

Refugee
Futures

IMPACT REPORT 2024/2025



A WARM WELCOME

by Heather Petch, Executive Director

This report shares numbers and stories about the positive changes and developments for the **345 refugees and people seeking asylum** who've had direct involvement with us in the last year.

We are sharing the report at the end of our first three year strategic plan and at the same time as agreeing a new plan for 2026/9. We're in touching distance of being able to really start capturing the depth of our work with people and the **profound impact** it can have on people's lives.

Throughout this report we describe the activities and support we've delivered and the numbers indicate the scale. The stories are collated using the '**Most Significant Change**' technique which draws on the perspective of those involved in the change, in some cases including some of our partners who have benefitted from the contribution refugees make when volunteering with them.

The Most Significant Change evaluation approach, together with closer reading of our existing data on the different aspects of our work that people engage with, have helped us to **understand people's journeys** with us. See page 7 and 9 to see an example of Shirley's *journey with us so far in 2024/25*.

UK Government policy and too much print and social media content continues to create a hostile environment for our communities. The racist violence on our streets in summer 2024 was a shocking wake-up call that we need to be more prepared in **supporting community safety and building interaction and understanding between different communities**.

As a relatively new charity, much of our funding has been short-term, but we are moving to a position of being able to access larger, multi-year funding. Support from Stockton Borough Council has been an important first step in

delivering on **shared goals with public sector partners**.

Our profile has increased during the year, receiving a nomination from Butterwick Hospice and then winning the Tees Valley Diversity Awards 'Best Community Organisation' category. We have also been **increasing our profile** via regular social media posts about our activities and stories of people's successes and positive experiences.

Let me end with a **heartfelt thank you** to everyone who works together with us to help refugees and people seeking asylum to flourish in Stockton.



To find out more about what we do please check out our video **'Every connection begins with a welcome'**



OUR VISION

Our vision is that Stockton and the surrounding area is welcoming and inclusive to refugees and people seeking asylum so that they belong and are able to maximise their skills and abilities and flourish within the community



OUR MISSION

To promote inclusion and participation of refugees and people seeking asylum throughout the community by ensuring opportunities are accessible and that individuals, groups and organisations work together to maximise resources, address gaps in provision and stimulate positive change

OUR YEAR IN NUMBERS 2024/25

We held Welcome Sessions with **251 people**

67 people attended an Orientation Walk

154 people attended Living in the UK Workshops delivered in **five languages**

Over **100 people** attended each of two pilot Service Fairs, in which **19 organisations** participated

105 people (420 attendances) took part in **74 Action Asylum volunteering events** with **18 Action Asylum partners**

31 people took place in **39 Skillsmatch placements** with **18 Skillsmatch partners**

WHY WE DO OUR WORK

Refugee Futures recognises the skills, strengths, creativity, and new perspectives within refugee and asylum-seeking communities that contribute to Stockton becoming a place where everyone can flourish. However, we also recognise the many challenges that undermine people's agency in building a future in our borough.

At any one time, between 700 to 900 people seeking asylum are placed by the UK Home Office in Stockton, often in three of the most deprived neighbourhoods (Central Stockton, North Thornaby and Newtown).

Many of the barriers people face are due to the UK asylum system itself, which bans the majority of people from working and requires people to live on limited Home Office financial support (set at about 60% of UK benefit rates). It can take one to two years to receive a

decision on an asylum claim, and this period of uncertainty can have a profound impact on people's mental health.

Further barriers include hostility and racism, a lack of social networks and limited English and knowledge of UK systems and culture. This all contributes to people experiencing fear, isolation, and an erosion of confidence, particularly after traumatic experiences in their home country and/or on their journey to safety.

This is exacerbated by challenges in navigating and accessing support services, and by social and economic pressures in the areas where asylum accommodation is located. Opportunities to connect with local communities are limited, and once people receive their leave to remain, there are further barriers to securing employment that matches their

qualifications and aspirations.

Despite the scale of the challenges that people face, we believe that by building strong partnerships across Stockton and creating opportunities for people to use their agency and skills, we can support people to build their futures here.

We work with a wide range of partners to support people on their journey from arriving to flourishing in Stockton. We do this through three areas of activity: the Welcome Project, providing people with a warm welcome, signposting support and orientation to the Borough and its services; Action Asylum volunteering activities facilitating connections with local people and contributing to improved well-being; and Skillsmatch providing three to six-month volunteer work placements with holistic employability support, creating opportunities for people to use their talents and build a sense of belonging.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE YEAR

As a relatively new charity, we have been working hard to support **a greater number of people on their journey**. This year 251 people attended Welcome sessions, we supported 39 Skillsmatch placements, and 105 people were involved in volunteering activities (up from 166, 27 and 79 participants respectively).

This year has also seen **significant developments in our work**.

Recommendations from our **peer-led research collaboration** with Durham University have shaped the direction of our activities, particularly the establishment of the Stockton Service Fair, delivered in partnership with Stockton Borough Council.

In the second half of the year, we embarked on **developing our networks with for-profit businesses**

with a view to creating new placements with the business sector, tapping into their expertise to deliver employability, and in turn helping businesses to understand and benefit from the pool of talent within refugee communities.

Collaboration is a vital element in supporting people's journeys with us, be it the organisations we refer people to for specialist advice and guidance, or the 36 partner organisations who support Action Asylum volunteering and Skillsmatch placements. Our profile has increased during the year, and we were very moved to have been nominated by Butterwick Hospice, one of our Action Asylum partners, in the Tees Valley Diversity Awards 'Best Community Organisation' category and we won!

Individuals with lived experience are

engaged in leading all our activities as volunteers, sessional workers, core staff, peer researchers or trustees. This year we have focused on developing our Advisory Group, who have played a key role in influencing the direction of our Welcome programme and feeding into our upcoming strategic review.

We recognise **we are still on a journey to embed lived experience of the asylum and immigration system in our decision-making about our work**. The peer-led research approach led by Dr Lauren Martin in our collaboration with Durham University has strengthened our ability to centre lived experience in how we shape our activities, leading us to reach for outcomes that move beyond people being beneficiaries of charity to being active citizens of Stockton, and the world!



JOURNEY WITH REFUGEE FUTURES

We support people on their journey from arriving to flourishing in Stockton. By offering the following opportunities:



Welcome session



Orientation walk



Living in the UK
Workshops



Action Asylum
volunteering
opportunities



Employability
workshops



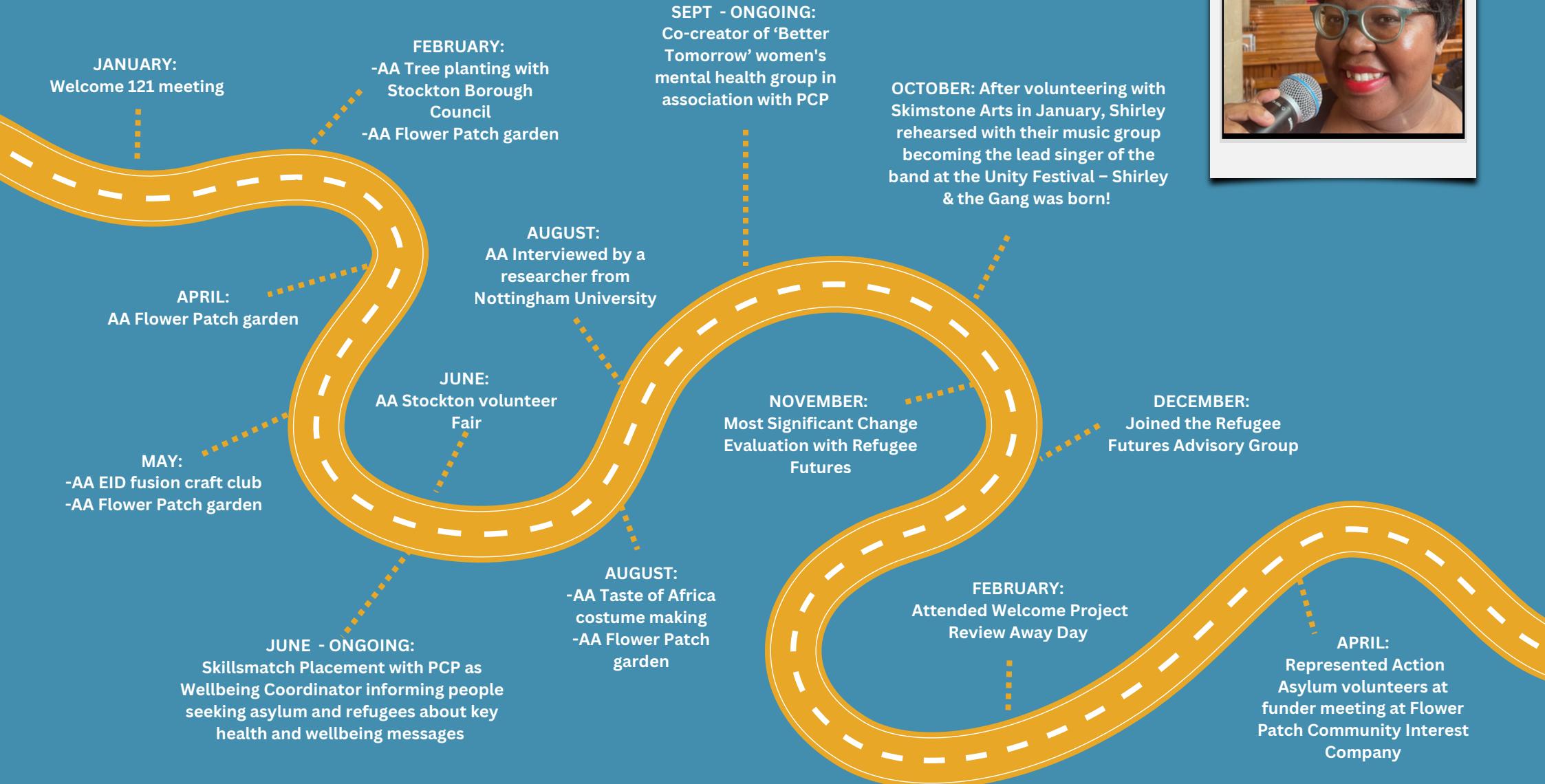
Skillsmatch
placement/s

Signposting / referrals

Service Fair

On page 8 you can see Shirley's journey with us in 2024/2025 which shows how we supported her from arriving to flourishing in Stockton!

SHIRLEY'S JOURNEY 2024/2025



Key:

AA = Action Asylum

PCP = Pioneering Care Partnership



REFUGEE FUTURES: THIS IS THE TIME

One of the greatest joys of the past year has been the development of the Refugee Futures Advisory Group, who have brought incredible energy and commitment to shaping our work. Shirley Masole, one of our Advisory Group members who has been on a journey with us over a number of years, has written this poem as a reflection on the impact of our work.

The name itself could not be far from the truth
It doesn't dwell on the past
But the future
If you are stuck in your yesterday
You will miss out on the benefits of this ride

If ever there was a time of pride
It is now
Be proud of yourself
Slowly things are changing
And what a joy to be part of this

Thank you for the growth,
For the push, the referral, the development
Thank you for providing a platform of learning
Thank you for the healing, the family you created for me
For the discovery and the nurturing

Words can't express the gratitude in my heart
Thank you for helping me find my voice
My purpose and dreams
You made me fall in love with the ME I never knew

It's not all honey and sweet
But my future sure is
THIS IS THE TIME

1 WELCOME

Through our **Welcome Project**, we meet people as they arrive in Stockton and support them to understand Stockton and to access services and opportunities.

Throughout this year, we have delivered **Welcome Sessions** from three partner drop-in locations (Thornaby Family Hub, St Peter's Church and the Stockton Refugees and Asylum Project (RASPs)). In these 1:1 sessions we discuss initial needs, skills and interests, and support referrals to specialist organisations including Open Door North East, British Red Cross, and Justice First.

We have continued our programme of Living in the UK Workshops, designed and developed by members of the Regional Refugee Forum and the North East Migration Partnership. The workshops explore health, laws and parenting, and have been delivered in multiple languages by Sessional Trainers with lived experience,

including Arabic, Farsi, Albanian, English and French, to encourage peer-to-peer learning and support.

In September 2024, we recruited two additional Sessional Trainers who speak Dari and Pashto to fulfil our ambition of creating a specific offer for Afghan refugees.

Since July 2024, we have run twice-monthly Orientation Walks, in which people join us for a briefing session before a guided walk that highlights different services and amenities in Stockton. The walks are led by colleagues who have lived experience of seeking sanctuary.

Our Welcome Map is used to guide the walk and is also used by organisations across the borough to share locations and timings of key services, and in March 2025 was entered into the Preston Park Museum Contemporary Collection.





"You know, when I came here you were the first people I met. I just got told that I was welcome, that I belonged, I got to know a lot of things around Stockton, where everything is, where the GP is. When you get here you just move into the accommodation and then you are left on your own, but I got to know where everything is. Just to be welcomed to the area for me was the most important part. I was confused, I didn't know where to go. So to have someone showing where everything is, where to go, it really calmed my nerves down, to say: I am home, I'm not lost."

Feedback from participant of one of our welcome sessions

"I have been in Stockton for one week. I was previously accommodated in Glasgow and Sheffield and have never received anything like this walk before. This has helped me to love Stockton!"

Anonymous feedback from orientation walk participant, Nov 2024

"I feel I know where to ask for help, like Stockton Borough Council, how to create an account and from there submit our concerns about school"

Feedback from participant in June-July 2024 living in UK workshop on the most useful things they learnt





SERVICE FAIRS

As part of our **commitment to developing a borough-wide approach to welcome**, since August 2024, we have worked with Stockton Borough Council, Durham University, Catalyst, and key VCS and statutory stakeholders to hold two **Service Fairs** for people seeking asylum and refugees.

88% of evaluation respondents said that the two Service Fairs had answered their questions or met their needs

The Service Fairs bring many services under one roof, with community interpreters and connectors on hand to help navigate attendees to the information they need. The concept of the Service Fairs came as a recommendation

from our peer-led research with Durham University, in which participants identified the challenge of navigating the range of services and organisations in Stockton.

Over **100 people** attended each Service Fair, and **19 service providers** participated. The success of the Fairs has inspired the piloting of the Middlesbrough Service Fair in June 2025, and we will continue delivering Service Fairs as part of our Welcome Project.

The event was fantastic and really showcased the support available in the area - a real example of collaborative working!!

Gavin Rodgers, Jubilee Centre

WELCOME PROJECT REVIEW

This year we have worked in partnership with **Durham University** to review the Welcome Project. We conducted peer interviews with participants, and consulted with partner organisations and our **Advisory Group** to understand the **impact** of the Welcome Project.

Key recommendations from the review have included:

- ✿ **Running Welcome Session activities from a greater range of locations**
- ✿ **Continuing with the joint delivery of Service Fairs**
- ✿ **Working more closely with community-led groups and exploring the role of Community Connectors**
- ✿ **Co-delivery of the Welcome Project by a woman**
- ✿ **Building opportunities for sport and physical activities into welcome provision**



ADDITIONAL PROJECTS

This year we have also developed a number of additional Welcome projects that aim to create opportunities for local organisations to access resources that help people to stay connected.

These projects include the **'Communi-Tees' Bike Project** with

Sustrans, Stockton Borough Council and Men's Shed through which **at least 30 bikes** have been distributed, and through which local Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisations can refer community members to the Active Travel Hub for refurbished, reclaimed bikes sourced from Cleveland Police.

In August, we registered with the National Digital Inclusion Network and National Databank via Virgin Bank, creating a referral pathway for people seeking asylum in Stockton to access free **SIM cards**. Since May, at least 70 SIM cards have been distributed.

We also completed the **Roots for Radio** project, a partnership with Mears and Men's Shed, to build planters, raised beds and a shed at Radio House initial accommodation, creating opportunities for women living in the accommodation to take part in wellbeing gardening activities on-site.

2 BUILDING SKILLS AND CONFIDENCE

ACTION ASYLUM

Our **Action Asylum** project has continued to grow, connecting people seeking asylum and refugees to volunteering opportunities alongside local volunteers. We are one of seven Action Asylum locations working across the UK, and the project promotes connection and skills exchange across cultural divides while improving mental and physical wellbeing.

Over the past year, we have supported **105 people to volunteer** with local organisations, including costume making for the Taste of Africa Carnival, stewarding at the Festival of Thrift and Stockton International Riverside Festival, gardening at the Flower Patch CIC, tree planting sessions with the Norton Sports Charity, and renovating the Children's Garden of Reflection at Butterwick Hospice.

This year we have provided 74 different activities/opportunities for people to volunteer, and next year we aim to offer two Action Asylum activities every week.



"We're thrilled to share that Refugee Futures in Stockton has been dedicating their time and effort over the past few months to create a beautiful Garden of Reflection for our Children's Unit. Teams of volunteers have been working tirelessly, regularly visiting to help with tasks like painting and gardening, adding life and tranquility to this special space"

Richard Beal, Butterwick Hospice



"The change that has been given to me, the impact on my life, is self-confidence. Before, I used to be very isolated, maybe because of my past story. When people were speaking I was just dead, I'd be quiet. But going out and volunteering, it exposed me to so many things."

Esther, who has volunteered with Action Asylum



Check out this video about the wonderful work we do with 'Middlesbrough Environment City'

SKILLSMATCH

Through our **Skillsmatch Project**, we have supported people to access longer-term volunteer placements linked to their experience and career aspirations. This year we have focused on expanding volunteer placement opportunities into new sectors, with new placements in the housing sector (North Star), the NHS (Prospect Programme South Tees), education (Outwood Academy Bydales), and local government (Public Health Department, Stockton Borough Council).

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“[The most significant change for me was] “Getting my job. Your confidence in me, seeing something in me and thinking I could do it. After placement, coming here and hearing you saying we believe in you; I didn’t know I could do it. Before I didn’t have confidence. I felt like I didn’t belong here. But now I know I belong, and I have something alive in me I didn’t know was there”

James Kamara, who is now working at Positive Support for You after completing his Skillsmatch placement. James is also a member of our Advisory Group.

“We’re now actually recruiting people from ethnic minorities in our company. It wasn’t that we didn’t want to, it was that we couldn’t attract and reach people. Doing this work with Refugee Futures has meant we’ve been able to attract people. [...] They’re great people and just make you smile! James is a bundle of happiness – the three people he supports think he is great”

Catriona Macdonald, Director of Operations, Positive Support for You, Skillsmatch Placement Provider

Since May 2024, **18 organisations** have engaged with us as Skillsmatch placement providers, and **31 people** have participated in **36 placements**. **12 people** who have participated in Skillsmatch placements are now in employment: seven people have gone on to work for their Skillsmatch placement host organisation, while five people have gone on to work in their desired sector. We also launched ‘Lunch and Learn’ trainings for host organisations



Shevin Alkurdi above taking part in a Skillsmatch placement with North Star Housing, with Coral Smith, Community Connector



Nkechi and Nura receiving their certificates for completing the South Tees NHS Prospects Programme. Both Nkechi and Nura are now working in the NHS



Above: Phil, Business Development Lead, Comfort and Amy who are volunteers attended the Innovation Tees Valley event sharing the work we do with attendees.

Below: Attendees at an employability workshop



“I want to thank you for the excellent idea of holding a workshop on employment for Ukrainians. It's exactly what we need, and you communicate so clearly to the British people the nuances we face. I'm glad they are trying to understand our challenges and are ready to help us solve them. You truly inspire us.”

Feedback shared with Diana, our Sessional Worker, from a participant in the pilot employability workshops

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

As Skillsmatch has developed, candidates have told us that they are keen to access more **opportunities in businesses**. In response, we have established a Business Development Lead role to drive this work forward and work in partnership with business to create new opportunities and connections. Phil Bramhall, who had previously held the Welcome Project Lead role, took on this new position in Spring 2025, bringing a wealth of experience in

working with small and medium-sized enterprises.

We have initially focused on building strong connections and networks, including exhibiting at Innovation Tees Valley, where we were nominated for the Social Innovation Award. We also secured our first for-profit Skillsmatch Placement, with a data-focused role at Sewell Advisory, and look forward to working with for-profit partners to create new opportunities.

EMPLOYABILITY WORKSHOPS

This year we have piloted **bespoke employability workshops**, consulting with communities about the employment challenges they are facing and delivering tailored workshops with language support.

We co-developed our pilot workshops with the Ukrainian refugee community, working in partnership with CAF Rail and Diana Tsarenko, our Ukrainian sessional worker. Participants told us that they are facing under-employment in roles that do not match their skills or ambitions. We therefore ran a series of three workshops

that supported participants to understand local skills shortages and maximise their skills and qualifications, and supported participants with job and Statement of Comparability applications.

This approach has had significant impact: of **21 workshop participants**, **seven are now working** in a variety of roles, including as an IT specialist and an English teacher. We aim to deliver three further rounds of bespoke employability workshops in the coming year.

3 PROMOTING BELONGING AND POSITIVE NARRATIVES

RESEARCH

Since 2023, Refugee Futures has been collaborating with **Durham University's Department of Geography** to build research capacity in our organisation through a trained team of **peer researchers** who have direct experience of the asylum system. Between September 2023 and January 2024, the team researched the reasons refugees choose to remain in (or leave) Stockton, interviewing 78 refugees who were currently or had previously lived in Stockton, producing the largest and most diverse dataset on Stockton's refugee residents.

In May 2024, we received funding from Durham University's ESRC Impact Acceleration Award for the '**Making Stockton a Home**' project, to build on the research findings and embed evidence-based changes in Stockton's refugee sector. This included working with Stockton Borough Council and other key stakeholders to shape services locally, particularly **Service Fairs** which have

become a key part of our **Welcome Project**.

The research also told us that people are looking for different types of spaces to explore challenging ideas and conversations. We therefore supported the creation of a weekly **Dance Exchange** for women to explore ideas of home and belonging, led by Jane Bizimana, an artist and researcher. In the sessions, people share dances, music and storytelling from their home places, creating a place for newly arrived women to meet others. Around **30 women** have participated since the sessions began in January 2025.

In November 2024, we also received Research England Participatory Research Funding for our '**Beyond Beneficiaries**' project to develop our commitment to deepen and embed lived-experience leadership and decision-making in Refugee Futures. This has focused on the development of our **Advisory Group**, and the **Welcome Review**.



From Nurture to Knowledge We Shape, Guide, Connect.



CAPTURING THE IMPACT OF INTERACTIONS

This year, as part of the Ariadne partnership, we have used the **'Most Significant Change' storytelling tool** to understand how our activities have impacted on people's lives, including team members from Skillsmatch host organisations. Next year, we will continue using this approach to build our understanding of the impact of interactions between our participants and local residents and organisations in Stockton.

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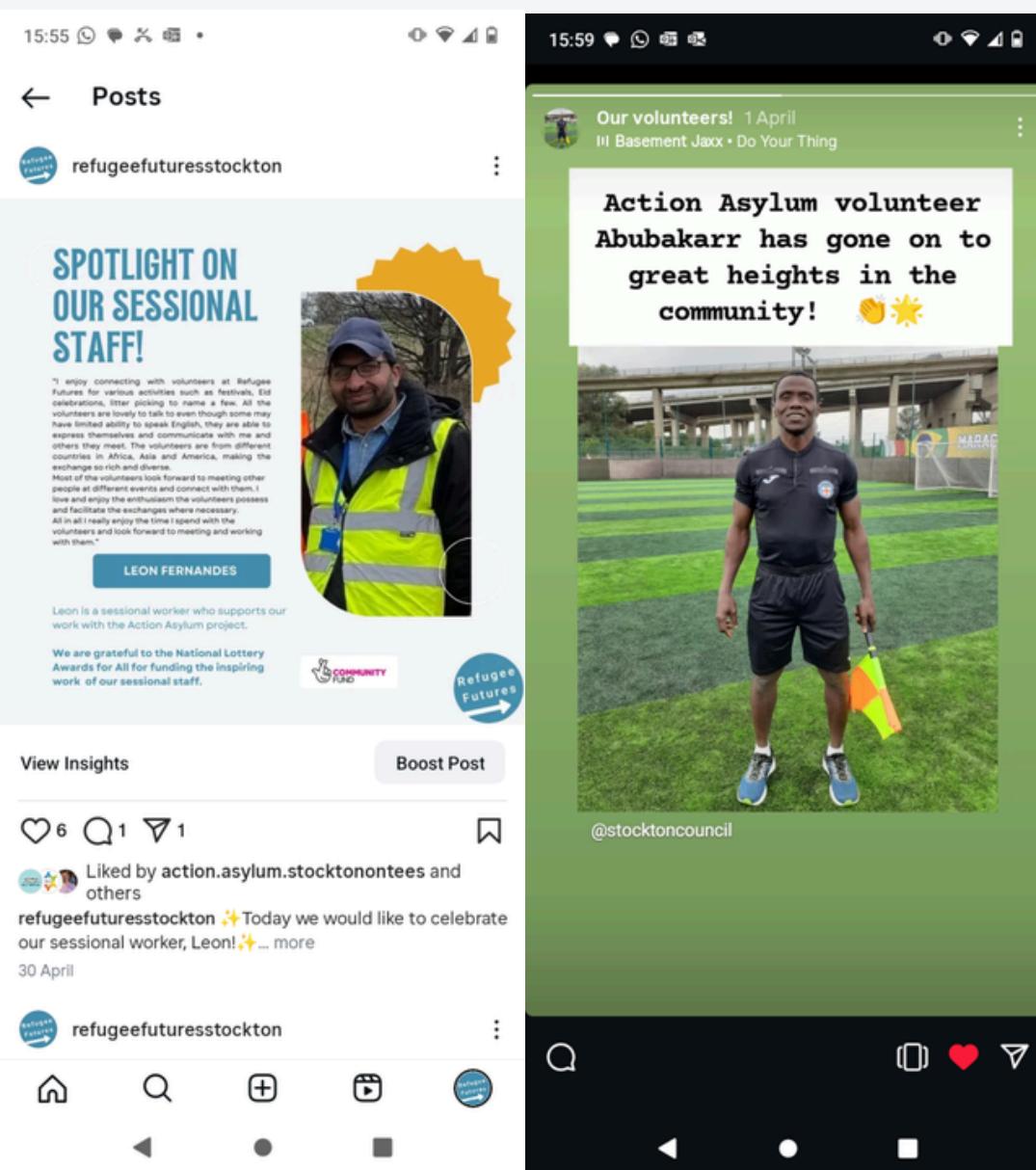
"There was a huge positive change from the moment Shevin came to the organisation and people realised what she brought - not just the knowledge and expertise - they immediately learned the value of working with someone from a different background. Shevin looked at work we had sat with for years and questioned why we hadn't thought about things from a different perspective. She offered new thoughts and ideas."

Extract from Most Significant Change interview with Peter Locke, Head of Engagement and Insight, North Star Housing.

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POSITIVE PUBLIC NARRATIVES

We have continued to use our **social media accounts** (Refugee Futures on Facebook, @refugeefuturesstockton and @action.asylum.stocktonontees on Instagram) to share the contributions and skills of participants and volunteers in Stockton, countering some of the negative public narratives that exist around people seeking safety in the UK.



4 RUNNING A SUSTAINABLE ORGANISATION

LIVED EXPERIENCE LEADERSHIP IN REFUGEE FUTURES

We have been developing pathways for different types of engagement in the organisation for people with lived experience, including as organisational volunteers, sessional workers and paid staff. We have been delighted that Kawa Wali has taken on the Welcome and Research Lead role, and Nasima and Malik Quraishi have joined our strong team of sessional workers.

This year, we have also focused on developing the **Refugee Futures Advisory Group** to ensure that lived experience leadership is embedded and deepened in the organisation. This work has been supported by participatory research funding from Durham University.

The Group has met regularly since December 2024, and continues to

grow: our founding members are Malik Quraishi, Haja Kargbo, Shirley Masole, James Karama, Nasima Hassan Zada, Comfort Nsocka, Jane Bizimana, and Fattouma Ouannassi.

The group have focused on building their strength as a team, including holding a workshop to use creative methods to explore what being in an Advisory Group means to them. They also led on planning a celebration event of Refugee Future's volunteers (held May 2025), and contributed extensively to the Welcome Review, shaping many of the key recommendations for the Welcome Project. They are now preparing to feed into our 2026-29 Strategic Review.

GOVERNANCE AND PREPARING FOR 2026-2029 STRATEGIC REVIEW

We have recruited **three new board members** and embarked on development work for the whole Board. A Board working group was established to plan the **2026 – 2029 Strategic Review**, including work on what change we seek to make and how we will demonstrate we are being effective. We are grateful to Lloyds Bank Foundation for supporting this work.



SUPPORT, DEVELOPMENT & TRAINING

We have **grown the staff team** and recruited and **trained more organisational volunteers and sessional workers**. There are now **six organisational volunteers** and **ten sessional workers** who speak Arabic, French, Ukrainian, Spanish, Farsi, Albanian, Dari and Pashto, among other languages.

What staff and volunteers do is challenging. We endeavour to look after each other's well-being and we are mindful of the balance between being hard working, flexible and ambitious on the one hand but not fuelling overwork and dilution of the quality of what we do on the other.

COLLABORATIONS AND NETWORKING

We have recognised the **need to map our networks and define the purpose and remit of our partnerships and collaborations**. We recognise the **need to collaborate more closely and build trust** with and between organisations providing expert advice and services.



Left to right: Malik Quraishi sessional worker and advisory group member, Ben Chisanga Trustee, Heather Petch Executive Director and Abubakarr Conteh Action Asylum volunteer receiving an award on behalf of Refugee Futures at the Tees Valley Diversity Awards for the '**Best Community Organisation**' category (sponsored by Thirteen Group & nominated by Butterwick Hospice).

THANK YOU TO OUR SUPPORTERS IN 2024/2025

We would like to thank our founding chair, Peter Chapman, who stood down as chair in June 2024 and retired from the Board in December 2024. We are grateful to Ruth Hicks for stepping into the role of chair; Ruth was vice chair and is also one of the founding trustees of Refugee Futures.

Thank you to all the trustees for their commitment, ideas, guidance and support, especially Susan Mansaray and Catriona MacDonald who served as trustees in our formative years. We were delighted to welcome new trustees Clair Jones, Ben Chisanga, Jon Carling and Simon Pleydell,

who were appointed during 2024.

Thank you to staff, volunteers and partner organisations for your commitment, creativity and collaboration - and all the people seeking sanctuary who engage with us and contribute their skills and energy in Stockton. This last year we've benefitted from 2 days a week volunteer time from Dr Lauren Martin who leads on our collaboration with Durham University. It's been a privilege to have her expertise in helping us to reflect, learn and adapt to ensure what we do and the way we do it

enables refugees and people seeking asylum to flourish in Stockton.

We are grateful to the funders who believe in our vision and have supported our work, including The National Lottery Community Fund, Catalyst, Durham University, Garfield Weston Foundation, Greggs Foundation, Stockton Fund, The Mercers Foundation, Postcode Neighborhood Trust, Stockton Borough Council, The Stockton Project, Task Force Trust (Action Asylum) and 1989 Willian Trust (Community Foundation Tyne and Wear and Northumberland).





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