The Operations Manager has been delivering case work advice in relation to immigration for a number of local authorities outside of the county, (including Charnwood Council and Tower Hamlets Council). This work aims to share his specialist expertise in immigration support, and has include delivering training for staff members within those local authorities.

AIG should be applauded for its commitment to innovation, particularly its willingness to embrace creative partnership working opportunities. The SMT are aware that they need to continue to evolve and diversify services to attract essential funding. However, it appears that some of these new initiatives require time from core staff members, reducing the amount of time they have to deliver core services. At this time, when the core service is overwhelmed, it may be unwise to seek out new activities without additional staffing resource.

R10. It is recommended that AIG focus its attention on building the capacity of core services, postponing new project developments until such time that sufficient staffing resources are available at both the managerial oversight and service delivery levels.

Service Delivery: Employment and Skills Building Support (Stage 2)

Referrals into support

The majority of service users engaged in employment and skills building support came through the advice drop-in, where needs in relation to training, education or employment were identified alongside broader life issues. In addition, Job Centre work coaches referred individuals to AIG primarily for employment-related advice and support¹². These individuals were subsequently offered support with their broader life challenges, reflecting the holistic approach of the service.

One-to-one support

Individual support was conducted through weekly sessions with a volunteer or staff member.

In these sessions, service users explored their education or employment challenges and progressed key activities to strengthen their employability and move towards their goals.

Support was entirely tailored to the individual, the duration of which varied considerably.

Individuals might be supported for three weeks or three months, depending on the type of support they need and their aspirations in relation to education or employment. A wide range of types of support were provided, which are summarised in diagram 5 below. This included:

- **Overcoming practical barriers to employment** – such as writing CVs, developing IT skills, providing references and strengthening employability skills
- **Connecting service users with volunteering opportunities** – at AIG or in partner organisations in order to gain practical work experience
- **Seeking job opportunities** – including job search and completing applications
- **Connecting service users with employment agencies** – in order to access work trials or employment opportunities
- **Advocating for service users in relation to workplace issues** - including grievances
- **Accessing online courses** - which service users completed on computers at AIG
- **Accessing free ESOL classes at the University of Leicester** - staff members referred service users to courses and helped them prepare for tests
- **Accessing higher education opportunities** – including completing application forms and applying for scholarships and loans
- **Bespoke support for individuals to set up their own businesses** – connecting service users with others who could share their expertise or purchase their services. For example, one service user who was setting up a shop needed some building work to be done. AIG identified another service user who was employed in the relevant trade to work with him.

¹² Unfortunately, service user records related to referral sources have not been kept over the last two years, therefore it is not possible to say how many individuals have been referred through this route.

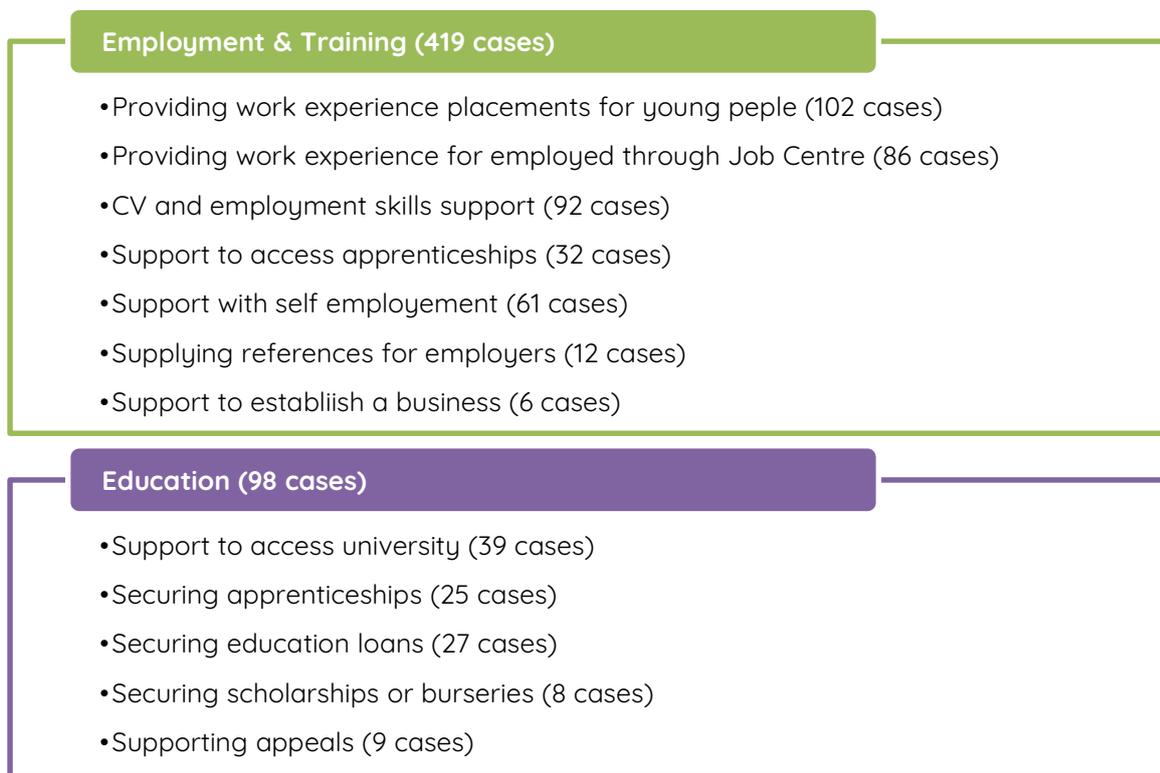
Stage 2 support sessions ran alongside the general drop-in in the main office room. As a result, service users might receive job search support next to individuals requiring advocacy or crisis support. These service users might also have to wait for prolonged periods in the waiting area for a team member to become available. Whilst this approach was pragmatic, it is likely that this physical merging of services did not create a conducive environment for this type of support.

R11. It is recommended that the staff team consider partitioning the working week, creating specific days on which the employment support sessions are delivered, separate from the busy drop-in support service. (See recommendations in text box on page 17)

An education and employment needs assessment tool was originally designed to underpin this support service. This tool was designed to identify a broad range of barriers to employment, individual skill levels and employment aspirations, with a view to developing a bespoke action plan for each service user. Given the pressures of the drop-in environment, it is unclear to what extent this assessment tool has been used in recent months, or whether support has been more focused on addressing the issues requested by the service user. Further, it appears that needs assessments and resulting action plans have not been recorded on the database. This makes it difficult to track activities that have been completed or progress that has been made.

R12. It is recommended that the SMT review assessment processes related to the employment and skills support and ensure that robust record-keeping is reintroduced.

Diagram 5. Examples of service user casework over the last 12 months (June 2024 – May 2025)¹⁵



¹⁵ Figures have been estimated by the staff team on the basis of observed service user numbers, emails and work records.

Group support

In addition to one-to-one support, the staff team run a weekly employability group.

Participants discussed a range of topics related to employment in these sessions. The sessions aimed to share information about employment law in the UK, and prepare service users for the world of work in the local community. The content of the programme was bespoke to each group, developed around the participants' interests and support needs, drawing on existing materials developed under a previous ESF-funded employment project.

Group participants were also registered with UK Online which gave them access to a range of courses to strengthen basic literacy and numeracy skills.

New business incubator support

AIG recognises that self-employment is a key strategy for many service users, however, they lack the basic resources to turn their ideas into a reality. Over the last two years, AIG has provided individuals with business start-up support. This has included:

- Use of a small office space for administrative work
- Helping service users to find funding for their start-up business
- Brokering links with partner organisations and potential customers

This support has been very well received and greatly appreciated by service users.

Challenges

Limited employment opportunities in the local area made this component of the support more challenging. The team developed relationships with a number of local employment agencies and businesses with a view to brokering employment introductions. They hope to expand these collaborations in the coming years.

At times, service users came to the service with complex support needs in relation to workplace grievances. Examples included unfair dismissal and sexual harassment cases. The team recognised the limitations on the support they could provide and connected service users with specialist employment advice providers such as ACAS in these situations.

Impact was constrained by limited space and IT equipment. Service users would welcome the opportunity to carry out job search on their own, without the supervision of a team member, however, the only computers available are on team members' desks in the large office.

Supporting new business start-ups was an intensive undertaking. Further, the team were aware that they lack some of the specialist knowledge required. For example, some individuals came to the team for advice in relation to self-assessment tax returns which required more specialist accounting knowledge than the staff team could offer.

R13. It is recommended that the SMT creates a clear protocol in relation to supporting new business start-ups, specifying the types of support that the team is both qualified and insured to deliver, alongside those more specialist tasks that require external referral.

Service Delivery: Social Activities (Stage 3)

The rational for social activities

The team are painfully aware that many service users were completely alone. New to the city, and often the UK, service users often had no one to help them navigate their environment or help them to integrate into community life. This isolation exacerbated underlying mental health issues for many. Accordingly, the aim of this group of activities was to promote social contact between service users, enabling individuals to help one another, and become part of the community around them.

Befriending

Service user befriending was integrated into Base+ at the start of this funding programme.

In previous years, AIG ran a women's befriending project, however, when funding came to an end, the team sought to sustain this activity by bringing it into the main service. Over the period, there was no dedicated staffing to support this activity. Rather, the Operations Manager lead the matching process and supported the development of befriending relationships. The befriending process was built on a number of key features:

- **Individuals were identified through the broader core services.** The Operations Manager approached them to enquire as to whether they would like to be matched with a befriender.
- **Service users were carefully matched together on the basis of a number of factors.** Having a common language was recognised as the most important factor, however, similar interests and shared life experiences were also looked for when making a match. Service users were delighted to meet someone from their home country or who shared their personal interests, finding these connections validating and reassuring.
- **Service users were matched together as equals and peers,** rather than as a 'befriender' and 'befriender'. However, in most cases, an individual who was more settled in their life and established in the community would be matched with someone who was new to the area.
- **Expectations of the befriending relationship were made very clear at the outset.** The team stressed that this was social support only, and that individuals should continue to seek problem solving advice from the staff team. The availability of this broader support meant that befriending relationships stayed within healthy and appropriate parameters.
- **The staff team took pains to develop befriending relationships slowly.** Service users were often shy. The Operations Manager met with both parties at the centre for the first two or three sessions. This created a safe space for service users to get to know one another and develop trust. Once service users seem to have 'clicked' the staff member left them to meet alone, however, they would continue to meet in the family room at the centre for some time. Service users noted that this was important as they felt relaxed and safe at the AIG centre.
- **Once service users had developed a relationship, they began to meet in the community.** The Operations Manager was in constant contact with both service users who will let him know via WhatsApp message when and where they were meeting. He would check in with them frequently to ask how they are getting on.

- **The Operations Manager was concerned to ensure the safety of both service users in befriending relationships.** It is understood that all befrienders completed a DBS check and received safeguarding training. If participants would be spending a significant period of time together, travelling out of the area, or planned to involve children, he asked to be kept informed, in effect, chaperoning the relationship to ensure everyone's safety.
- **In time, some befriending relationships became genuine personal relationships.** At that point the organisation stepped back and friendships were sustained independently.

Staff reported that this careful and actively supported approach has worked well and there have been very few problems in the befriending relationships. Occasionally, individuals decided that they no longer wanted to engage with befriending, however, they feel safe to say so as they continued to be in regular contact with AIG staff through the advice service and feel able to speak freely with them.

Feedback from service users about the befriending approach was very positive. Service users gave examples of befrienders visiting each another's homes, going out for tea in local café's, and supporting one another at difficult times. For example, one service user was accompanied by another to visit the grave of her mother who had recently died. It was evident that this support was greatly appreciated in a time of vulnerability and distress.

The staff team recognised the value of matching people from within the AIG community. This is a sizeable pool to draw on. Moreover, the opportunity to support others, and to pass on one's own knowledge and skills, created an empowering progression opportunity for service users, many of whom felt invisible and de-skilled in their new environment. That noted, the staff team would welcome opportunities to attract befrienders from the broader community, further broadening integration with the local population.

R14. AIG may wish to collaborate with local community group to access a broader range of befrienders. It is recommended that AIG seek out partners that have significant experience of supporting befrienders. AIG should work with collaborators to develop robust training and support, to ensure that all befrienders from the wider community are able to offer culturally informed and appropriate support to AIG service users.

Challenges

The team have capacity to support six befriending relationships at any one time. This was due to the intensity of the support process and lack of staffing resource. The team would like to offer befriending to a wider range of service users, including young people and those with mental health support needs. They recognised that this would require significantly more intensive support. Achieving this would only be possible with significantly increased staffing resource alongside careful assessment and planning for safeguarding risks.

R15. It is recommended that the SMT seek to recruit a sessional worker or sufficiently experienced volunteer to oversee the befriending service in order to free the Operations Manager to focus on his core areas of responsibility.

R16. AIG may wish to explore opportunities for collaboration with a partner that specialises in working with young people or those with significant mental health support needs in order to offer befriending to this group of service users.

Peer support groups

During this programme, AIG introduced new peer support groups. The aim of this activity was to bring people together in a safe but social environment to promote conversation and connection. Groups were conversation-based with a staff member present to facilitate and encourage people to share and support one another. Sessions ran on a Saturday or a Wednesday, lasting for two hours. It is understood that sessions were well attended, with between six and 16 participants each time¹⁴.

Through the groups, AIG strove to build connections between service users and a range of external professionals. This included specialists from other services who attended the sessions and shared information, particularly on wellbeing-related topics. At times this included practical activities such as yoga.

This activity has been informally run, and therefore it appears that attendance records have not been kept. It is understood that this activity has been tailored around participants' interests and support needs. However, service user feedback has not been systematically sought.

R17. It is recommended that the team update its database and introduce clear data recording protocols to ensure records are kept for this activity.

R18. It is recommended that AIG introduce a suitable process for capturing participants' feedback about the peer support groups, in order to ensure that the service continues to develop according to participants needs, and to capture the impact of this activity.

Broader social activities

From time to time, AIG hosts social activities that bring people together to recognise significant cultural dates or events that are meaningful to its community. These activities have brought whole families together to share food and celebrate. Service users have thoroughly enjoyed these socials and would welcome more opportunities to meet together. Service users would welcome opportunities to meet at a wide range of places, such as sharing a meal together in a community venue. They would also like to go on trips or outings in the city or further afield together, taking the AIG community out into the wider world.

R19. The staff team may wish to explore opportunities to generate funding to support a wider range of community social activities. Attracting suitable volunteers to support this endeavour would be essential.

¹⁴ It appears that data for session attendance has not been recorded on the organisation's database, therefore it is not possible to give exact attendance numbers.

Impacts and Outcomes

“Lives (are) completely changed as a result of Afro Innovation’s work such as getting Leave to Remain in the UK, getting recourse to public funds, supporting to claim benefits, supporting to get housing, receiving specialist immigration advice and support. Excellent Service!”
- Partner organisation

Programme outcomes

Outcome 1: Reduced isolation

Service users reported particularly strong impacts on overcoming isolation and loneliness. Through the various services at AIG, service users made contact with staff and volunteers who made them feel cared for and supported. This was invaluable in addressing their sense of isolation. Further, service users built a sense of family and community by talking with others at the drop-in and building friendships through social events and befriending that have been sustained into their daily lives.

Another area of impact, closely related to reduced isolation, was improved mental health and wellbeing. Service users stated how the debilitating emotional burdens they were carrying were transformed as a result of the support. Positive impacts included reduced stress, feeling happier and more relaxed, and developing a sense of hope, all of which are critical for positive mental health and wellbeing.

Diagram 6. Examples of feedback from service users:



Outcome 2a: Increased safety (in terms of immigration status and housing)

Service users were supported to meet their basic survival needs. They were extremely grateful to access food and clothing for their families through signposting to a range of external services.

Service users were supported to overcome a wide range of housing issues to strengthening their physical safety. The staff team estimate the following impacts:

- 371 families and 64 individuals were supported into temporary accommodation
- 33 service users supported to access new homes in the private sector
- 107 service users supported to settle in new homes
- 84 service users supported to address housing related debts – with an 84% success rate

Service users reported strengthened financial security as a result of the support. This included obtaining to a wide range of welfare benefits. The staff team estimate the following¹⁵:

- In the region of 250 service users were awarded Universal Credit, 85 Personal Independent Payments and 10 Employment Support Allowance
- Service users were able to manage debt issues, with debt plans put in place
- Service users were awarded discretion grants and cost of living support
- Service users accessed child benefits

Service users have greater legal safety, in terms of securing their immigration status for themselves and family members. The staff team estimate the following impacts¹⁶:

- In the region of 60 families achieving reunion
- In the region of 25 visa applications awarded
- In the region of 20 immigration status appeals successful

A smaller number of service users were also able to achieve strengthen family security.

This included supporting service users escaping domestic violence situations and supporting families to manage situations involving Children's Social Care services.

Outcome 2b: confidence and self-esteem

As a result of these practical life changes, alongside the care and concern offered by staff and volunteers, service users were empowered in a number of important ways. Staff observed how service users' confidence grew as a result of the support. Whilst many needed intensive support at the start, over time, staff observed how service users learned how to manage problems themselves. Whilst service users might continue to visit AIG from time to time for advice regarding a new problem or issue, they became more confident to take the necessary

¹⁵ The staff team estimate that 90% of new benefits applications, and 75% of appeals, have been successful. These success rates have not been broken down by category type. Figures for successful outcomes have therefore been estimated against the aggregate success rate, in line with the number of cases supported.

¹⁶ The team estimate 86% of immigration cases have been successful. This number is not broken down by case type. Numbers of successful outcomes are estimated applying this aggregate rate to the separate service user case types.

actions themselves. Simply knowing that there was a safety net available to them should they need it helped service users to go out into the world with great confidence and self-belief.

Outcome 3a: Access to opportunities (volunteering, training and skill development)

Through the support, service users accessed a host of new education and work-related opportunities. This included:

- Strengthening employability and overcoming barriers to employment – such as writing CVs; learning job search skills and job application writing techniques; opening bank accounts; and securing the legal right to work
- Strengthening basic skills - this included IT, literacy and numeracy skills, plus English language skills
- Accessing qualifications – including accredited courses supported through AIG
- Accessing volunteering opportunities at AIG and in partner organisations (including the 102 young people and 86 adults through the schools and Job Centre work experience schemes at AIG)
- Accessing higher education, including overcoming financial barriers
- Accessing apprenticeships and employment opportunities
- Establishing their own businesses or charitable initiatives

Service users were particularly grateful for opportunities to gain experience through volunteering and to access employment, thereby securing their financial future.

Outcome 3b: Impact on volunteers

Long-term and higher education volunteers reported a range of positive impacts upon themselves as a result of volunteering with AIG. This included:

- Strengthened work-related skills – including how to schedule appointments and how to communicate formally over the phone
- Strengthened technical knowledge – in relation to the topics of support provided
- Strengthened interpersonal skills – including communication skills, plus learning how to remain patient and calm in challenging situations
- Strengthened understanding of, and compassion towards, others - this was particularly noteworthy given how caring this group already were prior to volunteering with AIG
- A strengthened sense of gratitude - for the positive things in their own lives
- Strengthened mental health and wellbeing - volunteers reported feeling *“happier and more content”*. One volunteer reported reduced social anxiety as a result of volunteering.
- Strengthened self-esteem – particularly for service users as a result of being able to use their knowledge and skills, and from a sense of pride in what they have achieved.
- Strengthened social networks – volunteers made friends with others. They enjoyed being part of a multi-cultural environment, mixing with a people from all walks of life.

As a result of these positive impacts, many service users were keen for their own children to become volunteers. Volunteering at AIG has also been used as a mechanism for providing broader wellbeing support to some members of the community, with significant positive impacts. For example, one service user requested support for an autistic young man from her family who struggled with communication. As a result of volunteering he has grown in many ways. She noted,

“He’s changed. It’s a miracle! Now he talks to people! It’s a very big help for him and to the family.”

Diagram 7. Examples of impact on volunteers



Key Features of the Support

“Services are particularly accessible, anybody from an ethnically diverse community can walk into Afro Innovation and get support whether it be the person themselves or a family member. Advice and support is excellent. A big thank you to the staff at Leicester Afro Innovation. A gap is filled by them that is needed in Leicester.”
-Partner organisation

There are a number of key features in AIG’s working approach that make its services particularly accessible and impactful. This includes:

- **The centre is accessible** – based in the city centre with bus stops immediately outside.
- **Holistic support** – Service users can come to AIG with any and all issues they face, confidence that the team will be able to support them with all issues. Staff noted that no other service in the area offers such broad ranging support.
- **Long term support and safety net** – service users are supported for as long as it takes to resolve their problems. Further, service users can keep coming back, many doing so over several years as they experience new issues.
- **Expert knowledge and proactive support** – Service users are confident that the staff team will know what to do to address their problems and that they will provide quality advice. Staff have particular and expert knowledge in relation to immigration law. Staff are determined to find solutions to problems and routinely “think outside of the box”.
- **Specialist advice is free** – Accessing immigration advice is extremely expensive. Service users gave examples of how others had gone without food to save money to pay for solicitors. The fact that AIG advice is free is greatly valued.
- **Service users can access support in their first language** – the core staff team speak at least nine languages, with additional languages spoken within the volunteer team. Service users stressed the importance of being able to fully understand what they need to do and to have this explained in their own first language. One service user noted, *“You can only go so far with Google translate.”*
- **The staff and volunteer team is very diverse and multi-cultural** – service users come through the door and immediately see someone they are confident will understand their life and experiences. This expectation of understanding attracts service users. Moreover, staff are able to offer culturally sensitive support, mindful of the different ways that people communicate and relate to those in authority. For example, some individuals may bring their entire families with them to discuss problems together. AIG staff understand and welcome their involvement, something that mainstream services might not understand.
- **Staff and volunteers are kind, friendly, warm and welcoming** – service users report a sense that it doesn’t matter who you are or where you come from, you will be welcomed.
- **Staff and volunteers are compassionate and understanding** – service users feel confident to share their problems, safe in the knowledge that they will not be negatively judged.

- **Staff and volunteers have lived experiences making them passionate and personally committed to supporting this service user group** – staff members talked about times they had woken up at night, thinking about service users’ problems and potential solutions. One said, *“How can I go home and sleep if someone is homeless and on the streets.”*
- **Service users feel genuinely cared for by the staff and volunteer team** - they feel that their worries and concern matter to them, and that their wellbeing is important.
- **Service users are recognised and remembered** – Service users reported how staff members will ask them how they are getting on with a particular problem, remembering the details of their situation. In contrast, they noted how no one remembers their face in other services. At AIG they feel recognised and seen, restoring their sense of humanity.
- **Children are welcome at the drop-in** – service users noted that their children are actively welcomed and cherished by other service users and the staff and volunteer team. This is very important in making the service accessible, especially to women.
- **Service users feel at home and like they are with family at AIG** – Many service users come from cultures centred in life-long familial support. Being alone in a new country, with no family or friends, is particularly distressing for them. Getting to know other service users at AIG makes them feel that they are amongst family. They have people to say hello to when they meet in the street, helping them to feel at home in the wider community.
- **Opportunities for service users to use their knowledge and expertise** – volunteering at AIG creates opportunities for individuals to use their skills and knowledge, receive recognition and to support others. This is especially meaningful for those who are unable to work.
- **External agencies respect and listen to AIG staff** – service users shared numerous examples of struggling to access support. This included waiting for hours on helplines only to be ignored or dismissed. However, when AIG staff contact those same services on their behalf external professionals will pay attention and help. As noted by one service user: *“When they say (they are from) AIG, they listen.”*

Diagram 8. Examples of feedback from services users about why they come to AIG for support.



Future Developments

Planned Developments

AIG has recently developed a new Strategic Framework, built on five strategic aims which set its future direction of travel. Within these aims the organisation intends to:

- **Develop its staff and volunteer team** - by ensuring a healthy working environment that supports staff and volunteers' wellbeing, enables continuous professional development and supports clear pathways into employment and leadership roles.
- **Diversify income** - including broadening unrestricted income through the development of new projects and securing long-term corporate partnerships and sponsorships.
- **Influence local and national strategic policy** - through its advocacy work and active collaboration with partner organisations.
- **Acquire a permanent community space** - with a view to developing a community hub from which to deliver a holistic range of community services. AIG is committed to active community involvement and ownership over this new centre.
- **Deepen cross-sector partnership working both locally and internationally** - especially with the Global South, delivering programmes that are aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Many of these aspirations present a natural evolution of the organisation's current service delivery offer and are supported by the findings of the evaluation:

- Discussions are underway with the Local Authority about the asset transfer of a local community centre. This would give AIG enormous scope to sustain and further develop services, providing the space that the organisation needs. However, it is likely to be at least another year or two before this aspiration can be realised, and therefore obtaining more service delivery space in the short term should remain the organisation's priority and focus.
- In terms of employment support services, the organisation intends to secure partnerships with key contractors in the refugee employment sector and position itself as a regional leader in refugee employment support. AIG appears to be well placed to achieve these aims. It is recommended, however, that the team maintain focus on one or two employment sectors and on a central geographical area, to prevent this activity becoming overwhelming.
- In seeking to diversify income through new projects, the evaluation findings suggest that the team should seek opportunities to develop projects that promote social interaction between service users and create opportunities for positive engagement in wider community life. This project could build on AIG's broader service offer, such as its young people's music project, however, it is recommended that the emphasis should remain on providing opportunities for its core service group.

AIG will need to be discerning and realistic in terms of how it builds upon its recent service developments. Some of the ideas proposed in the new strategic plan are related to recent service delivery developments, however, they take the organisation well beyond its current areas of knowledge and expertise, potentially put AIG into competition with established specialist

providers of the proposed services¹⁷. It is strongly recommended that AIG maintain its focus on its own absolute and relative expertise and avoid mission drift in the name of income generation.

Some developments within the strategic plan are noble but highly aspirational, particularly those related to achieving national influence and developing services overseas. AIG will need to carefully reflect on its priorities and ensure that protecting and sustaining its core services is not jeopardised in the pursuit of loftier ambitions. Whilst the creation of new projects in other parts of the country, or world, may be attractive and have the potential to be highly impactful, the staff team must not lose sight of the need to expand the size of the core staff team to maintain and continue to strengthen current service delivery as an ongoing priority.

To achieve any of these strategic goals, the organisation will need to ensure that operational fundamentals are robust and in place. The lack of basic record-keeping in relation to service user case work, volunteer engagement and impact measurement, alongside challenges in managing current demands on service delivery, are all of concern, and will undermine the organisation's ability to attract support from a broader range of funders and sponsors. It is strongly recommended that AIG focus its attention in the short to medium term on renewing its basic service delivery practices before it seeks to expand service delivery.

The strategic plan suggests conducting specialist research and building partnerships with the private sector. These processes will be time consuming and require particular expertise. The organisation will need to carefully consider how to create the required capacity and knowledge base to deliver these activities to a very high standard. The SMT will need to determine whether the required skill sets already exist within the organisation, or whether external specialist support will be needed to achieve these ends.

In order to diversify income streams and secure corporate partnerships and sponsorship, AIG will need to be able to provide robust evidence of impact. Clear and precise communication strategies, channels and messaging will be required to sustain the engagement of external funders and sponsors. The strategic plan states that, "AIG will follow best practice in planning and reporting to maximise its impact." It commits to commissioning "an external Social Return on Investment Evaluation and seeking to achieve a quality accreditation in social value." Robust and detailed record keeping, monitoring and day-to-day assessment of the impact of service delivery will be absolutely essential for this to be possible. A considerable amount of work will be required to bring the organisation back up to basic standards before it can consider introducing more elaborate impact measurement approaches or accreditation awards.

¹⁷ For example, the strategic plan proposed building on the success of the recent youth music project by: "Offering business to business music therapy and arts classes to support mental health and wellbeing targeting charities that deliver mental health support" and "Offering recreational music and arts classes to schools and colleges." These activities are a significant shift from AIG's areas of knowledge and expertise and put the organisation in direct competition with a host of organisations delivering these activities in the arts and culture sector in Leicestershire.

Recommendations for Development Priorities

On the basis of the evaluation findings, it is recommended that AIG focus on the following development priorities over the coming 12 months:

- 1) **Focus income generation activities on increasing resources for its core advice service** – to ensure it sustains and expands capacity of the core staff team.
- 2) **Reschedule the delivery of core elements of the Base + service to maximise efficiency and effectiveness** – reducing the number of drop-in clinic days in order to introduce dedicated time for service user case work and group sessions.
- 3) **Further establish specialisation within the core staff team** – with individual staff members leading on key service delivery areas such as immigration, housing and welfare benefits.
- 4) **Review volunteer recruitment, supervision and training protocols** – to ensure that robust record keeping, training and support are in place, seeking to ensure that strategies for volunteer recruitment add significant value to the service.
- 5) **Increase capacity within the leadership team** – separating responsibilities for day to day service delivery oversight from new project development and innovation. Additional staffing resource, beyond the capacity of the existing staff team, will be required.
- 6) **Reestablish robust record keeping** – review protocols for record keeping related to service user engagement and service delivery, to ensure that all essential data is being systematically and routinely captured, and that the organisation’s database is regularly spot checked with any data recording issues being identified and addressed.
- 7) **Re-establish robust impact and evaluation practice** – reviewing and revising the previously developed evaluation framework, updating existing evaluation tools as necessary, training staff members in their use, and recruiting volunteers to support the implementation of the evaluation process.

Conclusions

*“They are the hope of the helpless and the voice of the voiceless.”
- Service user*

There can be no doubt that AIG plays a vital and pivotal role in supporting diverse communities in Leicester and surrounding areas. The rapid expansion in demand for the organisation’s core services, known as Base+, is testimony to how highly regarded AIG is amongst local communities. Service users come back to AIG time and again, safe in the knowledge that they will be welcomed, recognised, understood and supported, with care and compassion. Despite the intense pressure on the service delivery team, staff and volunteers continue to dedicate themselves to the provision of holistic and creative support, committed to ensuring that every service user’s needs will be met, within the organisation or in collaboration with external partner organisations. The team should be applauded for their steadfast dedication and unwavering commitment to those they serve.

Over the last two years, through the Base+ programme, service users have achieved greater safety and security, in terms of their housing, financial circumstances and legal status. They have been able to access a wide range of opportunities in relation to training, volunteering and employment, all strengthening their employability and future security. Through the range of social activities, service users have forged friendships and enjoyed opportunities to celebrate together. Through AIG, service users have overcome hopelessness and despair, loneliness and isolation, and have found a new family, helping them to feel like they belong in the community around them. The transformational impact for many service users should not be underestimated.

The Base+ programme is moving into its final funded year. The staff team are mindful of the need to sustain existing, and secure additional, resources to maintain and further develop its core service offer. In doing so, findings from the evaluation suggests that the team needs to prioritise expanding its core staffing capacity before introducing additional project activities. Further, the team will need to focus on strengthening operational fundamentals over the coming year, including record-keeping, monitoring and evaluation, and quality assurance processes, to ensure that it is able to robustly and accurately demonstrate its activity and impact, for the benefit of funders and service users alike.

The coming year is likely to bring new challenges to AIG’s door, however, it is evident that the staff team are committed to meeting and overcoming them. The project evaluator is confident that AIG will continue to learn and grow, and do everything within its power, to serve its community for many years to come.