Journey LGBT+ Asylum Group



Annual Report 2024

Celebrating another successful year.

With thanks to our funders:

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About the Journey LGBT+ Asylum Group

The Journey LGBT+ Asylum Group is a support group for asylum seekers and refugees in the West Midlands.

Our mission

Empowering people who identify as LGBT+ through the asylum process and beyond.

Our vision

To create a safe space for LGBT+ asylum seekers and refugees in the West Midlands, helping them find community, healing and support, throughout their asylum journey.

Our aims

- To create safe and welcoming spaces for connections and community among LGBT+ asylum seekers.
- To enhance confidence, resilience, and self-acceptance among members.
- To provide information and signposting through the asylum process and beyond.
- To promote greater inclusion across the West Midlands and collaborating with other groups to support LGBT+ asylum seekers.

Our values

- **Security:** We prioritise creating a safe and liberating environment where everyone can be themselves without fear.
- **Acceptance:** We embrace all individuals with compassion, openness, and a non-judgmental attitude, ensuring everyone feels valued.
- **Recognition:** We acknowledge each person's dignity and experiences, ensuring they feel seen, validated, and respected.
- **Empowerment:** We encourage and support individuals to take agency over their lives, fostering self-respect and partnership.
- **Belonging:** We cultivate a sense of family and trust, building deep connections and friendships within our community.
- **Positivity:** We inspire hope, optimism, and courage, promoting a positive outlook and resilience in our members.

2024 at a glance

This has been a big year for Journey. Over the last 12 months we have grown significantly, with membership up from 150 to a peak of nearly 300 mid-year. As a result, we decided to put a temporary pause on taking new members in June, as we felt we had reached capacity for the size of the volunteer team. We are going into 2025 with 265 members.

Throughout the year, 291 members in total took part in activities, and we regularly attracted over 50 members to our monthly meetings. At our AGM, many of our members spoke with passion about the activities they have taken part in, and the confidence and community they have gained as a result. Food and travel are still our main expenses - we gave out over 1000 bus passes in 2024, and spent over £750 on pizza.

Our volunteers and Buddies continue to play a vital role in the group, helping organise and run activities, as well as providing one-to-one and peer support. 113 members were given letters of support from Journey as evidence in their asylum claims, and over 90 members were granted leave to remain in the UK.

We have also connected with even more external organisations this year. This has helped us provide a greater range of activities for members, attract more volunteers, signpost members to more sources of specialist support, and raise greater awareness amongst support organisations of the specific needs and challenges faced by LGBT+ asylum seekers in the West Midlands.

> *"Thanks a lot for your support, Journey Group members, and volunteers. You mean so much to me. You helped me a lot, and you made me believe that there's still good people who fight for the right things in this world. All my gratitude to you. I will never hesitate to help when I can, because I want to give back what I have received. That's the only way for a better world."*
> - Journey member

> *"As a gay Muslim I can really see how important it is to have a safe place for LGBT+ refugees and asylum seekers, for a minority within a minority. It's so wonderful to see a family come together."*
> - Journey volunteer

> *"It is inspiring to see the impact you're having and the community and family you've created."*
> - AGM guest

Our activities in 2024

Meetings

Our monthly in-person meets are the core of Journey's programme of activities. Capped at a maximum of 50 members due to high demand, these are where the majority of our members connect with the group. Here are just some of the highlights from 2024.

In February, Birmingham Opera Company led a lively performing workshop which got our members up on their feet and singing together, and even recreating a scene from Bizet's 'Carmen'. Plus we had the privilege of getting a private performance from Samantha Oxborough, who sang the national anthem at the Commonwealth Games opening ceremony in 2022.

"The meeting was amazing! Couldn't stop smiling, I was just filled with joy! I really enjoyed myself."



In March, our monthly meeting focused on health and wellbeing. Nigel from Birmingham LGBT Centre's sexual health team talked to our members about the welfare services available, members then shared their wellbeing tips, and we finished the meeting with some deep breathing exercises and singing.

Our May meeting was led by LGBTeehee, a community arts-based initiative to benefit mental health resilience through comedy. Our members were encouraged to draw and share their personal journeys, highlighting the key turning points.





"We enjoyed today's meeting, because there were some fun activities, and also everyone got to draw some stories, and also the game we played at the start of the meeting was full of fun and laughter."

In June we asked the question 'Who am I?' with a session exploring identity, led by educational psychologist Doctor Anjam Sultana. Members discussed different parts of their identities - ethnicity, religion, level of education, status, gender, clothes, health, sexuality, family, age, employment and nationality. They then created visual representations of their inner selves. There were a lot of very thought-provoking discussions and drawings.



Ash Mukherjee led our July meeting, a taster of the forthcoming Pride Heart project. In a fun-packed session, our members made some positive affirmations, learnt about Pride history through a team quiz, refocused with some guided meditation, and crafted their very own pride hearts.

"This meeting is full of fun and emotions. Thank you so much for making our meeting exciting, comfortable and relaxing and I'm really happy and proud to meet everyone."



Other sessions included a singing workshop from Brum Rocks, a dance workshop with Eric Scutaro, a session to help members prepare for their Home Office interview, and a session to help members manage the transition from asylum seeker to refugee.

We also hold monthly Zoom meetings, and in April volunteer Naz worked with support group Imaan to hold a special Iftar meeting to mark the end of Ramadan.

"I have been lonely since eight months, but today I do this outing and enjoy Iftar party, and see all my journey family and the food was fantastic."

"The Iftar was not just for Muslims, other people came as well – that's the very good thing because it reminds us we are all equal, no one has priority because of culture, religion and colour, which I found great."



Birmingham Pride

This is a very significant event in the Journey calendar. Many of our members have come from countries where even speaking about LGBT+ matters is taboo. To march in the streets, waving rainbow flags, and to be cheered and applauded by the general public is a joyful and powerful experience.

> *"I loved seeing the joyous expressions of freedom and pride on everyone's faces in the celebration of our diversity. The energy within the larger community was uplifting!"*
>
> *"It was the happiest day of my life."*



Getting active

Healthy body, healthy mind!

This year, Journey members have attended football training sessions with Birmingham Blaze FC, a cricket session with Out4Cricket at Edgbaston Stadium in April, and weekly Disco and Vogue dance classes courtesy of FABRIC. Martineau Gardens also welcomed our members with a hot meal every Monday and a chance to get their hands dirty volunteering in the gardens.





"It was a great day. I was so happy that after a long time I got to play cricket again. They were so friendly. It was an amazing day."

In April, intrepid volunteers led a group on a robust ramble in the Lickey Hills to see the bluebells in full flower. At our summer picnic in Canon Hill Park in August, we made the most of the space available with a lot of boisterous games.

"The bluebell walk at the Lickey Hills was pure magic! The scenery was stunning, and walking hand in hand with fellow journey members made it extra special. Climbing those hills felt like conquering mountains together, and the picnic break was filled with laughter and tasty snacks. Sure, we might have some aches now, but the happiness from exercising together overshadows it all."

"The picnic was awesome, a great way to spend time outdoors, relax, boost mood and improve wellbeing. An opportunity to bond with my fellow Journey members, fun playing games and interact with old and new members."





Performing

A number of our members got the chance this year to take part in projects involving performing. Standing up and showing the world who they are gives our members a huge boost in self-confidence.

To celebrate International Women's Day in March, women from Journey took part in a workshop at the MAC organised by In Her Shoes. Participants sang songs created over the last five years by other women from Birmingham, and also got to create their own song.

> *"Being part of this workshop reminded me that I am not alone in my journey. Hearing the stories of other women and seeing how their experiences resonated with mine was truly uplifting. Music has a unique way of bringing people together and this workshop was a beautiful reminder of that. I'm grateful for the opportunity to connect with others and share our voices through song."*



In July, Journey members headed to the Dream Tent in Digbeth to experience Birmingham Opera Company's production of Tippet's 'New Year'. They were also there to support fellow member Gabriel who was one of the community participants in the show.

> *"I was really happy. I had a great time seeing my brother among the performers."*



In August, Journey members took part in 'Love is an Act of Rebellion', a performance by Stories of Hope and Home. The performance was created by asylum seekers exploring how, in the context of the hostile environment and the intent to divide, exclude and isolate, love is an act of rebellion, and how small acts of support can mean so much.

> *"it was actually my life, the performance reflected my life since I arrived in the UK. I chose to perform as Charity, the good people, because I have really got so much help from charities - clothes, accommodation, and food. Without charity I would be homeless."*





Towards the end of the year, members took part in two special performances, both the culmination of weekly workshops. In November, Journey members who've been involved with the Pride Heart project took to the stage at Birmingham Rep to showcase the work they'd been doing.

> *"It was inspiring to see the group perform so well as an ensemble and witness their growth in confidence and pride in their achievements."*

> *"You have truly shown the world what resilience, creativity and courage looks like."*

In December, several of our members joined the 'Light Up Fest' procession through Cannon Hill Park, carrying lanterns that they'd made in community workshops.

> *"I enjoyed it. The good about is the parade, walking around Cannon Hill Park with our lanterns, and the audience were cheering and enjoying. It was nice and fantastic."*



Shows, screenings and exhibitions

Journey members got to experience a lot of art and culture this year.

Birmingham Rep generously provided free tickets to 'Bhangra Nation' in February and 'Becoming Nancy' in October. Big thanks also to Hannah Phillips from Mobilise Arts for tickets to 'Queer My Throat' in March, 'Just Be You' in May and 'Queer Motherhood' in September, all at the MAC.

> *"I had a splendid and excellent time, most notably the history and struggles that LGBTQ people went through decades ago to fight for the rights and pride we are enjoying today."*
>
> *"It was so nice to be in the theatre today. I really enjoyed it."*

Meanwhile Birmingham Hippodrome donated tickets to 'Santi and Naz' and gave members a guided tour of the Birmingham Weekender festival in August, including snacks and creative workshops. In September, Birmingham Indian Film Festival invited members to a screening of independent British film 'In Camera', including a Q&A with the writer/director afterwards.



"The Birmingham Weekender was amazing! The highlight for me was an incredible aerial rope dance where performers were suspended high above the ground. Watching them twist and turn mid-air was magical and left me completely mesmerized. It was a perfect mix of beauty and excitement. Truly unforgettable!"

Members also got to experience 'Brum Rocks' and 'Fairlight' in July, and two trips to the New Art Gallery Walsall, one in April and again in September.

"I really enjoyed the trip, it was so beneficial for my mind because few days ago I isolated myself because I was so stress. The Journey group, the workshop, seeing people happy make me feel very good. The workshop with my culture's material makes me remember where I come from and how proud I should be about myself."

"It was really a beautiful experience. I enjoyed the art, especially the contemporary art. I also got to sculpt which was my first ever experience."



Raising awareness

A key part of Journey's work is connecting with other organisations, to raise awareness of what our members need, and the challenges they face.

In February, volunteers and members spoke at a meeting of the Proud Rainbow City Partnership at Birmingham Council House, and in May, eight of our members took part in creative discussion workshops with Diego Garcia from the University of Nottingham. Diego's research focuses on gathering stories and insights to improve understanding of the issues facing LGBT+ asylum seekers, to influence positive changes in the UK asylum system.

> *"It was an informative meeting that initiated some great links. I felt our voices were heard and opened doors for future engagement and collaboration."*

> *"I hope by highlighting our problems the people in the meeting can influence policy changes and make our lives a bit better."*

Volunteers shared a stall with Kings Heath Action for Refugees at Queens Heath Pride in June, stood in solidarity with hundreds of others opposing far right hate in August, and attended meetings of the Birmingham Migration Forum and Birmingham LGBT Forum in December. Longstanding member Appiah featured in videos made by Groundswell, a charity looking to end homelessness, and August saw the launch of 'I Am Virginia', a campaign by one of our longstanding members and a Journey Buddy, to support her claim for asylum. This gained a lot of sympathetic press coverage, and highlighted many of the issues faced by our members when seeking safety in the UK.
Please give Virginia your support by signing her petition and 'liking' her Facebook page.





Our team

Volunteers

Journey is organised entirely by a team of volunteers. Each volunteer brings different interests and skills to the group, helping to expand the ways in which we can support our members.

Providing one-to-one support to individual members is a key role that many of our volunteers take on. We encourage members to talk through their personal stories 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 country. Where appropriate, our volunteers also provide letters of support as evidence in our members' asylum claims.

Volunteers also organize Journey events, liaise with external organisations providing activities or services to our members, and speak at events about the group and the challenges our members face.

We are committed to offering training and support to our volunteers. In June, some of our volunteer team spent a training day with psychological therapists Debra Gordon and Isabel Stahlberg. Through a series of activities, they helped us learn how to recognise vicarious trauma, and to develop tools, systems and strategies to support our own wellbeing.

> *"It was an excellent opportunity to discuss our boundaries between empathy and professional detachment when faced with individuals reporting severely traumatic experiences, and to get ideas about how to protect our own wellbeing."*

> *"We spend so much time focusing on the needs of our members, it made me realise how important it is to also spend time on our own wellbeing."*

We go into 2024 with a team of 14 compassionate and dedicated volunteers, and we want to thank them all for their hard work and commitment.





Buddies

Our Journey Buddies play a key role in the Journey LGBT+ Asylum Group in supporting individual members and supporting the group. These are established members who are given training and support to be a point of contact and advice for other members. They also help organize and manage Journey events and activities.

"We are the heart of the Journey LGBT+ Asylum group."

"Having a buddy in a group helps foster inclusion, assisting especially new members feel comfortably in the group and enhance cooperation. A buddy feels they are making others' lives better, being there to listen to and check on them."

"The volunteers are my inspiration to be a Buddy. I want to give back what I received from the group."

"My buddy provided me with emotional support, she helped me reduce stress and improve my mental health. She boosted my happiness. Every time I was not happy, she always told me "everything will be OK" and that single sentence is what everyone needs to hear every day. This kept me going day by day."

"My buddy shared a lot of knowledge with me especially on things that I didn't know, because of coming here not knowing anyone and how things operate. She has been so supportive."

We head into 2024 with a team of six passionate and committed Buddies.
A huge thank you to all our Buddies, past and present, for all their hard work and dedication.



Organisational matters

Strategic consultation

Thanks to a Sanctuary Award from Birmingham City Council, we were able to undertake a strategic review, with the help of Flóra Raffai from Rapport Coaching. Flóra worked with volunteers and members to help us explore who we are and what we do.
We came away with a clear mission, vision, aims and values, as well as a stronger sense of our core activities. The consultation also initiated a change in legal status from 'company limited by guarantee with charitable aims' to 'charitable incorporated organisation' – in effect, changing form a company to a charity. This process will be completed early in 2025, and will enable us to access more sources of funding and support.
This will also entail a change in structure, from a volunteer team overseen by a board of Directors to a steering group overseen by a board of Trustees. This will enable greater input from members and external partners at a strategic level.

Safe and inclusive

This year we also undertook consultancy with Robyn Foley at Birmingham LGBT Centre to ensure we are doing all we can to make Journey a safe and welcoming place for everyone, and in particular our trans members. As a result, we updated our policies to make them more overtly trans-inclusive, and now have an information sheet about gender identity in very simple English that we shared with all our members. We are committed to continual monitoring and ongoing action in this area.

Annual celebration and AGM

Our AGM was held on 11th December 2024 with 55 members present, plus volunteers and guests from organisations we have links with.

The meeting accepted the report of activities as presented by members and volunteers, and the financial statement presented by the Treasurer.

The meeting voted for the following to be elected as Directors for the next 12 months:

- Helen Hibberd
- Sheila Rushforth
- Alexandra Taylor

We also wish to thank our outgoing Director, Jon Homer, for his many years of dedication. Jon will continue to support Journey as a volunteer.

Thank you to our funders and supporters

Throughout this year, the group has received financial support from Amnesty International, Birmingham City Council, Birmingham Pride Community Foundation, Fierce, Heart of England Community Foundation, Kings Heath Action for Refugees, Loving Men, Pink Sou'westers, the University of Birmingham and a number of private donors.

We are also very grateful for the in-kind support we have received from the following:

- Dr Anjam Sultana
- Autin Dance Theatre
- Birmingham Blaze FC
- Birmingham Community Matters
- Birmingham Hippodrome
- Birmingham Indian Film Festival
- Birmingham LGBT Centre
- Birmingham Opera Company
- Birmingham Rep
- Birmingham Unicorns
- Brum Rocks
- Diego Garcia, the University of Nottingham
- Digbeth First Friday
- FABRIC
- Freedom From Torture
- Imaan
- In Her Shoes
- Jane Barrett, BPP Education Group
- LGBTeeHee
- Martineau Gardens
- Mobilise Arts
- Queer-Side
- Rapport Coaching
- REUK
- Sampad
- Stories Of Hope And Home
- The Library Of Birmingham
- The New Art Gallery Walsall
- Time to be Out

Looking forward

We go into 2025 with a clear vision, a strong structure, an expanding team and secure finances.

As well as continuing to deliver our core activities, our key aims for 2025 are to:

- Complete the process of becoming a CIO
- Reopen membership
- Increase our capacity in giving one-to-one support
- Increase member involvement in operational decision-making
- Connect with more organisations that can offer support, advice, information and activities to our members



For more information on the Journey LGBT+ Asylum Group:

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