MAKING STOCKTON A HOME:

REFUGEE EXPERIENCES OF SETTLING IN STOCKTON-ON-TEES

RESEARCH REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Making Stockton a Home is a collaborative research project between Refugee Futures and Durham University exploring how refugees dispersed to Stockton-on-Tees experience arrival, welcome, belonging, and long-term settlement. Through **78 in-depth interviews** with refugees the research provides the first systematic, place-based evidence about the real factors shaping whether people build a life in Stockton—or leave after receiving status. Stockton hosts the **third-largest asylum-seeker population in the North East**, yet little prior research has focused on how people settle in the Borough or how local conditions influence long-term decisions. This study addresses that gap using a lived-experience-led methodology, producing insights directly relevant to Stockton Borough Council, VCSOs, community groups, funders, and policymakers.

WHY PEOPLE LEAVE STOCKTON

Twelve participants had left Stockton by the time of interview. Their decisions were shaped by **multiple factors**, including:

- Employment and Education opportunities elsewhere
- High transport costs, especially for early-morning or cross-Teesside travel
- Desire for a more multicultural environment
- Experiences of discrimination
- Family or community networks in other cities
- Relocation by Home Office or access to housing in a different local authority

WHY PEOPLE STAY IN STOCKTON

Of the 63 participants who stayed or returned, the strongest reasons for living in Stockton were:

- Social networks and friendships
- Knowing “who to ask” when problems arose
- Affordable and accessible housing
- Stockton’s walkability, quietness, and manageable scale
- Affordability of everyday life
- Children’s school stability

WELCOME AS A PROCESS

Participants consistently described feeling welcome not as a single event or time period, but as a **process of building connection over time**. Most felt more welcome after participating in drop-ins, faith groups, volunteering**,** or ESOL classes.

HOW REFUGEES DEFINE INTEGRATION

Participants' discussions focussed on **connection**, **communication**, and **participation**. For our participants, integration means active and recognised membership in Stockton life in addition to access to resources. Integrated people need integrated—and integrat*ing* places. Integration does not happen in isolation, but requires the conditions for connection, acceptance and respect.

LANGUAGE IS AN ENABLER

Participants emphasised that English language skills were essential for making friends, solving problems, understanding and navigating systems and accessing work and education. Without English language skills, people felt isolated.

INTEGRATION IS A FEELING

Participants described integration as feeling "at peace," "accepted" and living without discrimination. They also mentioned the importance of accepting others' cultures.

CONNECTION VS. ISOLATION

Integration was often defined as connection, as the opposite of isolation. Connection, necessary for integration, requires individual action: making friends, meeting different kinds of people, participating in shared activities and building networks of help and reciprocity.

PARTICIPATION AND CONTRIBUTION

Participants said that participating in community events and being involved was important to integration For our participants, integrated people see themselves as members of Stockton's communities and contribute as full members of society.

INTEGRATED COMMUNITIES

An integrated Stockton was imagined as a place where individuals get involved in their communities, where people are committed to welcoming others, and where people share values of open-mindedness, tolerance, respect and human rights.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Feeling **welcome** is a process of building relationships and integration means feeling connected.

2. Participants developed a sense of **belonging** through meeting, mixing with, and learning from a diverse range of people in Stockton.

3. Participants defined integration as both **connection and contribution** to social and economic activities.

4. Feeling integrated requires **practical skills** like learning English, understanding systems, building networks, gaining qualifications.

5. **Integration is a collective commitment.** Integrated people require integrated communities and vice versa. Mutual respect for rights, beliefs, cultures and contributions are fundamental characteristics of integrated communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **More activities and events** designed to bring new and established Stockton communities together, especially social, cultural, family friendly, and sports and wellbeing activities.

2. **More language support immediately upon arriving in Stockton.**

3. **Better access to employment pathways,** especially qualification transfer, training, and networking in desired industries.

4. **Expanded education about British life and culture,** including practical knowledge about housing, services, and local systems.

EMBEDDING RESEARCH IN PRACTICE

Based on the interviews, the research team identified ways to embed research findings in practice from 2024-2025. Supported by Economic and Social Research Council Impact Acceleration Account funding Dr Martin, Kawa Wali and the Refugee Futures team piloted:

- A one-stop-shop Service Fair for to enable asylum-seekers, migrants and refugees to navigate services, referrals and opportunities at critical moments in their journey.
- Pro-active sharing of family and children's activity information through Refugee Futures Welcome Sessions and assisting with online sign-up.
- Connecting people to nature with a day trip to Teesmouth National Nature Reserve, in collaboration with Natural England.
- Cultural Awareness workshops for the social and private sector to increase knowledge and understanding of refugees' and asylum-seekers' particular challenges in seeking support, employment, and communication.

Figure 1: Bizi Studios Dance Workshop, Community Carnival, Stockton International Riverside Festival, 3 August, 2025.

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1. INTRODUCTION

How do people choose where to make their home? When do we feel we belong? How do people forced to move build a life in a new place? In asylum dispersal areas like Stockton-on-Tees, how do people decide to stay or to leave after they get status?

This report shares findings and analysis from "Making Stockton a Home," a research collaboration between Dr Lauren Martin of Durham University and Refugee Futures, based in Stockton-on-Tees, UK. ESRC project funding "Digital Connectivity and Financial Inclusion in Refugee Governance" (ES/S016643/1) allowed us to build a team of five skilled researchers with experience of seeking asylum in the UK: Jane Bizimana, Sabren Karam, Araz Manguri, Luwam Tekeste, and Kawa Wali. Refugee Futures provided the original research aims and questions, supported MA student Jade Overfield's pilot research and the research team's subsequent development of qualitative research exploring how settled refugees choose to stay or leave Stockton after receiving positive status decisions.

MOTIVATION FOR THE PROJECT

Founding Trustees included research on Stockton's refugees in its initial 3 year strategy (2022-2025). Mutual contacts connected Lauren Martin to Jess Wratten and Peter Chapman to scope a potential research project. As Refugee Futures was new and growing, the trustees felt they needed to understand when and why people seeking sanctuary in Stockton decided to stay or leave after receiving a positive decision on their claim. Anecdotally, it seemed that sanctuary seekers frequently left for larger cities but the trustees wanted research to help explain what factors influenced that decision. The working assumption was that improving Stockton's pre- and post-decision offer would convince more people to stay and build lives in Stockton. Understanding sanctuary seekers' settlement needs would then inform Refugee Futures program development. As we detail below, there is little existing data on refugee settlement in Stockton and our aim was to fill this gap, produce research that reflected refugees' experiences and provide useful recommendations from refugees to VCSOs, Stockton Borough Council and community organisations.

2. RESEARCH CONTEXT

The Home Office's contractors disperse asylum-seekers to 13 local authorities in the Northeast of England and of these Stockton houses the third largest number of supported asylum-seekers (700-900 at one time) after Newcastle and Sunderland (Figure 1). As of September 2025, Stockton housed 805 asylum-seekers, up from 758 during our study October 2023-January 2024. Nationally, Stockton ranks 52nd for total number of asylum-seekers, but 98th nationally in total Borough population. Stockton is neither the highest nor lowest in asylum-seekers per capita. In the 2021 Census, 92% of Stockton residents identified as White English or British, higher than neighbouring Middlesborough (82.4%) but lower than Hartlepool (96.5%), Redcar and Cleveland (97.7%) and County Durham (96.8%). Sitting between extremes, with long-term experience welcoming and integrating refugees and asylum-seekers, Stockton may well be indicative of a substantial number of middle-sized local authorities outside of large, urban metropolitan areas with substantial BAME and minoritized ethic communities that can provide social infrastructure to arriving asylum-seekers and refugees. We hope this report is of interest to them, as well.

There are no consistent statistics that enumerate how many asylum-seekers get status and go on to settle in specific local authorities. The Home Office reports "immigration group" populations for Homes for Ukraine, Afghan Resettlement Program, and Supported Asylum Seekers, and UK-wide numbers of leave applications by type of leave and nationality but does not break them down by local authority.[1] The Office for National Statistics publishes census data on foreign-born residents, ethnicity and country of origin, but does not collect statistics on immigration nor refugee status. Mears Group, the private housing contractor providing dispersal accommodation and support services to asylum-seekers, may have information about who gets status and leaves dispersal accommodation, but they do not have data about where refugees decide to settle. GPs do not ask immigration status at registration. It is not possible, therefore, to determine a reliable exact number of current residents in Stockton who have received Leave to Remain following an asylum claim. Since supported asylum-seekers are reported by local authority, these numbers may indicate relative numbers of settled refugees in Stockton relative to other local authorities and regions.

[1] UK Home Office, *Immigration System Statistics, Year Ending September 2025*; UK Home Office, 'Immigration System Statistics: Settlement-Detailed Datasets Year Ending in December 2025'.

We offer these figures here to indicate Stockton's relative position regionally and nationally in comparison to other dispersal areas. As people receive decisions on their asylum claims, they face immediate decisions about where to live and find work, whether to join family or communities elsewhere in the UK, or whether to move children to new schools. While these are complex and highly individual decisions, our participants shared common values, aims and concerns. We explore our participant's experiences making these decisions in the Analysis sections below.

Region / Local Authority	31 Dec 2014	31 Dec 2015	31 Dec 2016	31 Dec 2017	31 Dec 2018	31 Dec 2019	31 Dec 2020	31 Dec 2021	31 Dec 2022	31 Dec 2023	31 Dec 2024	30 Sep 2025
N/A - Section 4 (pre-2018)	4,997	3,821	3,773	4,114	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
N/A - Section 98 (pre-Dec 2022)	1,476	1,985	1,990	1,802	2,089	2,738	12,235	24,175	0	0	0	0
North East:	2,543	3,028	3,411	3,558	4,634	4,739	4,990	5,269	6,285	6,721	7,559	7,277
Gateshead	227	261	360	417	667	739	676	717	863	758	758	677
Hartlepool	136	134	192	227	263	294	355	365	380	399	462	431
Middlesbrough	759	917	589	560	681	604	646	622	624	630	669	673
Newcastle-upon-Tyne	457	572	797	842	1,031	1,042	1,052	1,147	1,810	1,456	1,323	1,149
North Tyneside	113	114	133	152	230	269	277	300	298	341	444	453
Northumberland	1	1	19	60	81	166	256	298	325	530	703	661
Redcar & Cleveland	2	10	43	66	73	115	113	155	174	231	257	254
South Tyneside	38	55	110	165	202	247	360	436	455	636	635	612
Stockton-on-Tees	686	793	867	702	898	773	703	734	777	758	830	805
Sunderland	129	171	271	292	407	401	394	410	487	671	825	813
East Midlands	2,235	2,537	2,537	2,730	2,646	3,052	2,751	3,316	6,315	6,061	6,204	7,723
East of England	528	593	593	597	702	874	866	1,832	6,259	7,568	6,878	7,576
London	2,773	2,446	2,446	4,324	4,776	5.808	6,284	11,241	25,863	21,715	20,161	18,127
North West	7,099	8,444	8,444	9,491	9,739	11,054	10,456	11,544	18,045	18,643	21,166	21,684
Northern Ireland	475	545	545	636	715	912	960	1,437	3,103	2,831	2,730	2,566
Scotland	2,824	3,130	3,130	3,350	3,689	4,522	4,331	4,584	5,210	5,589	6,057	6,350
South East	446	513	513	580	598	716	788	2,259	7,995	7,488	7,746	8,120
South West	750	932	932	945	845	1,045	1,029	1,437	4,252	4,980	4,376	4,824
Wales	2,090	2,856	3,009	2,888	3,102	2,835	3,132	2,609	3,142	2,857	3,381	3,331
West Midlands	4,427	5,031	5,207	5,355	6,045	5,712	6,576	7,382	12,406	12,676	12,613	13,979
Yorkshire & the Humber	3,400	4,133	4,920	5,103	5,625	6,398	6,270	6,780	10,955	9,383	10,194	10,094
Unknown	160	175	189	122	58	204	130	592	341	0	0	0
N/A - Subsistence only (Dec 2023)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4,650	3,122	0
GRAND TOTAL	**36,223**	**40,169**	**45,152**	**46,652**	**49,536**	**50,091**	**64,041**	**84,457**	**110,171**	**111,132**	**112,187**	**111,651**

Figure 2: Annual Number of Asylum-seekers in dispersal or receiving support by region and NE Local Authority December 2014-September 2025. Source: UK Home Office Regional and Local Authority Data on Immigration Groups December 2025. Accessed 22 April, 2026.

There is little research on asylum-seeker and refugee experiences of settling, integration or welcome programming in Stockton specifically, though there is a large evidence base on integration, belonging and place. For example, the 2024 Commission on the Integration of Refugees included Newcastle as representative of the Northeast but did not include Teesside. Existing but sparse research on Stockton

focusses on health inequalities and post-industrial transformation.[2] While insights can be drawn from this existing research, they provide limited observations about Stockton's place-based dynamics. Research partners, Refugee Futures, sought to understand why asylum-seekers and refugees stay or leave Stockton once they get Leave to Remain in order to develop practical, place-based programming with meaningful impact.

This report also adds to recent research by the Commission on the Integration of Refugees, which overlapped with our research period. As part of the Commission, the Neighbourly Lab performed an extensive UK-wide survey of asylum-seekers and refugees in 2022, including London, Manchester, Glasgow, Newcastle, Leeds, Wales and Midlands. This study included 788 participants, comprised of 42% Ukrainian refugees and 46% of whom arrived through a resettlement scheme. 11 participants gave in-depth qualitative interviews and most of their participants had arrived 1-3 years prior to the research. The report revealed important regional and national trends in arrival and integration. Ultimately, any development of local VCSO and Borough Council asylum and refugee infrastructure will require place-based knowledge and context-specific expertise. To this end, our study makes three significant contributions to this evidence base.

First, we focussed on dispersed asylum-seekers who *did not* arrive through a resettlement scheme because wanted to know more about how the process of seeking asylum affects people's experience of arrival and decision to stay or leave Stockton specifically. While Stockton has long housed 700+ dispersed asylum-seekers at any one time, resettlement schemes have brought small numbers of refugees to the town in recent years. As of December 2025, Stockton housed 832 asylum-seekers in dispersal housing, 115 refugees through Afghan resettlement schemes and 235 through Ukraine resettlement schemes up to December 2025.[3]

Second, our research participants arrived 1-20 years prior to the research, yielding insights into welcome and integration in Stockton over a longer period. Third, all 77 of our interviews were in-depth, qualitative interviews and this approach provides us with specific insights into Stockton's place-based dynamics. Empirically speaking, this research adds significant detail and place-based nuance to national research on integration, welcome, and refugee experiences. We hope that the report generates practicable insights and lively discussion of how people make a home in Stockton.

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[2] Warren, *Industrial Teesside, Lives and Legacies*; Warren, 'Understanding Biographies of Place'; Bhandari et al., 'Geographical Inequalities in Health in a Time of Austerity'.

[3] UK Home Office, *Immigration System Statistics Data Tables*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/immigration-statistics-quarterly-release.

3. RESEARCH AIMS & OBJECTIVES

THE RESEARCH PROJECT AIMED TO:

- Better understand how people build a life and make a home in Stockton after receiving the right to remain in the UK.
- Build long-term research capacity amongst Stockton's refugees and asylum-support community.
- Co-produce meaningful knowledge about refugee integration in Stockton.

At the start of the project, we defined integration as a **two-way process of learning and change between arriving asylum-seekers, refugees who have gained status and the places in which they arrive and settle.** This definition is in line with the Home Office Integration Framework (2019), which defines integration as a context-specific, "**multi-directional process involving multiple changes from both incoming and diverse host communities.**"[4]

The Framework also defines integration as an **outcome** for communities: "**where people, whatever their background, live, work, learn and socialise together, based on shared rights, responsibilities, and opportunities**."

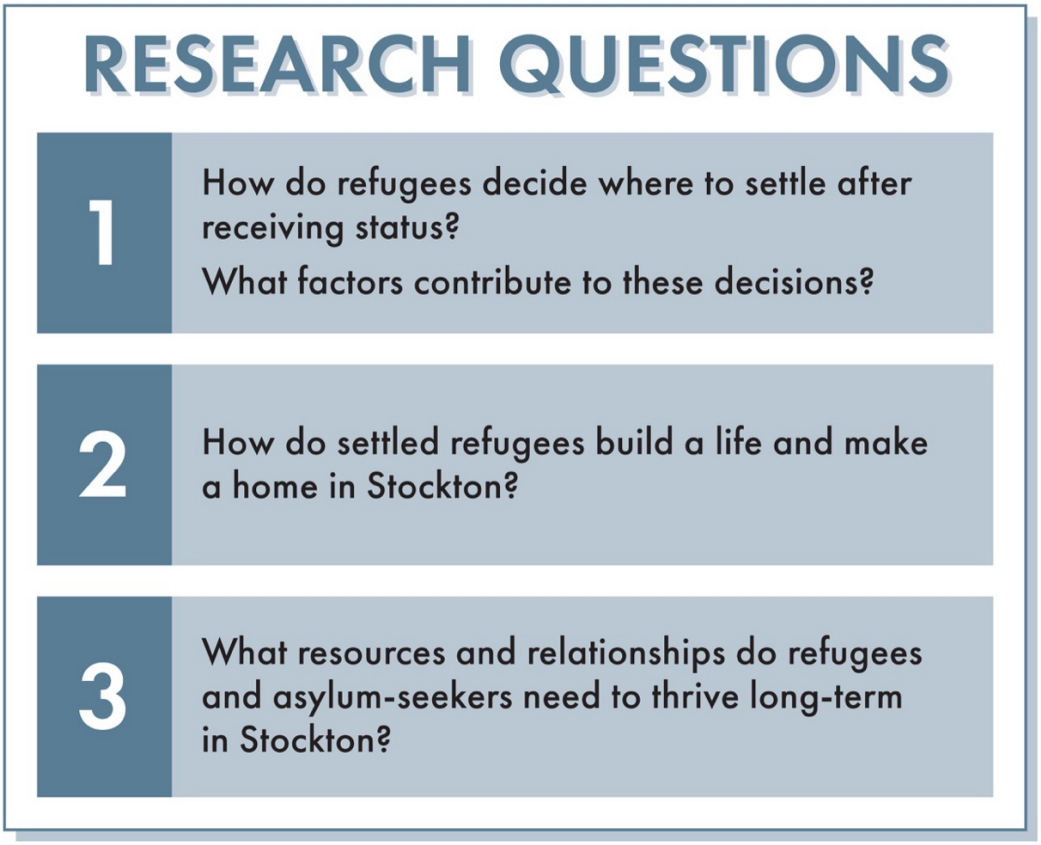
This approach to integration also framed the Commission on the Integration of Refugees' national review of refugee integration, which coincided with our study. They draw from the Integration Framework, adding that "integration is more than simply social mixing, it is also about access to opportunities and support." [5] This approach is grounded in critical migration studies and social science and attempts to schematise the complex process of joining a new society. Taken as a whole, it is a comprehensive, place-based and realistic approach that addresses individual and collective needs across the full range of human needs.

Integrated places need strong integration processes.

[4] Ndofor-Tah et al., *Home Office Indicators of Integration Framework 2019*.

[5] Commission on the Integration of Refugees, *From Arrival to Integration: Building Communities for Refugees and for Britain*.

Collaborating with Refugee Futures, who focusses specifically on Stockton Borough, we wanted to ground these national frameworks in Stockton's specific context, to understand more about how Stockton's actual refugees experience arrival and settlement in Stockton—or choose to live elsewhere. Refugee Futures' aim is to encourage more refugees to stay in Stockton and build a life, so we designed research to learn more about what keeps refugees in Stockton—or not—once they have received Leave to Remain.



Being place-based in our approach, our research project asked **what integration means in Stockton specifically**. Our research team mobilised exploratory methods to invite refugees' analysis of their own situations and experiences. We asked our participants to define integration for us, to describe what integrated people do, as well as what non-integrated people do.

We also asked questions about **integrated communities**, asking participants to reflect on the role of shared, collective spaces and activities in Stockton. These questions help us understand Stockton refugees' hopes and dreams for Stockton **as a community and as community members**. These questions help us understand how refugees see themselves in relation to Stockton as a place and people and how a "good community" works. Their answers paint a picture of "what good looks like," an important part of envisioning social change in Stockton.

4. METHODOLOGY

RECRUITING & SELECTING PARTICIPANTS

The research project focussed on refugees currently residing in Stockton, as well as those who have lived in Stockton at any point during their time in the UK. Because our aim was to understand how asylum-seekers decide to stay in Stockton once they obtain the right to remain, these refugees were chosen based on their decision to either stay in Stockton or move to another area in the UK.

The team discussed including other groups, as well, but felt that long-term factors contributing to belonging, sense of community and connection were best provided by refugees after the move-on period. Refugees in the move-on period face urgent and time-sensitive demands to organise housing, removal from dispersal housing, utilities, employment and other administrative matters. This is well-known to be a stressful and already under-resourced period[6] and the team felt that interview requests were not appropriate for this group.[7]

The researchers posted leaflets in shops, GP practices, public notice boards, at local colleges, and at local charities; gave presentations to ESOL classes and drop-ins and distributed images through social media and Whatsapp groups. Interested participants filled in an online Microsoft form which asked about basic demographic data and contact information. All data was stored on Durham University encrypted and secured servers. To ensure the widest possible representation of diverse experiences in Stockton, the team selected participants to include refugees from a wide range of countries, languages spoken, to balance gender, length of residence and area of residence. We knew that some nationalities received speedy decisions and some asylum-seekers waited years for decisions. We also knew that geopolitical events affected how asylum-seekers' claims are processed at different moments, which creates very different experiences of short- and long-term dispersal accommodation and subsequent settlement in Stockton.

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[6] Hughes, *Bridging the Gap: The Lived Experiences of Refugees Granted Leave to Remain*.

[7] Stockton Borough also welcomes Afghan and Ukrainian refugees through resettlement and sponsorship schemes. However, these were relatively new to the Borough and came with more support than dispersed asylum-seekers received. The team felt that this group has distinct experiences of arrival and settlement to asylum-seekers. Future research might delve deeper into comparing the impacts of various levels of integration and settlement support across different groups.

Altogether, the five researchers collected 78 interviews. Three were excluded from the final data set due to incomplete interviews and participant withdrawal. A full description of the age, gender, nationality, ethnicity and length of residents of participants can be found in the Appendix.

DEVELOPING THE INTERVIEWS

Using the pilot study as a starting point, the research team revised questions to emphasize links between feeling welcome, belonging and home and everyday experiences and practices. The research did not seek to evaluate specific programmes or organisations, per se, but to create an opportunity for settled refugees to define these concepts in their own terms. The researchers knew from experience that people move home for multiple reasons and that people often navigate push and pull factors simultaneously. The research team crafted a series of questions to draw out concrete examples of how this process worked for different participants. We then organised and streamlined questions to enable conversations to be more organic, manageable and easy to translate into different languages. The interview questions are available in the Appendix.

FEEDBACK FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS

During 2025, Kawa Wali organised and led Community Feedback Sessions with asylum-seekers with assistance from Sabren Karam, part of the original research team, and Amy Batey, a Durham University masters student and Refugee Futures volunteer. Using focus group methods, discussions were held at Catalyst House in Stockton and lasted about an hour. A total of 24 asylum-seekers were recruited through Refugee Futures' existing networks and attended five sessions. The discussions may have been biased towards asylum-seekers who are already connected to services and who engage in volunteering and other activities. A full discussion of focus group facilitation can be found in the appendices.

These discussions asked current asylum-seekers to reflect on what interview participants told us about feeling welcome, barriers to integration, and feeling able or unable to participate and contribute to community life, and what they would change if they could. As we explain below, our interview participants told us these were important to feeling welcome, belonging and valued members of community. We wanted to know how recently arrived asylum-seekers in Stockton in 2025 felt about these things. Because this data was collected with a different group at a different time, analysis is clearly marked in the sections below.

5. ANALYSIS & FINDINGS

STAYING IN STOCKTON

Of the 63 of the people interviewed who chose to stay in Stockton after receiving status, 47 arrived in Stockton through asylum dispersal. Others arrived to reunite with family (5), for a job (1), to be near friends (2), a partner (1), and for a house (3).

Friends, family and networks were important to people's decisions to stay in Stockton; below, these were the same reasons given for leaving. Alongside friends and family, participants said also mentioned wider networks of support and "knowing who to ask."

> *"I built up my network and started thinking about the future. I have no relatives in other cities, so I stayed in Stockton where I received support. When I first came, to be honest, I was a bit shocked. I didn't like it and to compare 10 years ago with now, it's improved a lot. Because I started doing these ESOL [classes]. I started doing other courses. I started having friends and I see here people are quite supportive. If you have any issue, they do support you….I never thought to move away."*

> *"I have already created a good community base with the people that live around [me] and I didn't want to lose that by moving to another city. I know that most of the people want to move to big cities, but it wasn't hard for me. I feel happy here and I enjoy the community. And there's the fact that the city is not that busy, but I have everything that I need."*

Access to housing was a major factor in people's decision to stay in Stockton. When asylum-seekers get a positive decision on their application, they are eligible for social housing in the area where they were dispersed. Our participants perceived that they would face waiting times and long wait lists in larger cities or be ineligible for social housing. For those entering private housing, as well, housing in Stockton is more affordable than other cities.

Respondents also mentioned **Stockton's walkability, size and quietness** compared to other cities. Considering the cost of public transportation mentioned above, this was perceived to be a major benefit of Stockton. Overall, participants thought that Stockton was affordable compared to other cities.

> *"Because here is a small town and I can and do my anything easy. For example, studying and access to any public transport is easy, life is easy."*

> *"When people get the right to remain, they move to the big city. Still, after that, they change their mind about staying in small cities because it's quieter than other cities and it's good and clean and cheap, and there are a lot of job opportunities. I live in Stockton and people here are nice…London is terrible and tough to live in."*

Stockton's **quietness** was mentioned 35 times as a reason to live in Stockton. While many of our respondents assumed that other refugees would move to bigger cities, they themselves appreciated being in a quieter city.

For others, having **kids settled in school** was important to their decision to remain in Stockton. While some mention feeling unsafe in Stockton, safety and quiet was also mentioned as a positive for Stockton, especially for raising families.

LEAVING STOCKTON

Twelve (12) of our interviewees had left Stockton at the time of our interviews. All had been dispersed to Stockton by the Home Office (or their contractors). While these participants eventually left, they had a mix of experiences and feelings, including positive ones. We go into some detail here to provide this nuance.

Respondents who left Stockton did not point to a single or consistent "push factor." All found RAS-facing services to be welcoming and helpful but this experience was inconsistent with their experiences outside of the RAS sector. Some had strong ties to family and friends in other cities or skillsets better suited to job markets elsewhere. For those staying in the Northeast, proximity to work was a key factor in leaving Stockton, even if they maintain ties with the city.

> *"Yes, the reason why I left Stockton? It is beautiful town. I could have stayed. It is due to the transport. It is because I start work in a factory….I cannot go [at] 4 or 3:30 am in the morning to Middlesbrough: then you do not find buses."*

WHAT REASONS DID PARTICIPANTS GIVE FOR LEAVING STOCKTON?

- 6 moved elsewhere in the Northeast, 2 due to housing availability elsewhere.
- 5 relocated for employment.
- 4 mentioned the high cost of transportation to work, alongside other reasons.
    - 2 mentioned the cost of transportation to work in Middlesborough.
- 4 mentioned finding more multi-cultural environment that provided for their needs.
- 4 relocated to be closer to family, their connections or networks.
- 3 relocated to access education for themselves or a child.
- 3 mentioned discrimination, alongside other reasons.
    - 1 mentioned being defended by community member.
- 1 mentioned negative experiences in dispersal accommodation, alongside other reasons.
- 1 mentioned finding a faith community elsewhere.

DID PEOPLE WHO LEFT STOCKTON FEEL WELCOME WHEN THEY ARRIVED?

Only four people in this group wanted to stay in Stockton when they first arrived; yet nine in this group answered 'yes' that they felt welcome when they arrived. We asked them for examples of how they were made to feel welcome. They mentioned:

- The number of support services, such as charities, churches and drop-ins.
- Someone from their home country welcoming them.
- Involvement in volunteering and other activities.
- Calmer or quieter than other cities.
- Other people of their nationality.

> *"I felt lonely for, like, quite a long time. Yeah, but thankfully later on, when I get engaged in different things, or kind of volunteering…I felt much better."*

> *"But I can feel Stockton was always better for me because of the communication and the integration that I had in Stockton. My life was getting better when I had a basketball every da.y I could come to the town centre and can engage with the communities."*

Of the three who answered no, they did not feel welcome when they arrived, they mentioned a combination of factors:

> *"When I first arrived in Stockton, I didn't know anything about the place. I felt lonely and struggled to connect with people and find my people. My thoughts were negative, and I became depressed; it was a tough time. I wasn't happy during my initial arrival in Stockton.… Things [got better] after 6 months …. After one year in Stockton, I liked to stay in Stockton because I knew many people."*

And some shared mixed experiences of feeling both welcomed and discriminated against:

> *"It's half and half: some people who are very welcoming. Especially the church groups, yes. But unfortunately, some of the social workers assigned to asylum seekers are…out of touch with reality and sometimes racist."*

> *"There was zero welcoming, and the housing company treated us very badly. The other things, like the GP, gave appointments, and they were very welcoming and kind. They sent me brochures, and the nurses were nice. There was mental health support, and they asked me to go to the gym."*

FEELING WELCOME, BELONGING AND COMMUNITY

Key Finding 1: Welcome is an ongoing process of making new relationships, learning and sharing knowledge.

Key Finding 2: Participants developed a sense of belonging through meeting, mixing with and learning from a diverse range of people in Stockton.

HOW DID INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS' FEELINGS CHANGE OVER TIME?

To start a discussion of how participants changed over time, we asked them to describe their feelings of welcome, belonging and integration when they arrived and at the time of the interview using a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being the least and 10 being the most. Researchers then asked for examples and detail through follow up questions. Given the diversity of our participants' backgrounds and our limited knowledge of their literacy and numeracy, specific numbers do not provide meaningful comparison across the dataset. We do not know whether participants feel the same way about a '3' or a '5'. Instead, we calculated how many participants reported improvement, consistency or deterioration over time. In the interviews, researchers asked for examples to explain their numbers and these helped us understand place-based dynamics. The researchers also asked what would need to change for participants to give a '10.' These questions opened up opportunities to discuss participants' ideas, suggestions and aspirations for flourishing in Stockton.

WELCOME

13 of the 63 (20.6%) settled refugees who stayed in Stockton did not feel welcome when they arrived. Of these 13, two said they felt they did not belong at the time of the interview (2023-4).

> *"I felt uncomfortable at first and not welcomed but after a few weeks, I made friends and relationships."*

> *"Not at first, alright….I was like, wow. There's no Africans like you can see [now]. Few. And I was like, 'there's no way.' But the more I stayed her,e the more I wanted to stay. But the first time I was like, oh, I am going to be here [until] I get my status. Then I can move. But after a few months, I was all right."*

6 of the 50 who said they **did feel welcome when they arrived said they did not feel welcome** at the time of the interview. They reported:

- feeling unsafe at night;
- feeling isolated having moved outside of central Stockton;
- a poor healthcare experience;
- feeling overwhelmed with work and no time to socialise;
- needing help with post-move-on support; or were not able to pursue their employment goals (opening a shop, in this case).

These interviews noted positive experiences of welcome as an asylum-seeker and more difficulties after receiving Leave to Remain. Needs change, therefore, over time, as people settle into permanent life in Stockton.

WHAT HELPED PEOPLE FEEL WELCOME?

Thinking back to the immediate arrival period, participants most often mentioned the difficulties of not knowing anyone, having no family nearby or knowing their way around. They mentioned staying in because they worried about getting lost, for example.

Those that felt more welcome over time specifically mentioned drop-ins and faith communities, followed by people who spoke their language and/or came from their country of origin. Support from friendly neighbours and charities were also mentioned frequently. Drop-ins, in particular, were praised for helping people to meet others and for English language lessons.

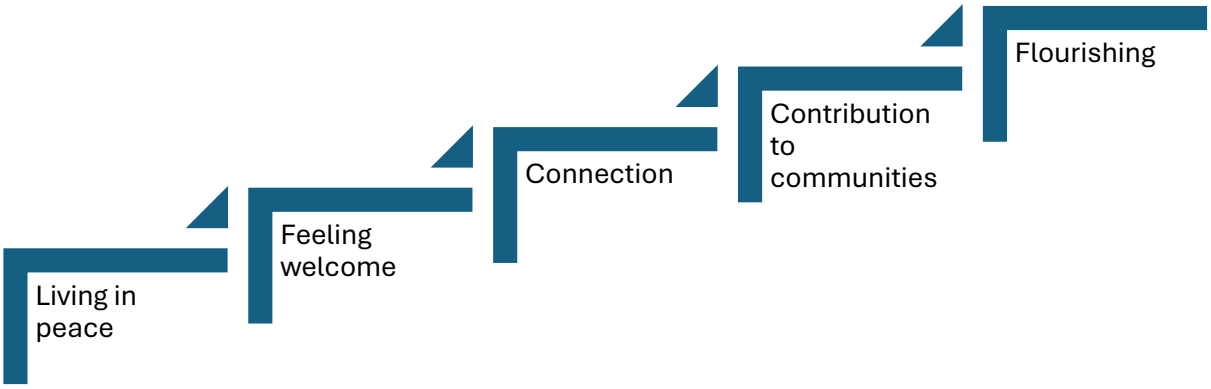
> *"Yes, we were lucky when we arrived, we got good friends there…Saint Peters Church and Baptist Church and there was a New Town Community Centre. These were two, three addresses that I was referred to. So from there, gradually, we we got more friends here."*

> *"At least the first time, you are a bit like, I will not say scared, but like, yeah.... How people were going to behave? … You know, you move from your place [and] you don't even know the country…you don't know nobody. So you will be, like, a bit reserved. But as we start getting on, I start talking to people, people who start introducing me. I remember … in the parish church where they told me, 'Oh, people, they are meeting there,' they said. You know, bit by bit, they showed me, 'so, oh, this is the market, this is the library, oh, we can help you.' "*

Asylum-seekers are required to wait 6 months before beginning English as a Second Language (ESOL) training at Riverside College and Stockton Learning and Skills (often referred to as Stockton Business Centre by participants). Some participants noted that they felt more welcome after 6 months and when they started taking English classes at college. Focus group participants also emphasised a need for access to language and employment training as early as possible, as we discuss in the Recommendations section.

After drop-ins, community centres and charities, English classes were most mentioned as welcoming spaces, with friendly teachers and opportunities to make friends. The importance of learning English and ability to understand things increased their feelings of welcome and belonging, as well.

We asked Community Focus Group Participants to reflect on interview participants' responses above by prioritising key words that emerged from the interviews. While discussions ranged in topic, they linked these ideas in a stepwise process, where each step enables the next:



UNWELCOME EXPERIENCES

We did not ask directly about negative experiences of living in Stockton, but participants shared experiences of feeling unwelcome. We used the boundaries of Stockton Borough to indicate Stockton for research purposes, but our participants understood Stockton as distinct from Thornaby, Yarm, Billingham and other towns in the Borough. Participants residing in Thornaby, Billingham noted feeling less welcome there than in central Stockton. They reported fewer places to meet and finding fewer people like themselves.

While friendly neighbours were mentioned as a key factor in feeling welcome and feeling settled, six participants reported problems with their neighbours' noise, fights, late night activities, or direct acts of racist abuse or violence. Some participants had experienced break-ins or muggings and reported feeling unsafe and some participants reported feeling racialised discrimination from the local community (which we did not ask them to define). Two participants mentioned discriminatory beliefs among asylum-seeker, refugee and migrant communities. Proportionally, focus group discussions reported more instances of discrimination and gave examples of experiences in shops and buses, as well as interactions with staff who assume that African English speakers cannot speak and write in English. These experiences did not define their feelings about Stockton in general, but they undermined sense of safety and the welcome and outreach received from drop-ins, volunteering and faith communities.

WHAT DOES INTEGRATION MEAN TO OUR PARTICIPANTS?

Key Finding 3: Participants defined integration as both connection and contribution to social and economic activities.

Key Finding 4: Feeling integrated requires practical skills like learning English, understanding systems, building networks, and gaining qualifications.

We asked a series of questions about integration to help us understand what ideas, feelings and actions our participants associate with the term. More importantly, asking about individuals, communities and actions/activities tells us what is important to our participants. It will hopefully be helpful to service providers, community organisations, cultural event organisers and newly arrived asylum-seekers.

> *"What is the difference between someone who is and is not integrated? You could say peace of mind.*

INTEGRATION IS A FEELING

Many participants responded to questions about what integrated people *do* with descriptions of how integrated people *feel*. In other words, integration for many is a state of being. Feeling out of place, like a stranger or foreigner and feeling nervous, described non-integration. Meanwhile, integration was described as feeling like family, feeling normal, at peace, happy, or calm. Isolation was linked to depression and poor well-being.

> *"When [a not integrated person] is with a community or group, he feels disconnected and believes he is not accepted. An integrated person, on the other hand, feels normal; they express their feelings freely and do what they enjoy."*

More than feeling alone, participants speculated that these feelings influenced people's interpretations of those around them:

> *"I think when you are not integrated, you feel isolated most of the time. And I get it how that can be so easy for you to do in the beginning, to just be [a] little bit [to] yourself because you were nervous of how you're going to be received.*

Our focus group participants added that mental health support to manage these and other anxieties, as well as the importance of "feeling at peace," safe and calm. For our participants, then, integration is a process of becoming comfortable with people, in a place, and an affective state.

More than a two-way exchange between residents and newcomers, integration emerges from individuals' relationship to a collective, and the accumulation of small acts of inclusion, care and welcome.

Figure 3 Volunteers Adel and Abderaziz apple picking.

BARRIERS AND ENABLERS

LANGUAGE

After feelings, interview and focus group participants agreed that the ability to communicate is essential to integration. Learning English enables mutual understanding, learning the system, knowing the law, solving problems, knowing one's way around. Without learning English, our participants reported feeling isolated, lonely, depressed, or out of place.

> *"I know the first thing: it's about the language. For me the first thing it comes to my mind [is] the language."*

> *"Because language has an impact on our relationship and we don't know their language and they don't know our language, as well. Then because of the language we cannot make a connection with the link between each other."*

Speaking together enables connection, education, work, meeting local people and contributing to the community. Here we recognise the highly important role that Stockton's Riverside College, Learning and Skills Centre, in particular, play in providing formal English as a Second Language (ESOL) training and interpretation courses. More than "just" skills and training, language classes are regular places to meet others both like and unlike themselves. As one participant shared, attending college was a pivotal point:

> *"Yes, when I arrived, I did not speak English. I met people here who tried to help me and they offered support. When I got my status, I went to the college. All the teachers were very helpful. So all that made me feel welcome in Stockton."*

Colleges are important nodes of information sharing, learning about British culture, and finding support. When asked how Service Fair attendees learn about each fair, college and friends / social networks are the two most common answers. In Stockton, in particular, education in colleges play a central role in both welcoming and integrating asylum-seekers and refugees.

CONNECTION V. ISOLATION

Participants most often defined integration in terms of connection and isolation, specifically connection to and isolation from other people, whether that be other migrants or British residents. This is important because institutional definitions of integration often emphasize access to and take-up of services. As discussed above, integrated people and communities combine institutional support with welcoming attitudes and actions.

> *"Someone not integrated doesn't have much network with others. An integrated person has a network and knows more about the area."*

> *"[An integrated person] engages well with the community, and they understand him. And he expresses his thoughts and opinions."*

> *"Because we are all foreign here, we feel lonely at home. If you don't have any friends over here, you cannot get adapted and mixed up with the people. I was feeling lonely. But if you have good and close friends, you can gather together and making food. Making good friends, gathering together, cooking together and being happy—that's everything."*

Making friends and mixing with different people were repeatedly referenced as important for integration:

> *"I think integration is finding a new friends, finding a new community and you think you are. You belong to them and you can talk with them. You can ask your needs. Of them, and you can hear of them their problem, their happiness."*

These characteristics were often juxtaposed with ethnic communities who were perceived as remaining isolated, insular and not welcoming or joining in with others.

As discussed above, for some people, integration meant *feeling* at peace, part of the community, accepted. Meeting and respecting people in different religious, ethnic and linguistic groups was repeatedly used to define integration. Accepting people from different cultures was often juxtaposed to isolation, either individuals being isolated or ethnic, national or religious groups isolating themselves from other. Volunteering, getting involved, going to college, helping out were all mentioned as examples of how different people meet and mix.

Figure 4 Maria and Gertrude. Maria is from Brazil and Gertrude is from Uganda. They do not speak the same languages, but their friendship has become well-known at BiziStudios, Stockton. Photo credit: Jane Bizimana

RESPECT

The word respect was mentioned as both a key individual act and a community trait. Respecting different cultures was mentioned both to described *what integrated people do* and *what integrated communities look like*.

> *"Integration means that foreign people become friends with the locals, living in harmony. They see each other like human beings, with equal respect."*

> *"I may not agree with others' behaviour, but I must respect them. My culture may differ from others, but I appreciate them all. I would not have a difficulty living with, learning from, or working with that individual; that would mean that person is an integrated person in my opinion."*

> *"Well, I think you can have your own ideologies and beliefs, but what is important is to how you act in a society and an individual in a society. You can have your personal beliefs, but about the fact, about apart from things like your gender, your religion, your ethnicity, What is important is to be a human being and act like a human being. We need to respect everyone, whatever they are, whatever they believe in. The basic, the foundation is to be a human being and have our kind of, it's something that brings all of us together."*

Respectfulness can be thought of as a practice and as an outcome or indicator the integration process for our participants.

PARTICIPATION & CONTRIBUTION

The sections above show that participants agree that connection is important. But wow do refugees connect with others? Our participants emphasized participation in activities, naming drop-ins, volunteering, cultural events, and festivals. This sense of

active contribution and involvement pervaded participants' discussions of integration. Integrated *people* join in and participate, such as attending events:

> *"Integration means connecting and participating in community activities in an informal way and this was easier in Stockton [than where I moved]."*

> *"For example, be volunteer in drop-ins.… Participate in different social clubs from college. OK, for example, I love the football. I made different friends playing football, right? That means participating in different activities."*

Integrated communities, on the other hand, invite refugees to contribute and treat them as full members of the community.

> *"For example, now I'm as a volunteer in [a local organisation], and they involve me in their issues. And I like it, you know, I'm not separated and they don't put me aside. They can see me. And they can see my ability. And they can ask me for help. And when you can help someone else, it gives you a good feeling. You think [to] yourself, 'I'm a useful person.' "*

Some participants emphasize employment as a contribution to community, particularly those working the health sector:

> *"Who helps the community and can assist the community as an example of helping those who need your help, such as helping a patient. The country can benefit from him, pay taxes, rely on work more than benefits, and open a private business or work. Sitting at home causes depression, so he must exercise or do hobbies, go out, mix with people, work a sport, and read books.*

Key Finding 5: Integration is a collective commitment. Integrated people require integrated communities and vice versa. Mutual respect for rights, beliefs and cultures are fundamental characteristics of integrated communities.

COMMUNITY

While we used community in some of our questions, participants also used community in three different ways. First, it was often used synonymously with integration: "being part of the community." Second, some participants used "the local community" to describe non-refugees and White British residents. Third, religious and ethnic communities among migrants and refugees were also mentioned, often as examples of isolation and non-integration. In this third sense, staying too much within one's own community works against integration.

To understand how our participants imagine an ideal Stockton, we asked a further question, **"What does an integrated community look like?"** This question shifted attention from individuals to groups and collectives. Participants' answers echoed other sections of this report: language education, providing access to jobs, and participating in events and volunteering. However, participants tended to emphasize shared values of tolerance, acceptance, doing activities together, and happiness which did not appear in other responses.

> *"For me, I think that the integrated community is the community that connects and can help every member of the community can help each other."*

> *"Well, I think integrated communit[ies], they welcome different nationalities…. They have an activity, [and] people are willing to join those activities and to people are happy to be with them, to be with that community and to spend with them with them…If there is an integrated community, [it] means that people also join any kind of volunteering activities with them and to make a better place for that area."*

> *"I think an integrated community is a community which consists of individuals who are open-minded and positive towards each other, meaning that they can accept each other, again, regardless of their religion and all of their personal beliefs. …We shouldn't be like, oh no, you have a different religion. I'm not going to help you because we're different. Just the foundation, the basics that we're all human and we're all in the same community requires us to help each other.*

We provide detail here because the word is so commonly used to refer to groups of asylum-seekers and refugees, to cities, to places, to identities. It is also used to refer to “the refugee community,” but as our participants showed us, refugees are a highly diverse group who do not necessarily see themselves as a community as such. For practitioners communicating with refugees and residents, this insight may be helpful in developing clear communications with diverse audiences. As we discuss below, ‘connection’ may be more precise, easier to translate, and be more warmly received.

Figure 5 Coffee is served. Making coffee became a way of sharing rhythms, memories and routines of home with each other—and a source of gentle debate.

CONNECTION

> *"Yes, [Stockton] feels like home. I look forward to coming back whenever I go on holiday. As I said, I feel at home here and always want to come back after visiting other places."*

Participants explained feeling welcome as a process not an endpoint. Feeling welcome included neighbours, drop-ins, services, healthcare, education and housing conditions, but **no single factor produces a sense of welcome**. Where participants felt most welcome, belonging and connection, they described their interactions across multiple everyday spaces.

Following the questions about feeling welcome, we asked participants "do you feel you belong in Stockton now?" This question moved them from the past to the present and asked them to reflect on their feelings about Stockton as a long-term resident. We then asked "do you feel part of the community here?" Welcome, belonging and community may seem to ask about the same feelings or experiences. These questions had two aims. First, we used good interview practice to offer multiple opportunities to share experiences of Stockton as a place, at different points in time, as settled refugees.

Second, we wanted to understand which words were clear to participants, which translated relatively well in different languages, and which words closed participants down or confused them. Bringing at least six languages to our research team, the researchers hypothesized that "integration," would either carry negative meanings or be so difficult to translate that it would render the interview question somewhat meaningless. As discussed above, "community" can create a sense of commonality that may or may not correspond to how people see themselves. Our participants used "community" to describe insular, non-integrated groups of people, those "just stay within their community," meaning ethnic, religious and/or linguistic group. For these reasons, **researchers ended up translating integration as "connecting**."

Connections take many forms for our participants. Participants connect through shared interests, talents, sports, streets, neighbourhoods, religion, politics, and shopping areas. Some connections are thick and strong; other connections are new, temporary or around a single activity. Many of our participants described feeling **welcome and belonging through multiple, different kinds of connections**. People can connect even if they are different. People can even connect *because* they are different. Connection, as our participants understood it, is about relationships.

Connection is also different from community. The term community was often used to refer to distinct ethic groups, place-based identities, groups defined by religion, sexuality or interest. Communities have distinct boundaries and so always produce some exclusions. We did not ask our participants to define community explicitly, but from their answers, we understand that people mean a range of things. Some people meant the refugee and asylum-seeker community; some people mention church or mosques; some mention volunteering; some mention their street or neighbourhood; some people referred to White British residents as "the community." Connections form communities, but they go beyond them, as well.

In sum, vocabulary of connection worked best across languages and cultures represented in our study. Connection was generally viewed positively, while integration was sometimes viewed as "giving up one's culture." Connections sustain people in different ways. Participants who reported highest feelings of belonging and integration gave examples of both dense and diverse connections.

Figure 6 Asylum Service Fair Volunteers, 2025. Photo by Rachael Smith.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

We asked interview participants if they thought refugees were integrated in Stockton. 50% indicated yes, 22% no and 28% somewhat/it depends. We then asked them what they thought people needed to be more integrated in Stockton, specifically.

> *"I think there must be social activities that gather refugees—old and new arrivals—and the local community. Those people must interact with each other and know each other. This is the real meaning of integration. For example, if there were any events or activities for asylum seekers or refugees it would be helpful if it was run by refugees who have been in Stockton for a while, as well as the local English community."*

The most common suggestion was **more activities** (18 mentions), though they mentioned different kinds of activities that might be helpful: **for children, sport, socialising, cultural events educating about and celebrating different cultures** were mentioned multiple times. These responses follow logically from responses above, which emphasize the importance of meeting people, making friends, being involved and creating connection.

Alongside activities, participants mentioned **language training** (13 mentions), **jobs / qualifications** (6 mentions) and **education about British life and culture** (6 mentions) among a diverse range of other suggestions. Many participants had multiple suggestions, often **linking social activities to learning the language and learning about other cultures**.

Our focus group participants were at the beginning of their settlement journeys in Stockton. While they enjoyed drop-ins, craft and activities sessions and volunteering, they also stated that it is not enough to feel settled. They would feel further supported through expansion of low-barrier, culturally competent **mental health services** to meet high need; **better communication** between accommodation providers and asylum-seekers; **peer mentoring** with settled refugees to learn from their experiences; **access to qualification transfers** and **training** early on; greater access to evening courses; and nearby **food banks**.

We also asked our focus group participants what they would change about Stockton if they had a 'magic wand,' no constraints and infinite resources. They told they would **address discrimination** and **offer community education to reduce prejudice** and improve everyday interactions. They also imagined cleaner streets and **improved local environment as a visible sign of respect and dignity**. They would **expand youth provision** (drop-in centres, supervised activities, sports) to

reduce crime and provide alternatives for young people. In other words, they would use their superpowers to improve the social and physical infrastructure of Stockton, to practice respect and to create communities capable of caring for everyone.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM LIVED EXPERIENCE

In our interviews and group discussions, we asked participants for to discuss barriers to feeling integration, their suggestions and their aspirations for settling in Stockton. Interview and Focus Group Participants identified the following priorities for improving settlement experiences:

1. **More activities and events** designed to bring new and established Stockton communities together, especially social, cultural, family-friendly, and sports and wellbeing activities.
2. **More language support immediately upon arriving in Stockton.**
3. **Better and earlier access to employment pathways**, especially qualification transfer, training, and networking in desired industries.
4. **Expanded education about British life and culture**, including practical knowledge about housing, services, and local systems.

In addition, report authors recommend:

1. Incorporating peer-led research and lived experience leadership throughout asylum-seeker and refugee programming in Stockton.
2. Increasing understanding of barriers and opportunities to connect Stockton's diverse communities.
3. Developing a Stockton Borough-wide "journey-based" strategy for refugee integration through collaboration and coordination between relevant organisations and agencies.

Figure 7 Jen and Nasima of Refugee Futures at the Asylum Service Fair, 2025.

8. APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: METHODOLOGY

PILOT PHASE

Durham University Masters student Jade Overfield, supervised by Lauren Martin and Refugee Futures, developed a pilot interview questionnaire and interviewed 9 participants in the summer of 2022. This initial research was written up as a report, "Making Stockton a Home: Refugee Decision-Making and the Role of Integration" (available on request). The pilot phase provided valuable feedback on participants' priorities, difficult language or phrasing of the questions, and potential for safeguarding concerns to emerge during the research process. Each of these items helped us to refine both our research design and training protocols for the full research process. In particular, questions pertaining to specific organisations veered into service evaluation, taking attention away from complex and interdependent components of integration. While service quality monitoring and evaluation have an important role to play, the aim of this research was to better understand Stockton's refugees' understandings and experiences of settling in Stockton.

In other words, we became interested in how refugees encounter Stockton *as a place* in a full meaning of the term. Places are lived in and experienced over time, building up layer by layer as people do everyday things. Jade's participants' showed us that their decisions to stay or leave Stockton were rarely determined by a single experience, program or factor. Likewise, interview participants' narratives did not map cleanly onto the government's Integration Framework. To begin to understand how practices and feelings come together to produce belonging or even integration, our research needed a different orientation, one led by people with lived experience.

Based on Jade and Lauren's experience and in collaboration with Refugee Futures, we decided to form a research team of lived experience researchers. We had a few reasons for this strategy. First, we were in contact with sanctuary seekers who were highly skilled in research and desired opportunities to participate in "knowledge work." Second, based on our experience with previous research and on academic literature, we knew that research designed and performed by people with lived experience could be more sensitive to the specific concerns, questions and need for sensitivity specific to particular communities. Third, Lauren was concerned that the research needed to "belong to" Stockton, not solely Durham University. Hiring Stockton-based lived experts would ground both research design and long-term impacts in Stockton, making the research accountable to the communities interviewed. Finally, we felt this would help us recruit participants through different networks, with different language capacities, and those who may not be directly known to Refugee Futures.

REVIEW, DESIGN AND INTERVIEWS

In July and August 2023, the recruitment process for the Durham Research Assistant role was conducted collaboratively between Refugee Futures and Dr. Lauren Martin. Phil Bramhall and Lauren Martin completed the interviews and Lauren offered posts to five qualified research assistants, each of whom had different language competencies and networks in the Stockton area: Jane Bizimana, Sabren Karam, Araz Manguri, Luwam Tekeste, and Kawa Wali.

By September 18, 2023, contracts were signed with five research assistants who would participate in the research led by Dr. Lauren Martin. The research project was designed to involve researchers with lived experience from the beginning. They contributed to editing the title of the research, formulating the interview schedule of questions, identifying the target participants for interviews, sharing leaflets and recruiting participants through their networks.. Lauren provided ethics training and oversaw continual ethics review. Kawa Wali managed the project in Stockton on a full-time basis from October 2023-January 2024.

Interview questions are available below.

RESEARCH ETHICS PROCEDURES, HEALTH AND SAFETY

This research project received ethical approval from Durham University's Ethics Committee. As part of our application, Refugee Futures staff and Dr Lauren Martin developed the following ethics protocol. It emphasised frequent and ongoing ethical review.

In each interview, all Researchers obtained Informed Consent from participants before proceeding with interviews. These are stored with Dr. Martin at Durham University.

The research team and Refugee Futures staff held periodic meetings to discuss research progress and ethics procedures. These meetings included progress updates, collaborative problem-solving, reflection on the interview questions and research objectives, discussion of ethical challenges arising and refresher training on ethical procedures, data management and health and safety.

Addressing Ethical Issues

Ethical issues can arise during data collection and between team members. Lauren Martin and Refugee Futures agreed on the following process for addressing ethical issues that arise during the research process.

Ethical issues arising between Refugee Futures, Community Researchers and Lauren Martin (any or all three parties): Inviting Refugee Futures staff and Board Members to periodic meetings, depending on their availability, will provide a venue for raising questions and concerns, collaborative problem-solving, and feedback to Lauren. These are also opportunities to discuss and decide upon any desired course of action, should a challenge or complaint arise. If desirable, we may invite consultation with members of Geography Ethics Committee.

Ethical issues arising from interviews: The Continual Ethics Review process (see above) was designed to capture ethical issues emerging from individual interviews.

If interviewees raised ethical questions about interview protocols, they could share them with Lauren Martin or Durham Geography Ethics Committee (contact information was provided on the information sheet). Lauren and/or the ethics committee would then collect information on the complaint, provide redress where possible and adjust interview and ethical procedures accordingly. No complaints on ethical procedures were submitted to Dr Martin but one participant withdrew their interview following the interview.

When Community Researchers raised ethical questions about interviews, these were shared with Lauren Martin immediately by phone. Potential next steps could include: removing an interview from the dataset; adjusting interview protocols and retraining other Community Researchers; collaborative problem-solving with Community Researcher team; sharing concerns with Refugee Futures if it pertains to staff, volunteers, core work or reputational risk. Two interviews were removed from the dataset, one because the participant could not complete the interview and a second because of inconsistencies in responses which raised questions of accuracy.

Support for Community Researchers: Drawing from a pool of recognised refugees in the Stockton-upon-Tees area, Community Researchers had personal experience with the asylum system in the UK. There is potential for the interviews to trigger strong emotional responses or PTSD. Monthly team meetings will provide additional opportunities to share difficult situations, thoughts or feelings. Where these go beyond the capacity of the team, individuals or the team will call upon counselling support. Even with this support in place, we acknowledge that upsetting or triggering situations are unpredictable and may still arise.

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT

The team circulated flyers and approached people in their networks. Flyers contained links and QR codes to a Microsoft form, which asked for basic contact and demographic information. Kawa and Lauren used this information to balance country of origin, language, age and gender.

116 people registered their interest in participating in the interviews. All interested participants were entered into a spreadsheet and assigned a number, which was

used to refer to interview recordings and transcripts anonymously throughout the research process. Interviews and transcripts were saved on Durham University servers with these codes, ensuring that they were anonymous from data collection to analysis. Kawa Wali and Lauren Martin managed the spreadsheet, assigning participants to research team members based on language capacities, gender and familiarity. This means that participants were not anonymous to the research team, but their transcripts and quotes have been anonymised in the report.

Getting 116 people to fill in the form required significant time and energy investment from the research team. Some participants needed assistance in filling out the form. Other participants wanted more information about the research, how it would be used, and whether it would improve things for refugees in Stockton. As trusted members of their communities, the researchers were able to gather substantial interest and without their networks, previous contributions to community-building, and rapport, the project would have struggled to recruit such a balanced, diverse group.

The team was careful about how we presented the research to potential participants. We did not use the term “interview” to refer to the research but instead referred to “conversations” or “meetings.” The research team’s experience showed that our participant group associated “interview” with Home Office asylum interviews, formal and often antagonistic settings that we wanted to avoid. In addition, “interviews” associated the project with the government and potentially surveillance; in some refugees’ countries of origin, universities are closed aligned with governments and research is sometimes used for intelligence gathering or political purposes. (Elsewhere in Europe, FRONTEX and IOM also interview asylum-seekers and refugees on arrival.)

Seventy-eight interviews were conducted with people who speak 18 different languages from 26 countries of origin. 13 moved to a different area, and 64 with people resident stayed in Stockton. After we did the interviews, 2 of them left to different cities in the UK. Three interviews were eventually excluded from the analysed dataset due to being incomplete, participant withdrawal, and inconsistent/irrelevant responses.

Interviews were conducted in seven different languages, as each researcher is fluent in more than two languages.

The team conducted all interviews with people who moved from Stockton online. Additionally, a few other meetings (less than 10) were preferred to be held online based on people's preferences.

In-person interviews were primarily conducted at Catalyst House in Stockton, where Refugee Futures is based, with two researchers present to ensure health and safety. Otherwise, researchers conducted interviews in local cafés and public places suggested by participants.

INTERVIEW PROCESSING AND ANALYSIS

While all interview recordings and transcripts were organised and stored by Kawa Wali and Lauren Martin, Sabren Karam and Kawa cleaned interview transcripts and copied text into a spreadsheet in 2024-2025 to enable Lauren to use NVIVO qualitative data analysis software to code and analyse our participants' interviews. This process allowed some of us to return to the full set of interviews and identify themes across them. It also provided an opportunity to reflect on different interview styles, how different questions yielded more or less nuanced responses, and what was seeming absent from the data.

APPENDIX 2: DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS

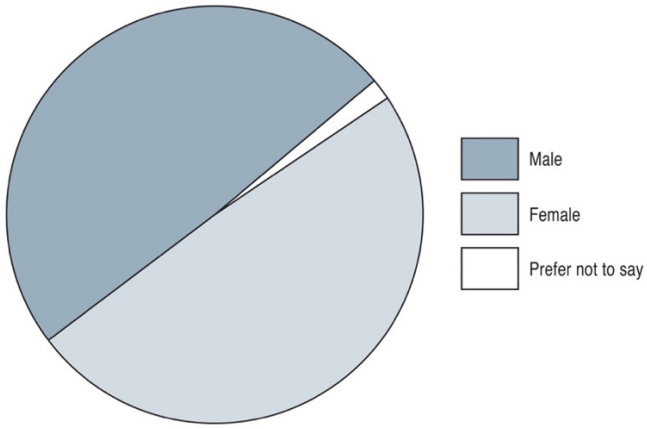


Figure 8: Gender Balance of Interview Participants

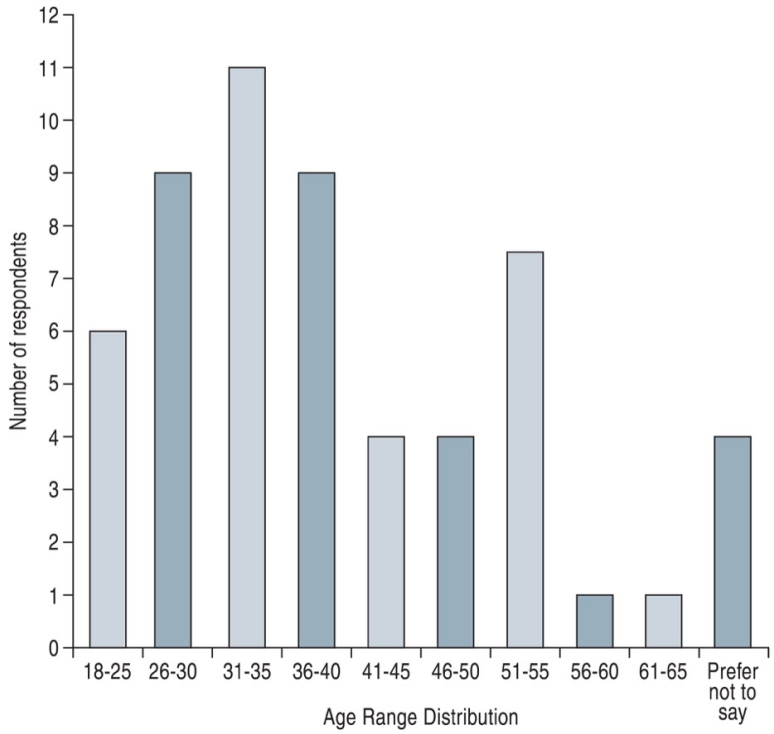


Figure 9: Distribution of Participants' Age Ranges

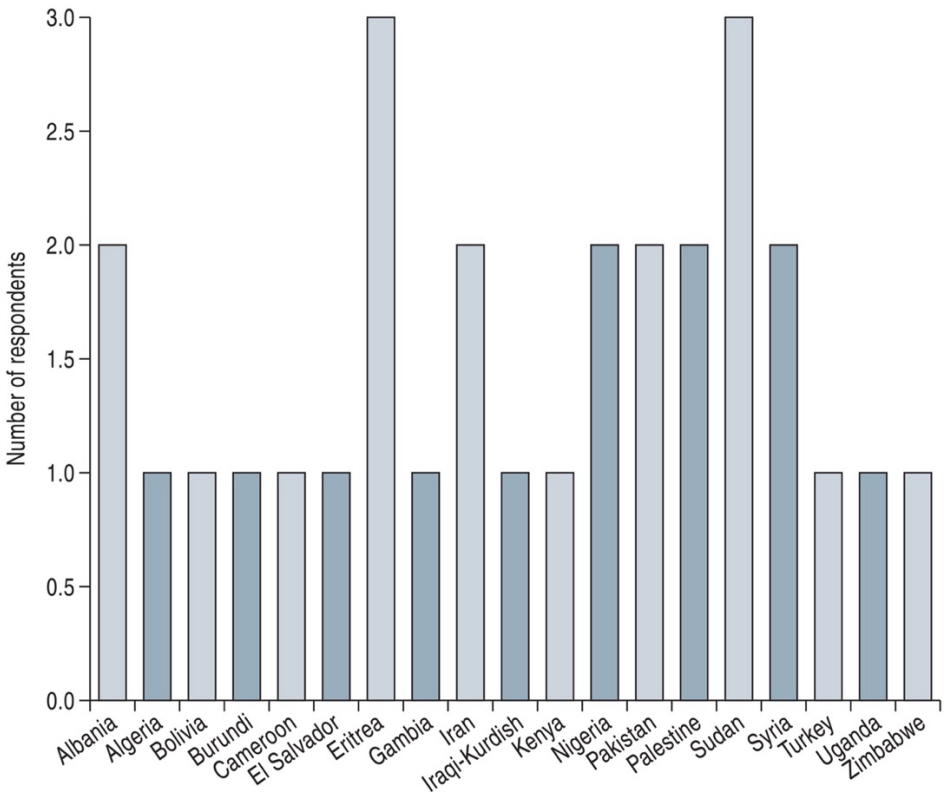


Figure 9: Participants' Country of Origin

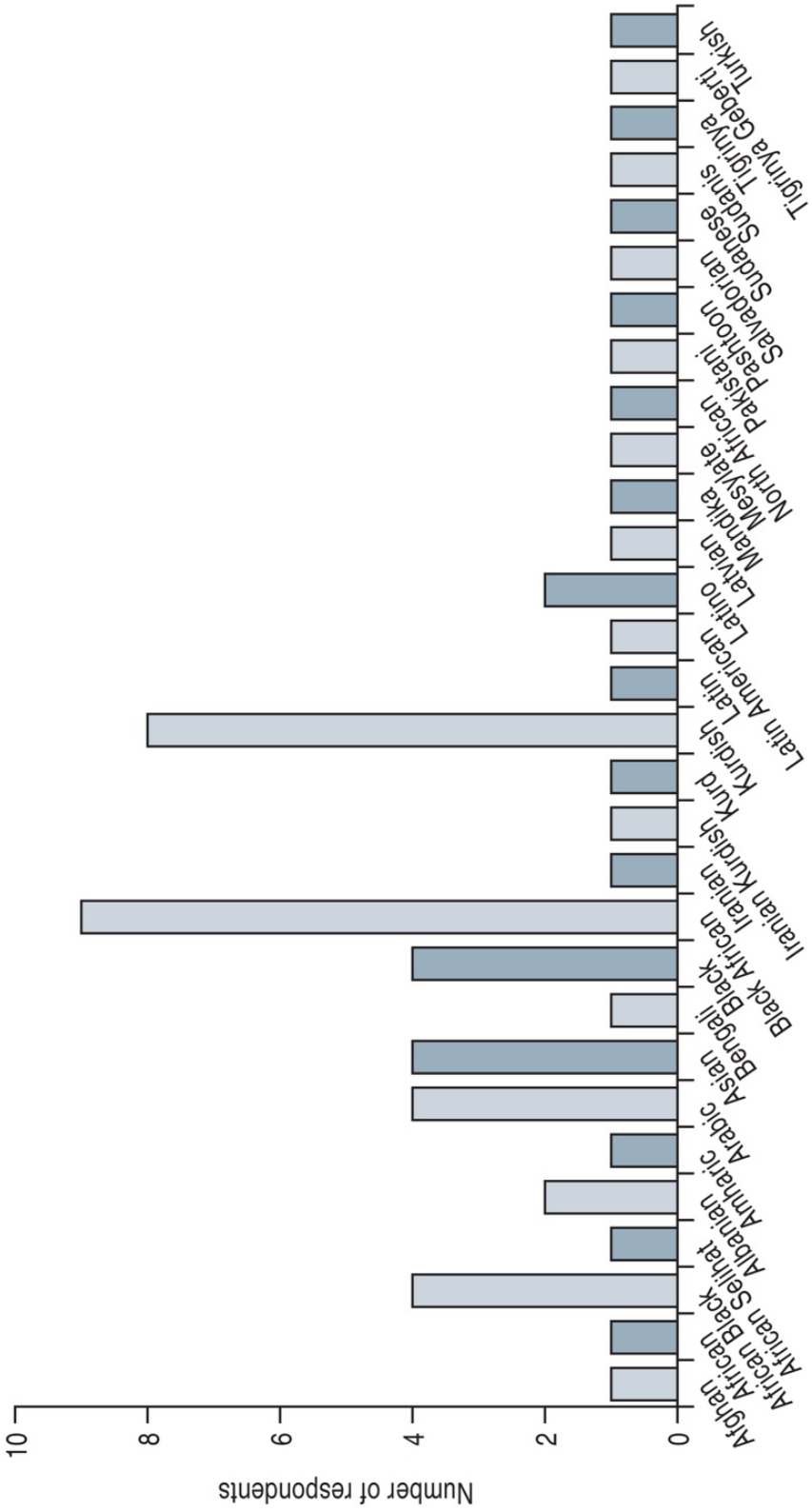


Figure 10: Participants' Self-Identified Ethnicity

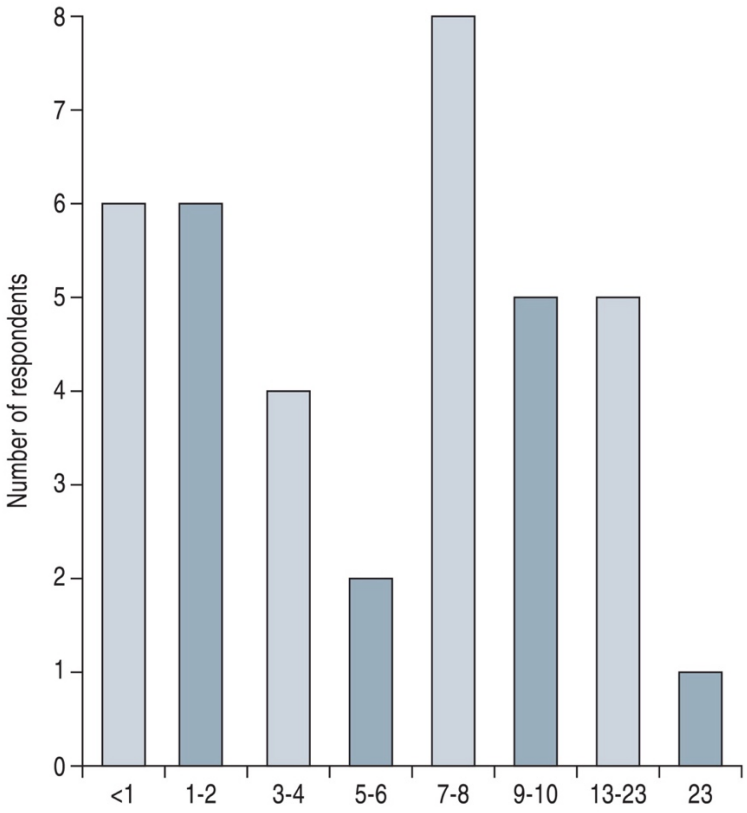


Figure 10: Participants' Length of Residency

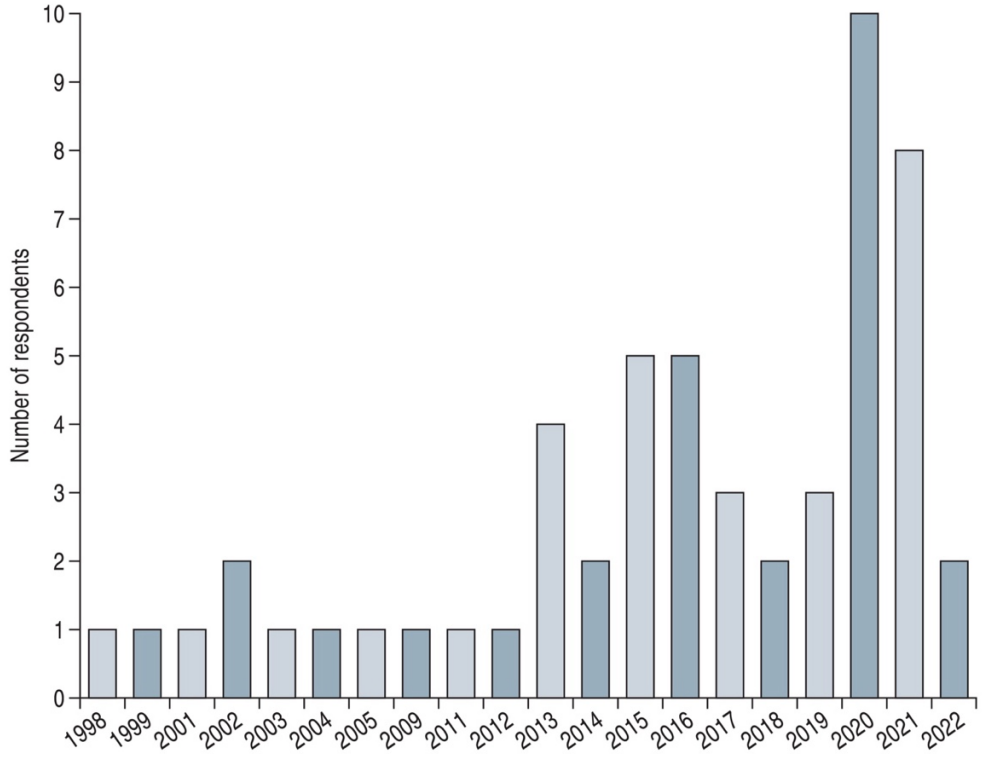


Figure 11 Participants' Year of Arrival in the UK

APPENDIX 3: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Demographic Information

a. How old are you?

b. What is your country of origin?

c. What is your ethnicity?

d. What is your religion?

e. What is your language?

f. What is your gender?

g. Is there anything else you think we should know about you?

h. What year did you arrive in the UK?

i. What year did you get your Leave to Remain?

j. What kind of Leave to Remain do you have?

k. How many people live in your household?

2. Arriving in Stockton

a. What is your postcode now?

b. For those who have left, what was your postcode (if they can remember)? OR what area of town did you live in?

c. When did you arrive in Stockton?

d. How long have you/did you live in Stockton?

e. Have you lived in other cities in the UK?

IF YES, which ones? For how long?

f. How did you come to live in Stockton? (asking about dispersal or moved here after gaining status)

3. Deciding to stay/leave Stockton

a. After you received your Leave to Remain, did you decide to stay in/leave Stockton?

b. Probing question: what did you think about when you made the decision?

c. Follow-up question: what was the most important thing in your decision to stay in/leave Stockton?

4. Feeling welcome, belonging and community

a. When you first arrived, did you feel welcome in Stockton? Can you give an example?

b. On a scale of 1 to 10, how welcome did you feel?

c .Do you still feel the same way?

d. On a scale of 1 to 10, how welcome do you feel now?

e. IF NOT, what has changed for you?

f. When you first arrived, did you want to stay in Stockton?

g. Do you feel you belong in Stockton now? Can you give an example?

h. On a scale of 1 to 10, how much do you feel you belong?

i. Do you feel /felt part of the community here?

5. Defining integration

a. When we talk about integration, what do you think of? What comes to your mind?

b. Probing Questions: What does an integrated person do?

c. What is the difference between someone who is and someone who isn't integrated?

d. What does an integrated community look like or feel like?

e. Thinking about Stockton as a city and the people you know here, do you think refugees are integrated (connected) into life here?

f. On a scale of 1 to 10, how much do you feel you are integrated (connected) in Stockton/where you live now? OR, if asked, On a scale of 1 to 10, how integrated DID you feel in Stockton?

g. Why did you choose this number?

h. What would change your feelings?

i. What barriers do you face to feeling more integrated?

j. On a scale of 1 to 10, how much would other people say you are integrated?

k. Why did you choose this number?

l. What do you think would help people feel more integrated in Stockton?

6. Meeting Places

a. Thinking about where you live, are there places where you can meet up with people?

b. What kinds of places do you feel comfortable meeting people?

c. Do you go to Stockton town centre to spend time or meet people?

d. What do you like about Stockton town center?

(If needed, ask for examples.)

e. for people living outside of Stockton center: is there a place where you go to meet people?

f. What do you not like about Stockton town centre?

g. probing question: do you prefer other places to meet people?

7. Safety and Security

a. On a scale of 1 to 10, how satisfied are you with the safety and security in Stockton?

b. Why did you choose this number?

c. For it to be 10, what changes would you like to see?

d. If you felt threatened, would you feel comfortable reporting this to the police?

e. What would prevent you from speaking to the police?

8. Services

a. On a scale of 1 to 10, how satisfied are you with the healthcare provided in Stockton?

b.Why did you choose this number?

c. For it to be 10, what changes would have to be made?

D. Do you face any barriers accessing healthcare? What were they?

e. On a scale of 1 to 10, how satisfied are you with the educational system in Stockton?

f. Why did you choose this number?

g. For it to be 10, what would have to change?

h. Have you faced any barriers accessing education? What were they?

i. On a scale of 1 to 10, do you think that Stockton has enough job opportunities for you?

j. For it to be 10, what would have to change?

k. Have you faced any barriers accessing job opportunities?

l. Do you think life in Stockton is affordable in regards to:

rent? transport? other costs?

9. Parenting and childcare (if applicable)

a. Do you have children?

IF YES, how old are they? (just to know whether to ask about family support)

IF YES, ask the following: if no just stop here.

b. What do you think about childcare in Stockton?

c. Does the schools in Stockton meet your parental expectations (safe, affordable, flexible)

d. Are there child services that focus on supporting parents in Stockton and have you benefited from these services?

e. Have you faced any barriers in accessing childcare? What were they?

f. FOR PARENTS: Overall, as a parent will you consider raising your child in Stockton and why?

10. Closing Questions

a. Do you plan to stay in Stockton/where you live?

b. What would make you change your mind to stay or leave?

c. Is there anything else you'd like to share with us?

d. What questions do you think we should ask?

APPENDIX 4: COMMUNITY FEEDBACK SESSIONS FULL REPORT

By Kawa Wali and Lauren Martin

INTRODUCTION

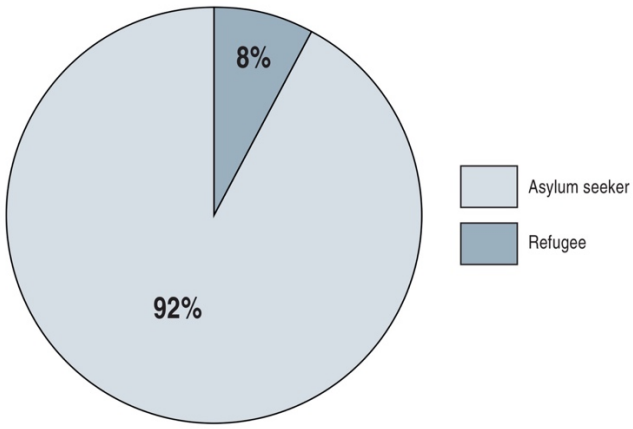
The focus groups were designed as “Community Feedback Sessions” on our initial research project and, like that project, focused on what helps people feel at home, gaps and barriers to integration, and aspirations. We shared key findings from 75 in-depth semi-structured interviews and asked for participants to reflect on those findings in relation to their experience as recently arrived Stockton residents. Our interviews included refugees with Leave to Remain while feedback focus groups included 22 asylum-seekers and 2 refugees.

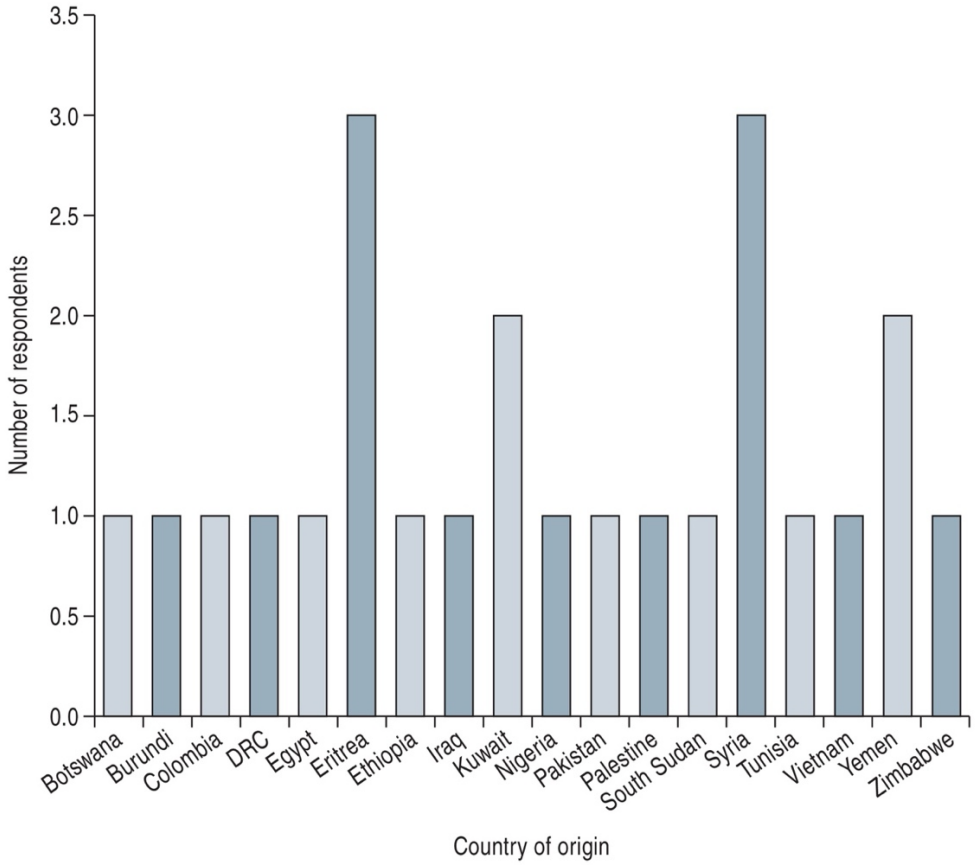
Purpose: To add asylum-seeker input to findings from 2023-4 individual interviews and to summarise participant experiences of (feeling at home) in Stockton and to produce practical, participant- led recommendations for Refugee Futures, and partners.

Scope: 5 Community Feedback sessions organized as Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) conducted at Catalyst House in 2025 with 24 attendees (22 asylum seekers, 2 refugees). Questions, themes and topics were designed by Kawa Wali (Refugee Futures) and Lauren Martin (Durham University Geography Department). Kawa Wali of Refugee Futures led all sessions.

PARTICIPANT PROFILE

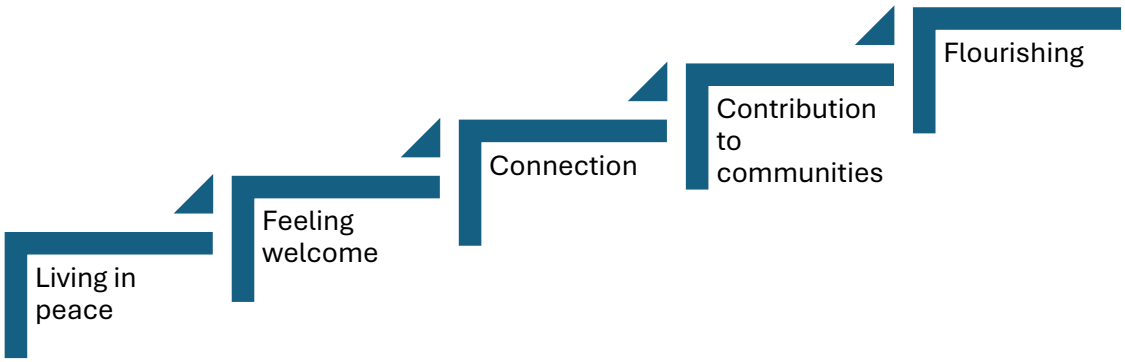
Ages ranged from 25 to 50.





KEY FINDINGS

Belonging: Participants described a stepwise pathways to feeling at home.



Local organisations play a crucial role but can feel fragmented. Churches and charities offer essential social connections and activities that support RAS comunity; however, FGD participants felt that their services seemed disjointed and poorly advertised. Participants recommended establishing a visible central hub for information and referrals.

Additionally, participants suggested that Refugee Futures can organise **peer mentoring workshops** or meetings featuring refugees who have successfully settled in Stockton for 10 to 20 years. This would provide reassurance and prove successful integration to new arrivals.

Specific barriers undermine the welcome. Participants shared experiences of discrimination on buses or in shops, limited specialist mental-health access, bureaucratic hurdles (example college entry after six months), distant foodbank locations, and a lack of evening services, all prevent integration and increase isolation.

Legal status influences civic engagement. When individuals face legal insecurity, they are less likely to invest in local civic life or take on leadership roles for change.

Mental health is fundamental. Participants consistently linked their mental health to their capacity to learn, work, and engage. Therefore, providing low-barrier, culturally competent mental health services is a top priority.

Effective communication and transfer of information are crucial in the early stages. The transition from accommodation providers (such as hotels) to local services represents a critical moment. Poor communication and inadequate publicity can lead to early isolation and missed opportunities for integration.

In sum, welcome activities are important but not enough on their own. While an interpersonal welcome fosters connection, structural barriers, such as issues related to health, employment, transportation, and access to information prevent many participants from progressing, contributing, and thriving.

Participant Recommendations:

- Providing low-barrier, culturally competent mental health services is a top priority.
- Improve communication and information-sharing when asylum-seekers change accommodation. Ensure timely and practical communication between accommodation providers and arriving asylum-seekers.
- Wherever possible, services and programs should be designed to include individuals regardless of their status and to offer short-term certainty (for example, guaranteed access to training while their status is pending).
- Support for long-term planning through qualification transfers and peer mentoring with settled refugees.

- Participant proposals are both practical and implementable. Many suggested actions, such as peer workshops, community hubs, evening courses, and the relocation of food banks, are feasible within existing local partnerships and could be piloted quickly.

2. Methods and Ethics

Approach: Kawa Wali facilitated the 5 sessions, three in English and two in Arabic language. All sessions followed by guide prepared by Dr Lauren martin and Refugee Futures, focussed the following broad areas to enable organic conversation:

Ethical procedures followed the same protocols as the research project.

Limitations: The recruitment process may introduce some bias in the sample towards experiences of people already involved in volunteering, drop-ins and community activities; experiences of people "known" to service organisations and therefore perhaps *not* those facing the largest barriers to feeling at home; potential unwillingness to criticize Refugee Futures specifically, given existing relationships and holding sessions in Refugee Futures offices, and participants who feel comfortable speaking with others in English or Arabic. In addition, most participants were in early stages of settlement, less than 2 years ,3 recent less than a month in Teeside area and all moved from hotels/shared accommodation. They have ongoing legal uncertainty. This might contribute to a sense of precarity and impact willingness to criticise council services.

COMMUNITY FEEDBACK DISCUSSION GUIDE

Feeling at Home in Stockton

- What do you need to feel at home in Stockton?
- What helps you to feel at home in Stockton?
- Are there steps or a process to feeling at home in Stockton? *Can you tell us about those?*
- If you don't feel at home in Stockton, do you feel at home somewhere else?
- What are the things that are important to feeling at home?

Gaps and Barriers to Feeling Integrated in Stockton

- Focusing on the words you say are most meaningful/important to you:
- Are there any gaps or barriers to this in Stockton? Do you feel something is missing? If so, what is it?
- Are there specific things you feel are missing or challenges you face that prevent you from connecting with the community and thriving in your daily life?

Power to change/contribute

- Do you feel you have the power to change that?

OR

- Do you feel you have the power to change things in Stockton? To improve the things we've been discussing?

OR

- Let's say you want to organise something—an event, a group of people, a celebration, or something you want to change, like with the Council. Do you feel you could do this? What would you need in order to organise something like this? What barriers do you think you would face?
- Imagine there's a specific issue you feel strongly about – perhaps improving a local market, or creating more opportunities for cultural exchange. Do you feel empowered to take action on this, and if not, what would empower you?

"**Magic Wand": Aspirations for the future**

- If you could wave a magic wand and instantly change one thing about Stockton to improve the experience for people like you, what would it be and why?
- What are your hopes and dreams for your future here in Stockton?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report would not be possible without the 102 people who shared their time and experiences with our research team in interviews and focus groups. Thank you!

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Any mistakes belong to the authors.

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