

Befriending Project Report



2023/24

Introduction



Befriending at DCRS is a project developed as a response to a need for more one-to-one social support, the need to safeguard and cherish the healing power of human relationships, and to alleviate social isolation. Befriending at DCRS brings together people from asylum seeker and refugee (ASR) communities with people who have lived in Plymouth for longer. The project offers a flexible way of volunteering to many local people who wish to support and connect with asylum seekers and refugees but have limited amount of time for 'formal' office-hour volunteering.



The Home Office accommodates asylum seekers in the UK with 'no choice' policy – meaning our clients almost always arrive in Plymouth having never been to, and often never even heard of such a place. “For years [whilst working as an Activities Coordinator at DCRS], I witnessed the difference our volunteers and the relationships they formed with our clients made. It was life-changing, and in some cases life-saving, too.” says Suvi Rehell, the project lead. “But we had no framework for client-volunteer relationships, and thus instead of managing and celebrating it, it was safer to discourage . We wanted to rethink our policies to fit befriending within them.”

Befriending works as a bridge between communities. The recent violent protests in Plymouth and across the UK have left many of our clients at DCRS shaken and scared. We need people who can accompany and support those who feel unsafe, and we need active efforts to bring together people from different communities.

Beginnings



We are thankful for our funders who have enabled the development of this new scheme: Postcode Local Trust, Southall Trust and Plymouth Octopus



First stage of the project, funded by Plymouth Octopus was a short pilot from December 2022-March 2023, during which a group of volunteers and clients were consulted in order to create protocols and policy for the project. 3 existing DCRS volunteers took part as initial befrienders and were involved in developing new volunteer training. The learnings from this pilot stage were utilised in developing good practices, safeguarding protocols, and to apply for new funding. **Thanks to funding received from Postcode Local Trust and Southall Trust** we were able to launch Befriending at DCRS in September 2023.

The first three months of the new project saw volunteer training, ongoing support, and safeguarding developed further. After recruiting and training the first cohort of new volunteers, first befriending matches were made in December 2023. We know from our first year that the model works. Currently the project is looking for funds to continue, to expand its capacity, and to cement good practices and learnings.

Volunteer recruitment, training, getting to know personalities.

Client referrals, getting to know needs and personalities

Matching: meetings, outings, activities

Ongoing support and contact with Project Manager

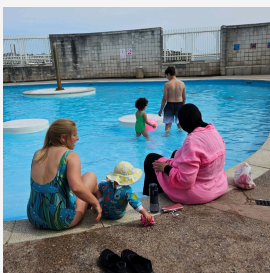
Outcomes



In its first year, the Befriending Project has trained 21 new volunteers and matched 20 pairs of volunteers and DCRS service users, as well as started a parents' group. Thus far the project has had many positive outcomes – some simply delightful, others potentially life-changing



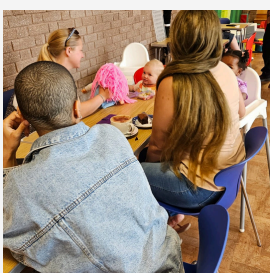
Befriending meetings have brought together local parents with ASR parents – who together launched a support group. They meet at a local soft play café, share thoughts and ideas, and have organised trips to the seaside together.



The project has paired a local history enthusiast with an Iranian archaeologist, and introduced those with shared interest in cooking and gardening to each other. One of our befrienders have supported their befriender to translate and transfer their existing qualifications to the UK, another pair have completed an application for a college course, and one volunteer has supported a client to apply for a job.



There have been offers of lifts to hospital appointments, and many many cups of tea. One young woman, who was evacuated from her house during a discovery of a WWII bomb in Plymouth, got a takeaway meal and a bag of comfort goodies delivered to her emergency accommodation by her befriender. A number of our clients who have been befriended have talked about **'just having someone'**, knowing someone is there – and the positive difference that has made for their mental health and wellbeing.



numbers

21
volunteers
trained

31 (adult)
service users
engaged

Parents' group:
11 group
meetings
13 members...

...plus 20
children!

What our volunteers say ...



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“Plymouth has changed a lot over the last 20 years. But who we hang out with, hasn't really. This project has opened up a new door, into a new community. I feel like i know my own city better now.”

“I feel everyone should have a chance to do befriender training, I learned so much about the journey and life experiences of refugees. It changed me not only as a Befriender but it changed the way I walk through life. I think a lot of people would do better and be kinder if they just knew a portion of the learnings from the Befrienders training.”

“I think the Befriender project should live on forever. We should all be Befrienders. Especially in recent times, when the community has felt shaken by the Far Right Protests. Having that Befrienders WhatsApp group was more important than ever before to just show that there is love and support out there and that we all have each others backs.”

“Befriending is a really easy, enjoyable way to support people who are new to Plymouth. I like volunteering with DCRS because they are deeply committed to providing practical and emotional support to asylum seekers and offer lots of ways for people to get involved, like befriending.”

“I have also made lots of genuine friends. It's not a one-way thing, the people I've met have lifted my mood, shared their wisdom and encouraged me to slow down and enjoy the things that matter, like hanging out with people who make you smile.”

”

What our clients say...



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“Yes, it helped me go out and meet more people and get to know them, and before that I was not a very social person. This is a big change for me.

“Thank you so much. I met a nice kind person. They helped me with English. They are a good person. It is good to have someone like this.”

We made an application together. They really helped me a lot.

“A wonderful group through which we got to know wonderful families, people. We have only been in Plymouth a short time. The difference made by the group: We got to know new people, and we started to get to know the city more.”

“It is really really awesome for me and the children. Many benefits from it. It really affect the quality of life in Plymouth. When I came to Plymouth, it felt really lonely. I met this other mummys in Plymouth. There is this support from each other. They gave me advice, and they had experiences like me. But they came to Plymouth before so they gave me advice. And my daughter every day she asks me when are we going next.”

I am thankful. They are listen and we share. When I have my own place I want to invite my friend for cake and food.

”

Case studies



“We share video clips of musical songs. She is so excited about the musical theatre course I found her.

“Charlotte only started befriending mother “M” about a month ago. M has a teenage daughter “D” who Charlotte has also gotten to know. M is a worried character, and has gone through a lot. D helps her mother a lot with English.

D is interested in theatre and dance and wanted to find a group to join. Her mother speaks very little English and is unconfident to look up and approach places and D has found herself not doing very much. Their befriender Charlotte found a musical theatre course and negotiated a deal for D to attend. Since then, the two have shared video clips of the songs and D has told Charlotte she’s learning all the songs at home and is very excited about the course. Charlotte has also approached two charities to see if M would be able to volunteer there, as she would like to do something supportive and get to know her new city and community, whilst not being allowed to work.

I am so thankful I have someone

H and Y only ever met twice. Y is from Gaza, and was enormously worried for their family and friends. The first meeting was wonderful, full of conversation about food and gardening and an agreement was made to meet weekly for conversational English. The second time they managed to meet, H who is a retired English teacher brought over lots of books they no longer needed – Y was overjoyed with these. But from there on their meetings were either no-shows, or cancelled. Y was hard to get in touch with, often busy, and traumatised and preoccupied with worries. H felt sometimes frustrated and that they hadn’t manage to support Y.

Later Y received a decision from Home Office and told us they were moving to London. Before they moved, they came to say bye and gave the highest praise for H. ‘H helped me so much. They are so kind, and a very good person. I am so thankful I have someone like this. Look – I can speak English now! I study those books every day!’



“ ***We managed to get their qualifications recognised in the UK***

Within minutes of E and A first meeting, these two history enthusiasts were deep into a conversation about ancient Mesopotamia, with the help of a translator app. Since then, E has supported A to apply for a volunteering position at a museum, and to get A's sports coach qualifications translated and transferred to the UK.

They have also studied for A's driving license test together, and most importantly continued to share cups of tea and interesting conversations.

They talk about you all the time. You have been so important

It took several meetings to get a conversation going between Volunteer 'V' and Befriender 'B'. B was new in Plymouth, and their accommodation was in a hard-to-reach area. B found being in Plymouth hard, boring, and isolating and missed their friends and an LGBTQ+ friendly community in London. B was reserved and shy and struggled with poor mental health. In 2024 a WWII bomb was discovered in Plymouth and B was evacuated from their accommodation. V immediately checked on B, and found out B was in a hotel, with no food. V drove over to B with a take-away meal and snacks.

This incident brought them closer together, and after that, they met and were in contact more often, however it was still hard to gauge with B's thoughts. Months later when they both happened to be in London at the same time, B invited V to come meet B's friends. B's friends told V: 'B talks about you all the time. You have been so important.'

