Journey LGBGT+ Asylum Group



Annual Report 2023

Celebrating another successful year.

With thanks to our funders:

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Kings Heath Action for Refugees

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heart of england COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

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 provide a welcoming, safe and supportive space, giving confidence and a sense of community to asylum seekers who identify as LGBT+.

We offer information, signposting and support though the asylum process and settling into the UK.

> "When I came here I was very shy and sick, I had no confidence to speak. Now I come here and speak in front of everyone."
>
> "I found a chosen family in the Journey group and enormous support during the asylum process."
>
> "Being in the same space with likeminded individuals, they have made me feel seen, heard, welcomed, and warm and part of a real family. I am so grateful for the Journey LGBT+ Group and how warm and cheerful they have been with me and how loved they have made me feel, because I was really lost when I arrived here in the UK."

Summary of Activities in 2023

This year we moved to a new meeting space, launched our website and did even more networking with other organisations. We ended the year with over 150 members.

We regularly attract 50 members to our monthly meetings. At our AGM, many of our members spoke with passion about the activities they have taken part in, including Birmingham Pride, the bluebell walk, our summer picnic, Digbeth First Friday and Pride Face.

Our volunteers and Buddies continue to play a vital role in the group, helping organise and run activities, and providing vital one-to-one peer support. Over 50 members were granted leave to remain over the last year.

The group has taken part in many networking opportunities, including Refugee Week, City of Sanctuary AGM, orientation sessions at Brushstrokes, and the Birmingham Mind Conference 'Sanctuary Seekers and Us'. This has increased awareness of the group and opened access to opportunities for group members.

A snapshot of this year's activities

Walking the hills

In April we had our bluebell walk in the Lickey Hills, walking over 7km up the hills and through the mud.



"It was a beautiful day and an excellent experience."

"Our bluebell walk was amazing. Speaking with each other made me feel very good and happy. The environment bring up good memories of back country and good times spent with my boyfriend. The nature was amazing, nice and beautiful."

"I had a really lovely day. Can't wait for another walk. Thanks for making this woodland peace walking come true. Everything brilliant."

Celebrating with Pride

We had a large and lively contingent bedecked in rainbows and t-shirts, and carrying the Journey Group banner to celebrate Birmingham Pride. Some members even made the press, sharing their stories with the Express and Star, Birmingham Mail and featuring in a video by I Am Birmingham.



"My first Pride in my life was a wonderful experience."

"It was a memorable event, so proud of my identity, one of its kind. I will never forget seeing my dreams come true."

"So proud to take part in this event."

"It was a great day. Happy to be part of this family."

"As a first timer I thoroughly enjoyed myself. Looking forward to the next Pride."

Getting crafty

We had a special guest at our June monthly meeting - performing artist Ash Mukherjee. Ash invited our members to take part in some movement and craft activities as a taste of what to expect from our 'Pride Face' collaboration with Sampad. The session culminated in a display of all the wonderful Pride-themed faces our members created.



Spreading the word – Refugee Week

Refugee Week was a busy time for Journey. We had a stall in Birmingham's Centenary Square as part of a 'Get Together for Compassion' event, bringing together several asylum support organisations to meet, share information and spread awareness.

Ten of our members were also invited to share stories of strength and courage at an Inclusive Gathering event in June. The Journey members gave personal testimonies, led songs, showed pictures and screened videos to raise awareness of their experiences, as part of Refugee Week, and shared delicious home cooked food from around the world.



Contributing to research

Ten of our members took part in a focus group for a research project by Migration: Policy & Practice. The study aims to gain a better understanding of the barriers faced by migrants to Birmingham and the Black Country. Researchers Trish and Andy encouraged our members to talk about their experiences - positive and negative - of accessing housing, legal support, health care and work. Their comments contributed to a report which aims to improve integration for migrants to the Midlands.



Digbeth First Friday

In August, our volunteers led a trip around the exhibitions, performances and live music of Digbeth First Friday - an event that happens in different spaces around Digbeth on the first Friday of every month.

> *" There was also an art gallery in another room, and I drew a big tree with many branches and fresh leaves. I choose a tree because I remember there was tree in my village at the road side. Everyone coming from the farm or anyone carrying a load, when you reached the tree, you will rest there, because that tree had big shade around it, and fresh air blowing there anytime. I called that tree Sanctuary Tree, because it saves people's lives. That tree is Birmingham to me, because it is a city where you can seek sanctuary, and is a city of different cultures. The people in Birmingham are so lovely, cheerful, supportive, so kind. I left my drawing with the host of that part"*

Park life

We held our annual picnic at Cannon Hill Park in August where twenty of our members and seven volunteers enjoyed an afternoon of games and fun. This included obstacle challenges, ball games and building blocks. There was also a game of rounders, and a game involving a multicoloured parachute. It was a lovely afternoon with laughter, fun and food. The samosas went down a treat, and we even managed to dodge the showers, staying mostly dry until the end of a great afternoon in the park.



"Lovely weather, amazing people, and yumm food. Everything was perfect."

"It was a very very refreshing picnic. I really enjoyed it. Thank you all."

"I really enjoyed the food and games. The great thing was I got a chance to catch up with people, so it's been a lovely day."

"I had fun as always, the games were epic, and I can't wait for our next picnic."

Live and learn

At our August meeting, Ehsan and George from Refugee Education UK came to talk to the group about opportunities to study at college. They gave an overview of the education system in the UK, the different levels of study, and which courses are available to asylum seekers and refugees. There were also group discussions, opportunities to ask questions, and a chance to talk in more detail after the meeting.

" Thank you for inviting the Refugee Education team yesterday. It was very useful and helpful and they did an excellent job."

"I got advice that with my current access diploma I should just apply direct to university, and search for places with funding or sponsorship. Meanwhile I can start any free course, including English, at colleges near me. Thanks for inviting them."

This was followed by a workshop aimed at members who wanted to access higher education and addressed concerns over funding, translation of qualifications, accessing UK ENIC and where to go for scholarships.

"It was a great learning opportunity, most questions were addressed, and personally I found clarity on all the grey areas I had. It was really helpful and insightful about the requirements needed for admission into higher education in the UK, the application process, and how to look for funding opportunities, among other things."



Performing with pride – Pride Face Project

Seventeen of our members took part in Saturday Pride Face workshops at the MAC, exploring art, craft, movement, wellbeing and performance. It all culminated in a fun and moving performance at the Hexagon Theatre to an audience of invited guests.

Pride Face was run by Sampad, and led by director Ash Mukherjee, along with workshop leaders Kiera Saunders and Darren Abrahams.

> *" Thanks from the core of my heart to all of those who gave us such a safe platform where we expressed and showed our inside reality and thoughts. I got a lot of encouragement and boldness to say to the world I feel proud of who I am."*

> *" It was a wonderful time. It was so helpful to me. I really want to thank Ash for your wonderful way of teaching and all members of the group. We had a wonderful time together."*

> *"I want to express my gratitude for patiently sharing your experiences with us. Your tolerance of our differences and the joyful moments you've created mean a lot."*

> *"Thank you all for your support so that we can be ourselves and celebrate pride on a daily basis. I am proud of who I am."*



Offering Support

Buddy scheme

The Journey Buddies play a key role in the Journey LGBT+ Asylum Group in supporting individual members and supporting the group. This is a peer-to-peer support network, and those who volunteer to become a Buddy receive training and support from the volunteer team.

"We are passionate volunteers who lend a compassionate ear and vital support to fellow members. We are the heart of the Journey LGBT+ Asylum Group."

"Being a Buddy has been a transformative journey. I feel empowered to make a difference and contribute to the lives of asylum seekers. The continuous training keeps me motivated and ensures I provide the best support possible."

"A Buddy, despite their problems, manages to support you and give you back a taste for life and boosting your emotions in a positive way. I know the road is still long, and I know it's not going to be easy, but I'm armed and I'm ready, because I have the necessary support to face everything that awaits me".



Celebrating Appiah's birthday at a Buddy training day.

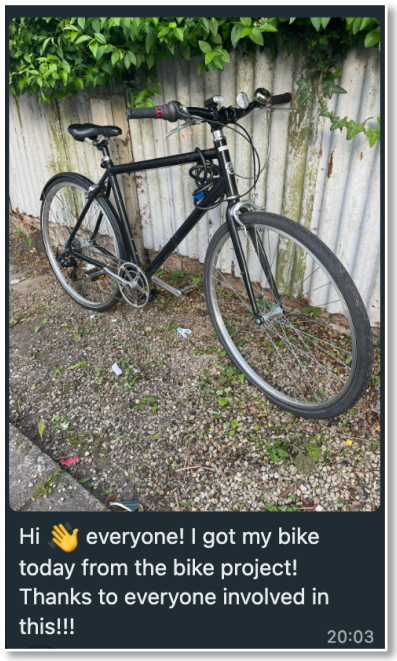
One-to-one support

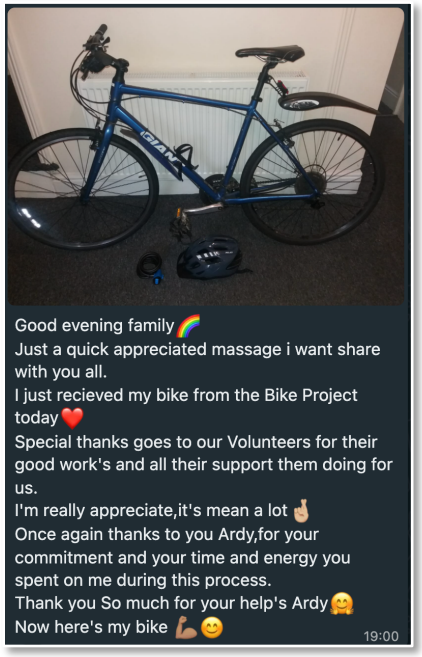
Providing one-to-one support to individual members is a key aspect of the Journey Group, as well as signposting individuals to more specialist support, for example referrals to Freedom From Torture.

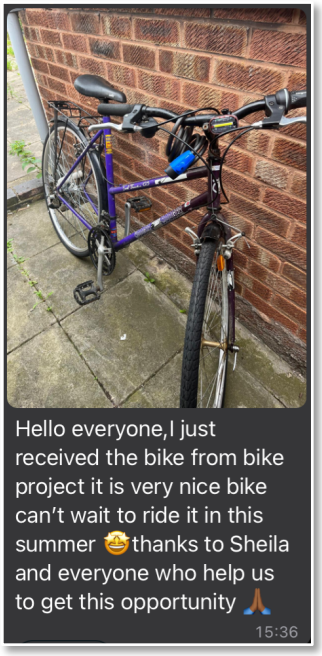
Where appropriate, we provide letters of support to members, as evidence to support their asylum claim. We also encourage members to talk through their personal stories, with a volunteer they trust, in preparation for their Home Office interview, as many have never talked to others before about their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

Partnership with the Bike Project

We continued our partnership with the Bike Project, and in 2023 over 30 of our members received a bike to use, along with lights, locks and maintenance advice. Having a bike can mean so much to individuals, enabling them to travel without transport costs and giving a vital boost to their mental wellbeing.







Journey Volunteer team

The Journey LGBT+ Asylum group is a company limited by guarantee with charitable aims and is organised totally by a team of volunteers. In 2023 we recruited new volunteers, working towards a more diverse volunteer team. This has increased the range of activities and support we can offer, as each volunteer also brings their interests and skills to expand opportunities for group members.

One of the founder members of the Journey LGBT+ Asylum Group, Stephen Bentley, died in September, and we would like to acknowledge his tremendous work in establishing and supporting the group in its early years.

Increased networking with other organisations working with asylum seekers has enabled us to signpost members to specialised or more appropriate services, and raised awareness of some of the challenges faced by LGBT+ asylum seekers.

With group membership growing significantly along with demands upon the volunteer team, one of our key priorities in 2024 will be addressing how we ensure sustainability of our work.

Finances

Throughout this year, the group has received financial support from Heart of England Community Foundation, Birmingham Pride Community Foundation, Fierce, Kings Heath Action for Refugees, Inclusive Gathering and a number of private donations.

We have also received in-kind support from the Creative Learning Hub at Birmingham Rep, who have provided a large meeting room for our monthly member meetings, smaller rooms for volunteer team meetings, and have facilitated complimentary tickets at some events at the Rep, enabling members to go to a theatre performance, often for the first time. Thanks also for other in-kind support from Sampad and Fabric.

We were successful in securing a Sanctuary Award, through Birmingham City Council, which will support a significant amount of activities in 2024 for our members who live in Birmingham.

A key challenge for the group in 2024 will be in securing longer term funding to ensure sustainability of our work and support to LGBT+ asylum seekers and refugees in Birmingham and the West Midlands.

Annual celebration and AGM

Our AGM was held on 18th Oct 18 2023 with 60 members present, plus volunteers 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.

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

- Alexandra Taylor
- Jon Homer
- Sheila Rushforth

We also gave thanks to Phil Hoar, who stepped down as a Director but continues to support the group as a volunteer.



For more information on the Journey LGBT+ Asylum Group:

Email: hello@journeylgbtasylumgroup.co.uk

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