

Activities Report



DEVON AND CORNWALL REFUGEE SUPPORT

Introduction



With the addition of a new Befriending Project Manager (Suvi Rehell) and a new Activities Coordinator (Tressa Thomas), 2024 saw both the expansion of our Wellbeing and Activities Department and a renewed focus on land-based activities and access to blue and green space.

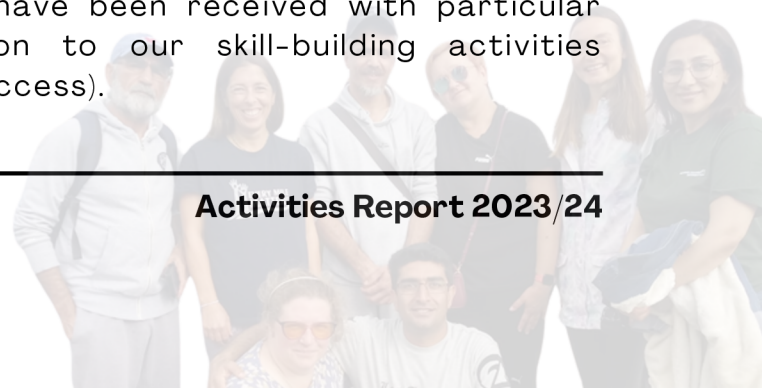


DCRS Activities 2024 Goals have been

- **to give service users the opportunity to connect with themselves, each other and the natural world**
- **to provide opportunities to learn, have fun, and meet new people**
- **to approach our work from a trauma-informed lens and practice good safeguarding**

We have provided activities for 20-45 service users nearly every week in 2024. These are mainly asylum seekers residing in Plymouth; some clients have refugee status or are ARE (appeal rights exhausted). Our clients commonly have experienced trauma, and many – especially those still going through the asylum system – struggle with their mental health. The majority of our participants struggle to express themselves fully in English, do not have the financial means to access activities that require equipment, travel, or entrance fees, and find themselves in a new city and an unfamiliar environment.

The impact our activities have had on our service users has been immensely positive. Our service users have constantly told us how their mood has improved, they have new social contacts, and know new areas in Plymouth including walking and cycling routes. This year our trips to local farms, such as the Apricot Centre in Dartington, have been received with particular enthusiasm and gratitude, in addition to our skill-building activities (swimming, cycling, canoeing, and gym access).



Numbers



We hosted 303 activities over the course of 2024; this number includes 117 gym passes (each containing 5 visits to the gym). This number does not include all English classes, which constitute another 160 activities.

222 individual service users attended at least one event between Oct 2023 - Oct 2024. This is an increase from 205 attendees in 2023.

Of that number, 128 service users came back to attend another activity. That means we have a return rate of 58% regarding all DCRS activities.

24.5% percent of DCRS service users in between Oct 2023 – Oct 2024 attended at least one activity; if we include English classes, 33% of DCRS service users between Oct 2023 – Oct 2024 have attended at least one activity.

Surveys in Winter 2023 tell us

85% of service users
feel healthier

100% feel happier,
and

85% feel less alone.

New Developments



During 2024 we turned our attention toward building partnerships with local growers, farmers, and land-based projects. This has allowed DCRS to offer a range of day trips to places like Apricot Centre, Tulgey Woods, Snapdragons, and Common Flora.



In 23/24, we established six new partnerships with land-based organisations and hosted 70 land-based activities for 118 service users. Of those service users, 71 came to more than one land-based activity; that means we had a 60% service user return rate.



Our second focus has been reinforcing Activities Safeguarding procedures by implementing processes that reduce risk to staff, volunteers, and service users. These changes include performing Risk Assessments for all new activities, requiring that two paid staff members be on site at all times during out-of-office activities, and providing Facilitation Inductions for all new partners and activities volunteers.

Setting Sail Course



In partnership with ODILS and Horizon's Plymouth, this 3-month course offers 5 service users the opportunity to earn a first aid certificate, as well as a qualification that will allow them to volunteer at a local sailing charity, Horizons. Students are trained on first aid, sailing terminology, boating regulations, practical sailing technique, safeguarding, and safety at sea. This course will be completed by the end of 2024 and our hope is that all 5 service users will be able to gain volunteer positions at Horizons, and for those with ability to work, potential employment in the boating and/or charity sector.



A service user offered his words of gratitude after the first day of the course: "You guys amazing I have no words how to say thanks this day is very good and special for me, thanks to all of you."

New Developments



Apricot Centre

Our partnership with the Apricot Centre has involved day trips, volunteer days, and a trip to London to see the Chelsea Flower Show.

Daytrips include taking groups of 2-12 participants first to Dartington, followed by a 20-minute walk to Apricot Centre: a wellbeing and education space complete with polytunnels, green houses, indoor and outdoor community spaces, fire pits, and a wellbeing garden. We typically meet at the indoor social space for hot drinks, followed by a tour of the farm where we learn about what is being grown, how it is harvested, and what it can be used for. Participants spend the rest of the activity either helping the local cook make a community lunch or supporting the farm team with planting, clearing, building, harvesting, and transporting.

Based on service user feedback, we decided to offer a Volunteer Pathway for service users who were keen to go to the farm weekly in order to support the Apricot Centre's farm team and learn new skills. The 6 volunteers attended 8 days of volunteer work, culminating in an invitation to the Chelsea Flower show in London in May 2024, which they attended with rave reviews.

In a feedback session earlier this year, one service user reflected: "When we belong to something we are responsible for caring for it."



New Developments



Common Flora



In partnership with Totnes' Beyond Borders, we took 3 daytrips to Common Flora: a farm in south Devon dedicated to increasing biodiversity and human wellbeing.



Service users took part in foraging black berries to make syrup, planting pots, making mint tea, singing and playing instruments, widdling spoons, weeding the garden, and learning the basics of basket weaving. One memorable moment was when a service user caught a baby harry and carried it around the entire day (we did release it back into the garden).



The culmination of our time with Common Flora was a feast from Community Food, who provide free meals across Devon using locally grown surplus veg. An added win was connecting Community Food with a service user who is a chef and has since volunteered with them in Totnes during one of their local feasts.



A service user told us: "Good morning, early birds!! ...thank you very much for our yesterday's activity... That was soo lovely and pleasant! That day is still in front of my eyes, many memorable moments!! I feel so good that I am not even surfing the Internet since yesterday. Do not want my mind to be overlapped by another thoughts and feelings."

New Developments



Hard Hat Ready Course

Thus far we have supported 9 service users in applying to and completing 4 of City College's Hard Hat Ready courses: an accelerated 5-week course that teaches bricklaying, carpentry and joinery, plastering, painting and decorating, construction operations, wall and floor tiling, and plumbing.



These students are also given the opportunity to earn their CSCS labourer card. This means that from the moment of graduation, they are able to work on a construction site (once they are given right to work).



This process has been significant to our team building a healthy relationship with City College, creating new pathways for course referrals, and ultimately how it could look to focus on supporting service users in gaining pre-employment skills. We want to develop this method into 2025 by finding other useful vocational course in which service users can engage for a quick burst of time and graduate with a certification of some kind.



This format suits our clients additionally because it offers a space to make new friends and bond as a cohort. During our first Construction course, the group Whatsapp was full of kind messages, jokes, and photos of the students' work. Students were affectionally calling each other "Supervisor" and poking fun at each other's construction work.

A recent graduate reflected on the help DCRS gave him in applying for the course: "Thank you so much DCRS team ... for your guidance and support on our whole journey."



Other Activities of Note



Active English Class

Script in Hand, a participatory theatre project, has been hosting weekly Active English classes since Spring 2024, 20 classes in total.

These classes are designed to offer opportunities to practice speaking, listening, and presenting in English. Classes combine theatre warm-up activities, poetry, writing, acting, and games to help participants learn new and specific English phrases and practice presenting in front of one another. These classes are always high energy and are perfect for new service users getting to know DCRS and looking for new friends.

For example, K, a new service user from Afghanistan, was invited to join Active English the very first week he came to DCRS. He presented as quite shy with limited English. In his first Active English class the teachers and other participants were very encouraging, asking K to get involved in the warm-up game and offering positive affirmation when he did not want to read out loud. K has been coming to Active English for 8 weeks now and we have seen a big change in his behaviour: he is energetic, smiling, and quite competitive. He has also now expanded his vocabulary to include basic English phrases that help with communication. He reads out loud in class, plays every game, and even pranks fellow participants when given the opportunity.



Other Activities of Note



Calstock Daytrips

In partnership with Calstock Arts Centre, DCRS took 4 trips to Calstock in 2024.

On these day trips, approximately 15 service users took the local rail from Plymouth to Calstock, exiting at the small village and making our way to the scene Calstock Arts Centre, which has a fantastic view of the river. There, we enjoyed food and tea while taking part in various arts and crafts workshops. The art we made was then displayed at the Tamar River Valley Festival in Calstock, which service users attended at the end of October.

17 service users, largely all families with young kids, were able to attend the festival thanks to free bus tickets from the Calstock Arts Centre. Participants were also offered free lunch and able to enjoy the sunshine, dancing, a walk along the river, and many children's activities.



Other Activities of Note



Cook-a-thons

In partnership with Sherwell United Church, we hosted 3 cook-a-thon sessions.

Sessions were largely made up of current or potential Befriending matches and included time for meet-and-greets so that new people could learn each other's names and a little about the kind of food we each like to make and eat.

The menu itself crossed continents as a few key chefs stepped up to the plate: from Nepalese dumplings to Kurdish soup to jollof rice to Welsh cakes to pickled chilli sauce, meatballs, and more. During the second session, someone lugged out the Sherwell ping pong table so that while waiting for a few final dishes to cook, we were able to sneak in a table tennis tournament. It turns out that a few of the gentlemen who attended are avid table tennis players and had a go at becoming our tournament champion.

The meal itself was chatty and filling as we ended sessions by piling leftovers into tupperware and pitching in on a massive washing up effort. The best part of these sessions is the way people are encouraged to pitch in, everyone getting their hands messy and learning new cooking skills in the process.



Other Activities of Note



Gym

We continued our partnership with Plymouth University Students Union (SU) Gym to provide gym sessions for clients.

We provide 5-session gym passes for each service user - up to 2 passes per month and a total of 117 gym passes during 2024. These passes are extremely popular and most people are keen to use the gym more than 10 times a month. For people who continue to use the gym and are always keen for more passes, we are able to sign a small group of people up for a gym memberships, which allows them to access the gym as many times in a month as they want.

Our clients have told us the gym gives them a reason to leave their accommodation, gives them energy and a sense that they are working on their own self-improvement / health, and makes people feel like they are “the same” as everyone else, since they are using a public facility.



List of 2023/24 Activities



Connecting to Land

- Apricot Center Visit: farming, outdoor cooking, harvesting, volunteering
- Tulgey Woods: apple picking, crafts, foraging
- Snapdragons Community Garden: plating, weeding, foraging
- Common Flora: day trips, foraging, wood carving, playing music, basket weaving
- Jar Squad: cooking / pickling / fermentation workshops
- Flax Project: growing, harvesting, processing flax

Connecting to Blue Space

- Horizons Sailing Course: 3-month hands-on sailing course for 5 service users, certification received upon completion
- Train Trips to Happiness Project: day trips to Cornish towns / beaches
- Reclaim the Sea: wild swimming sessions
- WildWise: canoeing sessions on river Dart
- Group trips to local beaches, The Hoe, Plymouth Sound, Devil's Point, Mount Edgecumbe, Whitsand Bay, Mount Batten Beach, Jennycliff, Bovisand
- A trip to the aquarium

Movement / Exercise

- Monthly SW Coastal Path Walks: walking along the SW coastal path with Gemma Dunn / SW Coastal Path
- Monthly guided cycling and learning to ride with Jonathan PCC Plymouth Cycling Scheme during summer
- Martial Arts class at Masters Academy taught by previous service user and new volunteer
- Life Centre: swimming lessons for men and women and swim passes
- SU Gym access for up to 20 individuals per month
- Paradise Island Adventure Mini Golf
- Tenpin Bowling

List of 2023/24 Activities

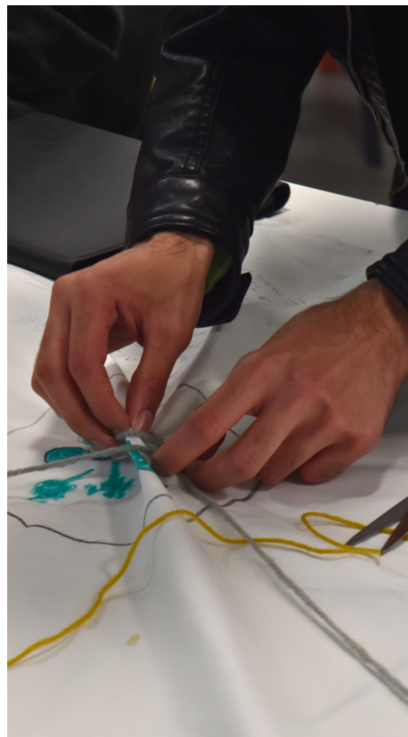


Art / Creative Practice

- Active English: poetry, drama, and games
- Photography
- Beginner guitar learning with Martin
- Gallery / Museum visits at The Box
- Block printing, painting, lantern-making, collaging, ceramics
- Cinema trips: Vue, Plymouth Art Cinema, Cineworld, DCRS film nights

Education

- Referrals and support for City College's Hard Hat Ready Course, Health and Nutrition Level 1, Preparing for the Workforce, GCSE Math/English
- Support with Sanctuary Scholarship Applications and Online Translation Course
- Tuesday IT classes at DCRS
- Intermediate and beginner English classes 4 days a week at DCRS



What our Service Users say ...



“

I came to DCRS because my friend [another asylum seeker] told me I would get a lot of support here. I was told I could go to the gym, and I've just talked to Tressa who's signed me up for it. Thank you!

Thank you so much DCRS team ... for your guidance and support on our whole journey. We graduated and are looking forward to start a new career in the construction field.

Thank you for indicating O to accompany us, because she has the qualities of a good LEADER: to guide us, is encouraging, cares about the difficulties of each person and is easy to interact with the group. I really enjoyed our swimming meeting today

[T]hank you very much for our yesterday's activity on the moors!! That was so lovely and pleasant! That day is still in front of my eyes, many memorable moments!! I feel so good that I am not even surfing the Internet since yesterday 😊 do not want my mind to be overlapped by another thoughts and feelings

Cooking makes all my stress go away, I don't think about anything else. I can cook anything and will always come and cook if I can.

The teacher taught me how to dip and swim without a noodle!!!! Can you imagine? We were beginners but we really helped each other to be better and to improve! [The volunteer] was wonderful and taught us how to float, it's a blessing to have her with us!

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Case Study



“ This individual came to us seeking support for chronic pain. He had difficulty walking due to sciatica, spoke little, and expressed a desperation for his pain to stop. We supported him with getting a GP appointment -- who later prescribed medication -- and signed him up for swim lessons at the doctor’s recommendation.

H, with increased mobility on his side, began attending farm visits, where he changed before our eyes. This once quiet man, with few words and a slow gait, started playing. What had been hidden beneath acute suffering was the bright, infectious personality of a jokester. H loves practical jokes and started doing his best to stick straw in facilitator's hats, intentionally confuse his words so that the person he talked with had to ask the same question over and over only to eventually succumb to giggles.

On one farm visit, a facilitator snapped a photo of H leaning back in a bright red lounge chair, bowl of steaming soup in his hands, smile on his face; he was not the same person who had come through our doors 6 months before.

This progress came to a crashing halt when H was detained on behalf of the Rwanda Scheme during summer 2024. He was detained during his weekly immigration signings at the police station and kept in London for 6 weeks. Caseworkers were on the case from the moment he was detained – on and off the phone with police, solicitors, H, and Home Office.

When H was released he came straight back to Plymouth, and to our great surprise, arrived at DCRS the next day with a smile on his face. H stepped right back into the activities schedule, attending nearly every outdoor activity, from cycling to foraging walks to art classes in Calstock. H’s pranks have become more sophisticated as his English language proficiency has improved. He is in constant giggles, providing every activity with levity and silliness.

H’s story shows so clearly the power of holistic care.



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