

BRISTOL REFUGEE FESTIVAL



Evaluation and Impact Report

December 2024 – December 2025

Introduction

CEO - Jules Olsen

2025 has been one of BRF's most successful years to date, but also one of the most challenging. The continued rise in anti-migrant rhetoric and the on-going cost of living crisis, has caused rising frustration and division in communities, with some of the most vulnerable being targeted.

This is why this year's 'Community as a Superpower' theme was so powerful, because it showed that when we unite instead of divide we can create strong, inclusive communities that welcome all. We have worked with some incredible communities this year, who are determined to change the narrative and below you will see highlights of what our tiny, but mighty team has achieved.

Once again I express my deep thanks to the staff, volunteers, ambassadors and partners who have made it such an incredible year.



Chair - Nawar Nasser

This report reflects a year of strong impact and deepened community connection for Bristol Refugee Festival, delivered during a period of increasing social tension and uncertainty. In this context, BRF's role in creating safe, welcoming and inclusive spaces has been both timely and essential.

Throughout 2025, BRF continued to bring people together across differences, supporting refugees and asylum seekers to share their skills, culture and leadership, while strengthening understanding and cohesion within local communities.

The evidence in this report highlights not only growth in participation, but also the sustained trust BRF has built through long-term, hyper-local partnerships and lived-experience leadership.

On behalf of the Board, I thank the staff, ambassadors, volunteers, partners and funders whose dedication has made this work possible and ensures BRF remains a vital part of Bristol's community life.

Bristol Refugee Festival (BRF)

Vision



For **refugees and asylum seekers to feel welcome, valued and confident** to celebrate and share their culture, skills and knowledge in their local community and beyond.

Mission

To support and facilitate **newly arrived and settled communities to come together in celebration of inclusion and diversity** through a year-round programme of events, with an annual cross art-form Festival at its core.



Aims

- 1 To celebrate and **value the contribution of refugees and asylum seekers** enabling them to engage with and be more active members of their community.
- 2 To bring **settled local residents and newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers together** to build strong relationships in and across communities.
- 3 To improve the **health and well-being of refugees and asylum seekers** and reduce social isolation.



BRF Activities

BRF achieves this through a year-round collaborative programme of arts, cultural, sports and educational events with a cross art-form festival at its core. BRF uses a responsive and flexible approach to develop this programme, to ensure relevance and authenticity. BRF works at the pace of trust to build meaningful relationships and sustainable connections. BRF also achieves its aims through strategic partnership work as part of the Bristol Refugee and Asylum Seeker partnership (BRASP).

The Difference made by BRF in 2025

BRF has promoted better understanding of why people seek sanctuary and illustrated the value there is in the diversity and talent that refugees and asylum seekers bring to Bristol.

This has contributed to increased understanding between and across settled and refugees and asylum seekers communities, leading to greater cohesion.

It achieves this through:

A year-long programme of arts, cultural and educational events.

Strategic partnerships with other local organisations which are refugee and asylum seeker led and / or have similar aims to BRF, to amplify the effect of our work by sharing opportunities and expertise.

Strategic collaborations with mainstream and hyperlocal community-based organisations, supporting them to develop more spaces of welcome and to embed refugee and asylum seeker-led events as part of their annual programmes.

Promoting events that showcase the talent and diversity that refugees and asylum seekers bring to Bristol.

Developing relevant events in response to changing social contexts.



47 different events and activities have taken place over the year-long programme:

- Annual two week Festival in June, with over 20 partner events
- Celebrating Sanctuary - Queen Square - annual flagship event.
- A package of local community activities including:
 - Welcome chats at local hubs, connecting local residents and refugees and asylum seekers in the area to discuss inclusion, co-creation and how to be involved with the project.
 - Creating Spaces of Welcome workshops, bringing refugees and asylum seekers and community leaders together to share ideas and best practice on how to make community spaces more inclusive and welcoming, to overcome barriers to engagement.
 - Celebrating Sanctuary Local events.
- BRF's ambassador development Programme.



Sharing Love exhibition
at the RWA - partner
event Festival 2025



One of four Migrateful cookery
classes - partner event Festival 2025

Graphic of partnership between BRF, Bridges for Communities (BFC) & Bristol City of Sanctuary (BCOS) to develop a new cohesive programme of welcome activities and spaces for local residents and people seeking sanctuary in 5 locations across Bristol.

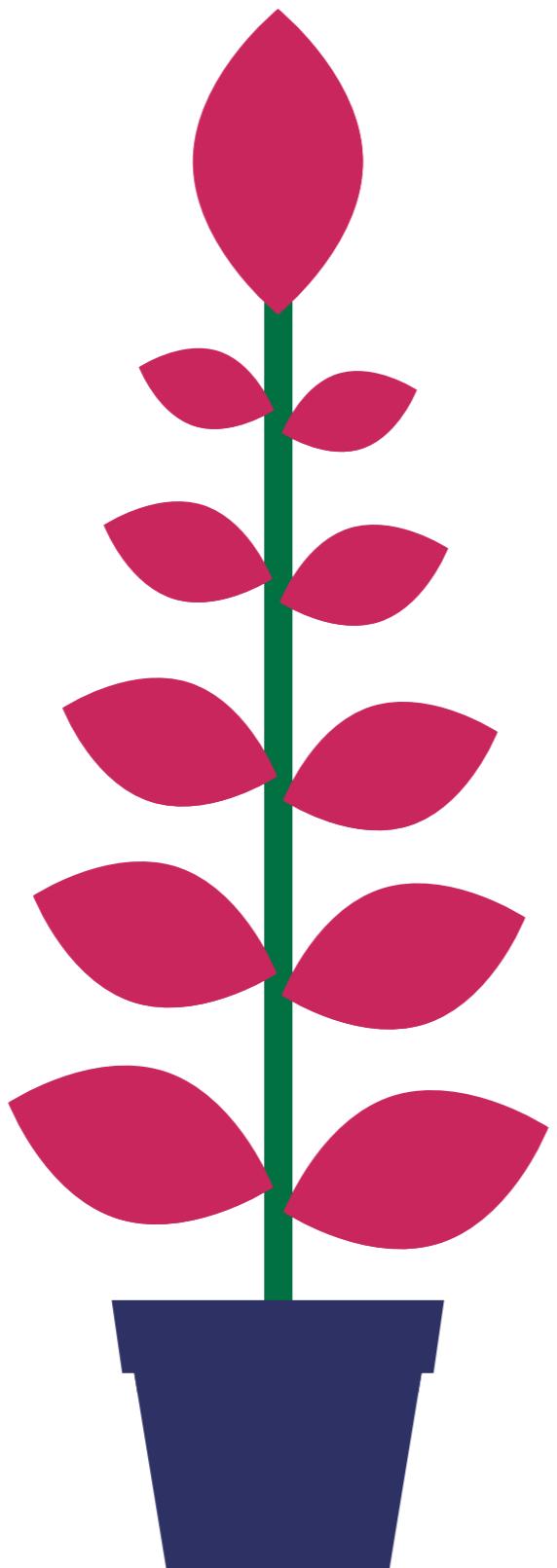
Through work with organisations like Migrateful and RWA and partnerships with Bridges BFC and BCOS, BRF has developed valuable strategic work in a range of venues and contexts.

The year in numbers

47
events &
activities

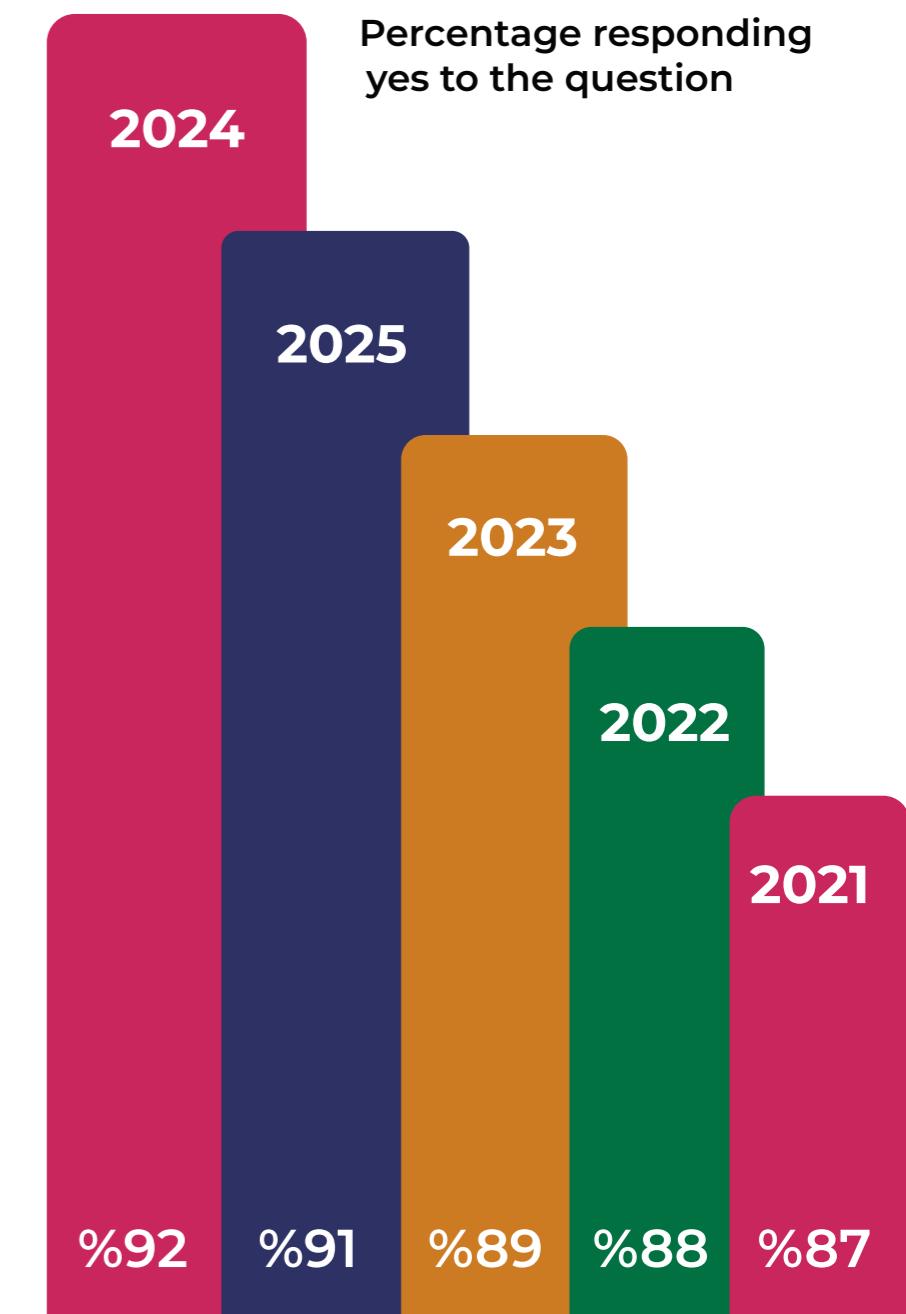
11,884
participants

1891
refugees and
asylum
seekers (16%)



2025	Total Attendees: 11,904
Refugees and asylum seekers: 1,891	
2023	Total Attendees: 5,777
-	
2024	Refugees and asylum seekers: 966
2022	Total Attendees: 6,196
-	
2023	Refugees and asylum seekers: 983
2021	Total Attendees: 2,092
-	
2022	Refugees and asylum seekers: 496
2020	Total Attendees: 802
-	
2021	Refugees and asylum seekers: 332

**Has this event made you feel more
connected to your local community?**



Aim 1 - Celebrating and valuing the contribution of refugees and asylum seekers, enabling them to engage with and be more active members of their community.

I learnt like diverse races, cultures and ages can share in the same space and show beautiful performances.

-Volunteer 21, Celebrating Sanctuary Queen Square, Survey feedback, 22nd June 2025

It is clear from feedback that the events that BRF produces celebrate the contribution of refugees and asylum seekers, so that their contributions are valued, for example:

It's just a way to let refugees feel like they are valued, heard and seen.

-Audience member, Celebrating Sanctuary Queens Square 2025, Film Interviews*

Platforming refugees' skills and cultural assets at the Queens Square event is an important annual flagship moment for BRF, where audiences from across Bristol come together to enjoy a variety of different cultural experiences:

It's really beautiful and also to see people from all over the world. And to hear people stories and different people's cultures and traditions and food... the food's good!

-Audience member, Celebrating Sanctuary Queens Square 2025,



Food stall at CS Queens Square 2025

BRF also celebrates and values the contribution of refugees and asylum seekers through events in hyperlocal contexts and a wide variety of communities. For example, six events took place in South Gloucestershire this year, in Patchway, Kingswood and Yate.

236 people attended these events, of whom **145** were people with lived experience as refugees or of the asylum seeker process. This means that more than a half of those attending were refugees and asylum seekers (61%).

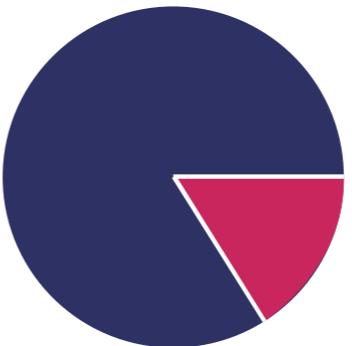
The range of events planned and delivered in South Gloucestershire by BRF have ensured opportunities for local people to come together and experience the potential contribution of their local refugees and asylum seekers communities, from different countries, cultures and experiences. In turn, these events have also **enabled refugees and asylum seekers to engage with and be more active members of their community.**

Events, such as the Nowruz Celebration in Patchway and the Spring Celebration in Kingswood, have been celebratory and have brought people together through dancing, making and talking together. People have got to know each other and learned different things at these events:

“
I learnt to embroider. I met wonderful people, and I improved my English.
-Participant 4, Spring Celebration Survey, April 2024

“
Delicious food and great music and dancing.
-Volunteer 2, Nowruz Celebration Survey, March 2025

It is clear from feedback that people have learnt new things about each other and each other's culture through these events and the wider BRF programme. For example, 81% of people responding to the annual survey, reported that they have learned something new at a BRF event:



Did you learn anything new?

72 Responses, 3 empty

■ %81 Yes
■ %19 No

When asked what they have learnt people have responded in a variety of ways, as indicated by the following quotes:

“
Really think about things from another perspective.

-Creating Spaces of Welcome Participant 3, North Bristol, 11th Nov 2025

“
Learning about Bristol's colonial past as well as places of sanctuary, connecting with new people.

-Participant 14, Sanctuary Walk through Bristol's Past & Present, 19th



Kingswood Spring Celebration

BRF supports refugees and asylum seekers to develop events they want to see and over years of collaboration, reducing support as and when refugees and asylum seekers feel able to organise their events independently.

For example, the local Nowruz celebrations have developed organically across several years and are now being led and organised by members of the community, who none the less continue to value BRF's support:

“
I would like to sincerely thank all the members of the Bristol Refugee Festival team for your invaluable support and collaboration in organizing this year's Nowruz celebration. Your presence and contributions made this event one of the most memorable celebrations... We look forward to working together again next year and hope to host an even bigger and more successful celebration.

-Arman Rahimi, Feedback via email, May 2025

”



Nowruz Celebration 2025



Redcliffe launch event

This, in turn, enables refugees and asylum seekers to be **more effectively engaged** and supports them to become more active members of their community and ensures that they **feel more welcomed, connected and able to contribute to their local community.**

Many more similar events, with similar outcomes, have been organised through collaboration with local organisations, from Redcliffe to Southmead.

Southmead CommUnity Celebration

part of Bristol Refugee Festival

Saturday 14th June 2025

12 - 3 PM

At The Ranch Adventure Playground & Youth Space,
BS10 5PP

Food, Music, Activities

- ★ Eat food from Afghanistan, Sudan, and more
- ★ Play games and sport
- ★ Help to make a Community Superpower Banner
- ★ Create a CommUnity Poem
- ★ Story Sharing

For more info:

Email: LucilleSmith@southmead.org
or tel: 0117 950 3335,

**BRISTOL
REFUGEE
FESTIVAL**





Women's Craft Group which is now established at Arnolfini

BRF also achieves long term partnerships with organisations like Arnolfini, to the point where BRF have been able to step away and leave Arnolfini to independently continue the work, that was initiated by BRF.

One of the most direct ways in which BRF celebrates and values the contribution of refugees and asylum seekers and enables them to engage with and be more active members of their community through the **Ambassador programme** which BRF continues to develop to ensure the voice of lived experience is at the heart of its work and decision-making. The group has become more confident and able to take part in a variety of ways and the following events have been significant in this year's ambassador programme:

- Ambassadors weekend away-day to discuss their roles and how to further develop.
- Ambassadors involved in AGM, planning meetings as speakers and workshop facilitators.
- Organisational development day when ambassadors actively contributed to discussions about organisational direction and plans for the coming year.
- Ambassadors had key roles in the Queens Square event.



Ambassador weekend away

Aim 2 - Bringing settled local residents and newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers together, building strong relationships in and across communities.

“Connecting with different cultures.

-Participant 27, Celebrating Sanctuary Queen Square,
Survey feedback, 22nd June 2025

Through platforming the skills and cultural assets of refugees and asylum seekers, BRF works to bring people together in harmonious ways:

“People from diverse backgrounds, people from different nationalities, different languages, even different religions, they're coming and they are enjoying it. And you know, they are just accepting each other.

-Audience member, Celebrating Sanctuary Queens Square 2025,
Film Interviews

Events that focus on making things together have been shown to be highly effective in bringing together settled local residents and refugees and asylum seekers, in ways that build strong relationships in and across communities. For example, in South Gloucestershire, common interests in craft activities have brought people together and thereby contributed to a sense of cohesion and harmony:

“Chatting with people with the same hobby... I met women of different ethnic groups, they are friendly even though we didn't have much verbal communication, I felt good to stay with them.

-Participant 1, Sew and Chat Survey, April 2024



The Sew and Chat sessions and Nowruz celebration have also been significant as opportunities for refugees to gain experiences in leading events and workshops themselves. BRF is constantly working towards becoming a refugees and asylum seekers led organisation and so these types of opportunities are key working towards realising this ambition.

It is evident that Arman Rahimi, quoted in the previous section, and Sherien Elsheikh, who facilitated the Sew and Chat sessions, have gained experiences that they wish to build upon in future, through continuing to bring people together in ways that nurture greater community cohesion:

“

As I observed their progress, I began to contemplate the potential for expanding our workshop offerings in Kingswood. There is a genuine need for accessible spaces where individuals can come together to engage in enjoyable activities while their children are in school, especially for those who may otherwise feel isolated. These gatherings play a significant role in fostering community connections, particularly for older individuals who benefit from social interaction.

-Sherien Elsheikh, Email feedback, May 2025

”

Welcome chats have also presented opportunities for people to meet others, share ideas, and get involved in planning events in the community. People have enjoyed these events, as opportunities to get involved as well as getting to know each other.

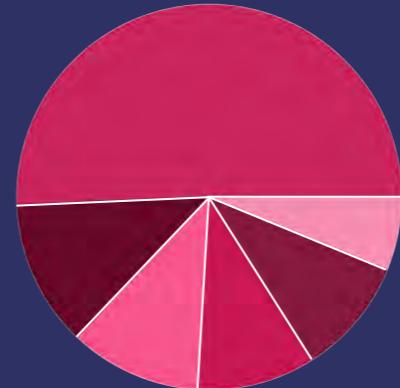
Furthermore, the BRF approach enables host communities to have the confidence and knowledge to engage with refugees and asylum seekers in their area, enabling them to create places of welcome and inclusion.

One example of this, this year, has been in supporting partners in Knowle West. BRF worked closely with a range of local people, organisations and groups, and brought those organisations together to collaborate, plan and deliver an event entitled 'Bring Your Culture to the Table.' as outlined in this [BRF Case Study 2025](#).

Through its programme and collaborations like the one in Knowle West, BRF ensures that refugees and asylum seekers feel more welcomed, connected and able to contribute to their local community, as is evidenced by the number of asylum seekers and refugees attending events, which this year has been 16% of those attending and 43% of those completing the BRF survey, as is illustrated in the pie chart below.

Have you had direct experience of the UK asylum or immigration service?

81 Responses, 1 empty

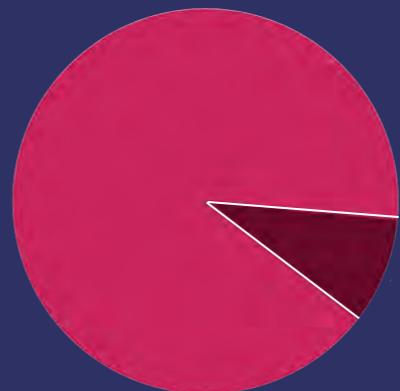


%51	No
%12	Migrant
%11	Asylum seeker
%10	Refugee
%10	Other
%6	Prefer not to say

The connectivity generated through BRF events has also been evidenced by 91% of people stating that they feel more connected to their local community, as shown in the pie chart below.

Has this event made you feel more connected to your local community?

74 Responses, 1 empty



%91	Yes
%9	No

This outcome has also been evidenced in feedback gathered across events, as evidenced throughout this report.

It is also clear that **refugees and asylum seekers participating in events have valued** the opportunities presented and BRF have developed spaces in which people have been able to connect:

“

لا شيء جميل جداً حبيت البرنامج

Translation:
Something very beautiful, I liked the programme.

-Participant at Redcliffe CommUnity Celebration, 7th June 2025

”

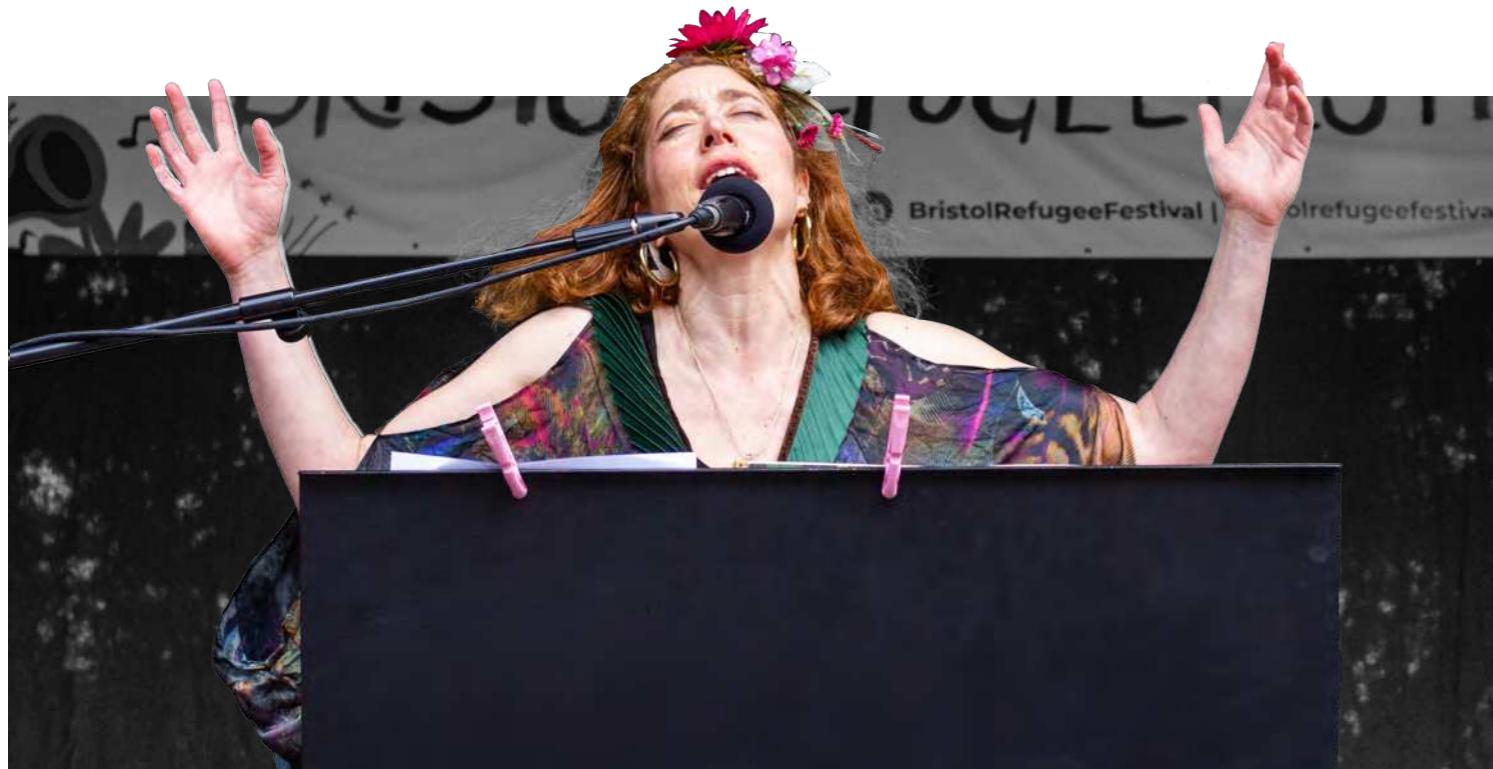
“

It has made me feel connected by being able to socialise with people around me.

-Participant at Redcliffe CommUnity Celebration, 7th June 2025

”

Food and music are continually highlighted as central to an effective event in bringing people together, to eat and dance as are events that are family friendly.



”

عشان معي اصدقائي واحبتي والأطفال مبسوطين

Translation:
Because with me, my friends, my love and the children are happy.

-Participant at Redcliffe CommUnity Celebration, 7th June 2025

”

”

The dancing is great and enjoying seeing all of the people coming together.

-Participant 38, Celebrating Sanctuary Queen Square, 22nd June 2025

”

”

The food!!!! The marimba!!!! Oh, the music was awesome. Met some amazing people.

-Participant 47, CommUnity Celebration, The Ranch, 14th June 2025

”

It is also clear that **people value the opportunity to contribute to their local community:**

“

Putting my input and my ideas amongst and with the team and coming up with this big event, that is really exciting to me.

-Malesha Lynch, Local organiser,
BRF Community as a Superpower film 2025*

”

As evidenced previously in this report, people thereby recognised the **value of their contribution** and discovered their **communal strength**.

BRF's approach, by working with hyper local organisations and communities to support people to identify and share their diverse assets, means that the work acts to evolve greater community connectivity:

“

When you come to it grassroots, that is where you start building a better community.

-Malcolm Clarke, Local Organiser,
BRF Community as a Superpower film 2025

”

By working directly with local communities, the diversity of hyperlocal areas can be made visible and celebrated through events:

“

It's all been organised by a group of residents, who are really passionate about taking social action... They've pulled in different people... and it's just a great way to see the rich cultures that are here in Knowle West.

-Mona-Lisa Chaka, Community Development Practitioner,
BCC, BRF Community as a Superpower film 2025

”

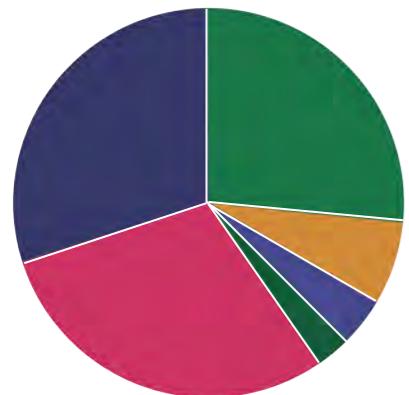


7-22 JUNE 2025

As evidenced previously, this makes a significant difference to communities like Knowle West, where the potential to **bring communities together to celebrate is an important way of countering current tensions.**

An important factor in realising this outcome is the effective ways in which BRF brings together people of different faiths, as is illustrated in the table below, based on feedback gathered across the 2025 events, which shows that 30% of people attending and / or participating identify as Muslim, with the same percentage identifying as Christian.

What is your faith/religion?



74 Responses, 3 empty

- %30 Muslim
- %30 Christian
- %27 No religion
- %7 Other
- %3 Prefer not to say
- %3 Other entries

Community cohesion is clearly a significant outcome from across all the events that BRF programmes, produces or collaborates to realise, across the city and beyond.

It is also a significant outcome from the '**Creating Spaces of Welcome Workshops**'.

Through the creating Spaces for Welcome workshops, BRF shares its expertise in creating spaces where settled local communities and refugees and asylum seekers can come together. It is clear from feedback about what people gained from BRF's 2025 workshops, that the workshops were effective in this way:

Signage and Welcoming signs in other languages are important, learning about the barriers.

-Creating Spaces of Welcome Participant 6, North Bristol, Nov 25

Learning lots of practical examples.

-Creating Spaces of Welcome Participant 8, North Bristol, Nov 25

This results in community connectivity and cohesion through bringing settled local residents and newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers together, building strong relationships in and across communities.



Aim 3 - Improving the health and well-being of refugees and asylum seekers and reducing social isolation.

Meeting so many lovely people, eating delicious food, and feeling connected.

-Volunteer 19, Celebrating Sanctuary Queen Square, 22nd June 2025

There were more people there with mental health issues who were buoyed by it.

-John Harrison, Interview, 3rd December 2025

BRF events lead to greater community connectivity, which in turn reduces loneliness and isolation, which thereby improves health and wellbeing:

It's good for me personally, it's good for my wellbeing and for all of our mental health, to go out and communicate and meet our neighbours.

-Malesha Lynch, Interview, 3rd December 2025

Becoming familiar with each other leads to greater understanding empathy and a desire to care for each other:

It was a wonderful time of meeting and speaking together, celebrating and eating and dancing together. Of sharing experiences, support and care for one another.

-Participant 15, Celebrating Sanctuary Queen Square, 22nd June 2025,

People also find BRF events to be joyful and uplifting, which is of significant value in terms of wellbeing, especially for people who struggle with mental health issues:



Audience dancing at Celebrating Sanctuary Queen Square

Through joyful acts of making or dancing together, people feel uplifted, buoyant and positive.

One detail that is important in achieving this outcome is that the BRF team provides transport and food for refugees and asylum seekers to enable their involvement and participation.

The team has nurtured trust with people living in isolation in hotels to ensure that they felt safe accessing this transport to attend events. This has made vital opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers staying in hotels to connect with each other more accessible:

“Met more women from hotel and Redcliffe building.

-Participant 56, Participant at Redcliffe CommUnity Celebration, 7th June 2025

The team has also ensured multilingual signage in all venues and spaces being used and in other marketing and publicity. BRF has also provided transport and food for ambassadors and volunteers from different backgrounds working with BRF. These inclusive details are significant to the engagement of refugees and asylum seekers, for whom such practical considerations are pivotal.

The presence of BRF's partners at the Queens Square event is also important in connecting refugees and asylum seekers with other organisations that can support them and address practical needs:

“I learn about charities that work for refugees and asylum seekers, for us.

-Participant 33, Celebrating Sanctuary Queen Square, 22nd June 2025



At Celebrating Sanctuary Queens Square BRF's strategic partners to come together to amplify each other's presence, raising the profile of different local organisations' work:

“I came with Duncan and our team from the Bridge. I felt that by talking to other stall holders and people immersing themselves, we had a sense of being allied to something bigger.

-Volunteer 19, Celebrating Sanctuary Queen Square, 22nd June 2025

All of these details contribute to improving the health and well-being of refugees and asylum seekers and reducing social isolation.

Outcomes & Next Steps

In 2025, not only has BRF achieved its intended outcomes, but the programme has also led to various other outcomes.

Community members engaged in the hyper local strands of the BRF programme have become involved in the wider programme, attending meetings, workshops and events.

Longer-term engagement to involve local communities meant that refugees and asylum seekers in localities such as Hartcliffe, Lockleaze and Knowle West, felt a stronger connection with BRF as an organisation.

Local representatives feel more connected and have a deeper understanding of the value of BRF's work, for example:

"In 2024 there were 120 million people displaced around the world and 43.5 million of them are refugees and... these people, contrary to popular belief, live off... between £1 and £7 a week and once they are given citizenship, within 28 days they have to provide their own work and their own accommodation. It's no easy ride and part of the celebration is acknowledging what Bristol Refugee Festival is about and we're part of that bigger picture."

- John, Knowle West Alliance member, BCFM Interview 21st May 2025



Participants value the opportunity to learn more about the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers and how the city of Bristol works to be welcoming and inclusive:

"It's always very valuable to realise how diverse and welcoming Bristol is and wants to even go further and keep improving on becoming more inclusive. It's really rewarding to be able to hear from other's experiences and stories about how they ended in Bristol, why and their struggles/positives."

- Participant 10, Creating Spaces of Welcome, North Bristol, 11th Nov 2025

Local communities, having witnessed the difference made by BRF's events, have talked about fundraising for their own events next year.

Connections and networks have developed where communities are connecting with each other and extending their activities beyond BRF's central involvement.

Challenges

This year there have been several contextual challenges for BRF.

BRF has been working against increasing hostility and continued anti-migrant/refugees and asylum seeker protests, meaning people become scared to go out and feel they are not welcome.

There has been a greater need for longer and more focused engagement across the city particularly in areas that have maybe not engaged with this type of work before and where tensions are high, which has put pressure on an already stretched team.

There has been an increasingly difficult funding environment, with grants being reduced and in some instances cut completely. This makes planning difficult and creates uncertainty within the organisation.

These challenges mean there is a significant need to consistently consider how to ensure staff, volunteer and partner safety, but also wellbeing, as when a very small team is doing a huge amount in a challenging environment, this can lead to risk of stress and burnout.

What next?

The unique role of BRF, in the current social context and climate, is essential for continuing to foster positive attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers in Bristol, therefore BRF will continue the following

- Collaborate with more local community groups and organisations to offer BRF's expertise, networks and support to develop more inclusive spaces.
- Develop a network of spaces of welcome across the city, encouraging peer support and independent activity.
- Develop and evolve the ambassador programme, through training and clear pathways to lived experience leadership in all areas of the organisation.
- Review policies and protocols for risk assessments to ensure safety of team and participants at events.
- Increase and diversify funding opportunities to enable increased capacity growth.
- Prioritise staff wellbeing.



Thank you !

To everyone who has supported Bristol Refugee Festival over this last year and joined us to show Bristol as a welcoming and inclusive city.

- ♥ Our fantastic staff team.
- ♥ Our wonderful ambassadors, volunteers & board members.
- ♥ Our generous donors and funders.
- ♥ All the wonderful partners and communities that help make Bristol a true City of Sanctuary.

“ It's such a unique festival because there's nothing in Bristol that really brings every culture together in such a positive and friendly way.

-Volunteer, Celebrating Sanctuary Queens Square ”



Report compiled by Dr Roz Stewart-Hall

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