

Journey LGBT+ Asylum Group



Annual Report 2022

Aims of the Journey LGBT+ Asylum Group

The Journey LGBT+ Asylum Group is a support group for LGBT+ asylum seekers and refugees in Birmingham and the West Midlands. We aim to provide a welcoming, safe and supportive space, giving confidence and a sense of community to asylum seekers who identify as LGBT+, and who are often isolated, offering information, signposting and support through the asylum process and settling into the UK

“This is more than a family. Family is not always blood. It is the people in your life who wants you in theirs. The ones who accept you for who you are. The love and support you all showed me means so much to me and I am so grateful to have you in my life”

“When I come here I feel better - it seems to be my new family”

“The group allows me to be free to be myself”

Summary of Activities in 2022

The group continues to attract on average 5 new members every month, and we have 35 - 40 members attending our monthly face to face meetings with a wide range of organisations presenting information or running workshop sessions at these, and our monthly zoom meetings.

Improved networking with key organisations, including Migrant Help, Migrant Voice, Refugee and Migrant Centre, Right to Remain and BCC's Asylum and Refugee Liaison team, has given Journey members the confidence to access other services in the city and region.

This has also extended the range of opportunities open to members, and new developments over this year have included working with the Fierce, the Shout Festival, Pride House and sporting opportunities, such as Unicorns Cricket team.

Challenges for members and volunteers have included the much publicised delays in the Home Office asylum procedures; the proposal to send asylum seekers to Rwanda which caused a huge rise in anxiety levels; the difficulties in accessing help from immigration solicitors accentuated by cuts in legal aid; helping people living at a distance to find local support or manageable links with us.

These challenges have increased the pressures and demands on the volunteer team in providing 1-2-1 support to individual members.

Group Meetings



Throughout the year we organised monthly face to face and zoom meetings (as many members have been dispersed across the region, or to areas where there appears to be no LGBT+ asylum support groups). Topics for meetings (and outdoor activities) came from members suggestions, and included a variety of fun sessions to more serious topics. Our face to face meetings now regularly attract 35-40 members.

Julie and Fatema from MIND provided practical tips to members in dealing with stress; Salman from Migrant Voice ran an interactive session to build the confidence of members when putting across a point of view; Geoff from Birmingham City Council's Asylum and Refugee Liaison team provided information on the transition from asylum status to leave to remain; Yumna from Right to Remain talked through the asylum process and how to use the RTR toolkit; and we have had speakers from a range of colleges and educational opportunities to encourage members to take up learning opportunities.

We also involved the members in designing a group logo and Jane Thakoordin worked with group members to design and produce the group banner. Members were proud to wear the group's t-shirts with our new logo and carry the banner at the Pride Parade which took place in September.

“Helping in making the banner was very important to me, because I feel like I was with my own family ... the joy inside me that day I can't over emphasise”



Outdoor Events

Throughout the year we also organised or participated in a number of outdoor activities. In May, we organised a bluebell walk in the Lickey Hills, with members enjoying a 7 km walk through woods and views over Birmingham. In June, we organized a Bike trip from the city centre, along canals and green routes to Edgbaston Reservoir and the Harborne walkway, and later on in June, a picnic in Cannon Hill Park.



“we had an amazing trip today”

“special thanks for the road map and everything”

The Journey group, together with the Coventry Out in the UK group, had some fifty members taking part in the **Birmingham Pride Parade** in September 2022. Proudly carrying their new banner and wearing the newly designed t-shirts. The Pride Committee gave free wristbands so that members could socialize in the arena areas.



Buddy Scheme

The group has a Buddy scheme, which is a peer to peer support network amongst Journey members. We provide training and then on-going support, with regular reviews meetings, to Journey members who volunteer to become a Buddy. They are then responsible for keeping in regular contact with a designated number of Journey members, offering a friendly voice over the phone, to help reduce isolation and signpost to other sources of support.

The Buddies themselves also talk about the benefits it brings to them.

“It’s a thing of joy when I do contact, communicate and put smiles on others faces. Being a Buddy is much more fun and interesting, especially when you have amazing contacts like mine, who always create time to check on me too”

“It’s a role that makes you make friends since we all know how difficult it is to be an asylum seeker, the stress, depression, anxiety and so on, but being a Buddy helps you be in touch with people that you can talk to anytime and with that you feel much better than keeping things to yourself”

1-2-1 Support

Providing 1-2-1 support to individual members is a crucial aspect of the Journey group, and the challenges noted above have put added demands on the support and time commitments of the volunteer team, whilst we signpost individuals to more specialist support, which has included for example, referrals to Freedom from Torture.

Where appropriate, we provide letters of support to members, as evidence to support their asylum claim. We also encourage members to talk through their personal stories, with a volunteer they trust, in preparation for their Home Office interview, as many have never talked to others before about their sexuality or the harassment, abuse, or violence they experienced in their home countries.

“The volunteers give us moral and emotional support and I give my thanks to them. They gave me many contact numbers where I could get help”

Partnership with the Bike Project

We continued our partnership with the Bike Project, and during this year 25 members (which includes members and their children) received bikes as a result. Having a bike, can mean so much to individuals, enabling them to travel without transport costs and a boost to their mental well-being.

“Its been my dream to ride a bike”



Three of our women members have learnt how to ride a bike through the Pedal Power classes, and it has been a joy to see them posting videos as they gain confidence on their bikes.

“Yes I really enjoyed the cycling I can’t believe I can ride a bicycle”

“I want to tell you thank you so much for everything today I take my bike I’m so happy”

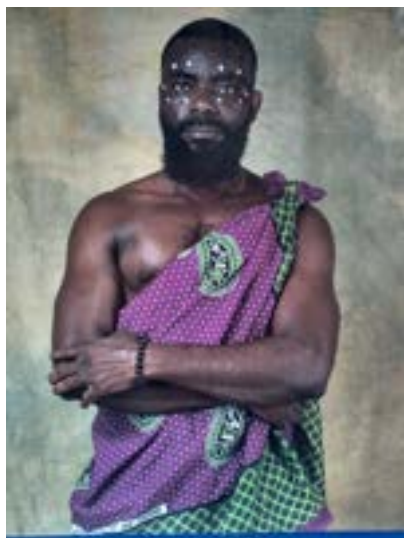
New Developments

Fierce project - *Arrival*

Journey members were invited to participate in the *Arrival* project from April – August 2022, which was produced by Fierce for the Healing Gardens of Bab, a programme of work commissioned by the Birmingham 2022 Festival (part of the Commonwealth Games). The project created a set of portraits, by Sunil Gupta and Charran Singh, which involved the participants in designing how they would be represented. The resulting images were on display in the Gay Village, by Pride House, during the period of the Commonwealth Games, with plans to display elsewhere.

“I took part because I want to show that queer and LGBTQI+ Ethiopians exist and that we are proud”

“It was an opportunity for me to come out as lesbian and be proud of who I am”



These photos are of the portraits on the walls in the Gay Village. The original photographers are Sunil Gupta and Charran Singh

“I want to be open as a gay and never ever again hide who I am”

Commonwealth Games Pride House

Journey members benefitted from the experience of joining the team of volunteers and raising awareness of LGBT+ issues as they met visitors and helped to set up the AIDS memorial exhibition at Pride House.

MicroRainbow and Journey collaborated in an evening presentation on asylum issues with input from members. Other Journey members attended events and presentations. One volunteer commented

“It was the best two weeks of my time in the UK”.

Shout Festival

The Journey group was approached to talk part in the Shout Festival 2022, a festival that celebrates LGBT+ arts and culture. The resulting project, YATRA, led by queer artist, Ash Mukherjee, was a partnership between Shout and Sampad, and involved a series of workshops on the theme of journeys, culminating in a short performance at the Midlands Art Centre on November 5th.

The workshops certainly resulted in incredible changes in levels of confidence and well-being amongst participants. Many of Journey members came to see the performance and were amazed to see the energy and enthusiasm of those on stage.

“The best moment was when Rebecca and Ash taught us to sing because it made me feel free”



Photo by Irina Jeffremova

“To be involved in the Shout project was one of the best experiences ever. First I wasn't sure because unfortunately I deal with mental health issues... it helped me to find a reason to leave my room... to see more positivity in my life and I could prove myself that I could do something good for me and that I'm good at”

Unicorns LGBT Cricket Club

We were pleased to make links with Unicorns LGBT cricket club, and one of our members has encouraged others to attend training sessions. We are grateful for the help given with transport costs, as well as the warm welcome to Journey members. For at least one member, the involvement has been a lifeline and antidote to worry and anxiety.

Journey Volunteer Team

The Journey LGBT+ Asylum group is a company limited by guarantee, and is organized totally by a team of volunteers.

We continue to advertise for new volunteers, working towards a more diverse volunteer team. This year we have been glad to welcome Carl and Adrian.

Workshops with Rainbow Migration and Right to Remain have improved our knowledge base, attendance at Mental Health First Aid courses have increased our awareness, and increased networking with other organisations in the city has improved our ability to signpost members to appropriate services, and to also raise awareness amongst other organisations of the specific needs of LGBT+ asylum seekers.

As we move forward into our next year, we are planning some review and reflection sessions, so we can best address any new challenges.

Finances

We are grateful to all our donors and supporters, who have enabled us continue provide support to Journey group members. We are anticipating a grant of £1000 from this year's Pride and are currently applying to other funders. However, with the increasing numbers of members attending and the variety of activities we aim to involve members in, we urgently need to extend our fundraising efforts.

Annual Meeting

The Annual meeting was held on November 15th 2022, with 40 members present, and guests from organisations we had links with, over the year. The meeting accepted the report of activities as presented by members and volunteers, and the financial statement presented by the Treasurer.

1. The meeting voted for the following to be elected as Directors for the next 12 months, Philip Hoar, Jon Homer and Sheila Rushforth
2. The meeting voted to confirm the name of the group as "Journey LGBT+ Asylum Group" in line with the newly designed logo

For more information on the Journey LGBT+ Asylum Group contact

Phil Hoar at philhoar@btinternet.com

Sheila Rushforth at sheila.rushforth@googlemail.com