

Northumberland County of Sanctuary
(NCOS)



Annual Report

April 2025- April 2026



Northumberlandsanctuary@gmail.com

Registered Charity 1185663

Contents

Page 2	Introduction
	Board Members
Page 3	Volunteer Structure
	Overview of the Year April 2025- April 2026
	Major Achievements
Page 5	Sessions offered in 2025-26
	Developing Partnerships
Page 6	Challenges
	Safeguarding and Risks
Page 7	Policies Reviewed
Page 8	Plans for 2026-27
	Strategic priorities
	Planned improvements
	Known Risks or Constraints
Page 9	Reports from Activities and Projects
	Ashington Drop in
Page 11	Blyth Drop In
Page 13	Bedlington Drop In
Page 16	Art Group
Page 18	Ashington Football Group
Page 20	Games Night
Page 21	Bike Project
	Haltwhistle Hub
Page 22	Summer Programme
Page 23	Acknowledgements

Introduction

NCOS is a small, registered charity run entirely by Volunteers. As we enter our 10th year, there is much to celebrate as we go from strength to strength. In a year where we have seen many challenges against an ever-growing tide of negative rhetoric towards people seeking asylum, we have also seen many successes for our members, past and current. This report contains detail of the many things achieved all of which has only been made possible by the gift of time from our band of volunteers, the funding from generous donors and the donations from the good folks of Northumberland.

We will endeavour to continue the excellent work from the past ten years into the next ten years for the benefit of many who come to our wonderful county of Northumberland to make a new life.

Board members

Murtala Touray – Chair and Trustee

Muhammed Virk – Treasurer and Trustee

Sarah Wright – Secretary, Board Member

Caris Vardy – Designated Safeguarding Lead and Trustee

Elena Kassis – Volunteer Co-ordinator and Trustee

John Stenhouse Blyth Drop in Lead and Trustee

Sarah Greaves Ashington Drop in Lead and Trustee

Zara Galaeva – Deputy Treasurer and Trustee

Wendy Bond - Trustee

Lucia Maharero – Board Member

The board meets on the third Wednesday every month.

At the last AGM in April 2025, Hilton Dawson who was one of our trustees, retired from the Board. Hilton was a founding member of the charity and has worked tirelessly to promote the aims of the organisation and assist people in making the best of their new lives here in Northumberland.

In 2025 the board welcomed two new trustees and an additional board member.

Our chair Murtala has given notice of his intention to stand down at the AGM in April 2026, so we would like to take this opportunity to thank him for all his hard work in steering the direction of the organisation in the past three years. A new chair will be appointed at the AGM.

Volunteer structure

Elena Kassis took on the role of volunteer co-ordinator at the last AGM and there has been progress in formalising the recruitment of volunteers with the establishment of a process including application forms and interviews. We have interviewed nine new volunteers who have successfully started volunteering with us. NCOS currently has twenty-one people signed up to be volunteers.

Blyth drop-in has experienced a reduction in volunteer numbers and was running on two volunteers at one point which placed huge pressure on the Drop-in Lead. However, we have recruited two new volunteers for Blyth. We will need to monitor this and will endeavour to increase volunteer numbers at Blyth.

We are in the process of developing a training programme to include safeguarding, an overview of volunteering, staying safe. We recognise we need to develop first aid and fire safety training as well and will incorporate these subjects into the programme. We do have access to training programmes offered by NCC and NCVA and encourage volunteers to access them.

We also signpost members who have asked about volunteering to other community organisations and other local charities with a view to promoting integration and increasing their knowledge of local services and systems as well as culture.

Overview of the Year 2025-2026

This year has been such a busy year for NCOS with never a dull moment. Our current membership now stands at 510 members served by twenty-one volunteers with a wide variety of backgrounds. We have broadened the network of agencies we work with across the voluntary and statutory sector as we seek to continue to welcome people to Northumberland and support them in helping them settle into a new life in the area, familiarising them with the local area and introducing them to new friends, communities and activities. We have continued to source funding from generous donors to support a number of activities and worked hard to strengthen the governance structure to underpin the functioning of the charity.

Major Achievements

- Provided weekly drop-in sessions in Ashington Bedlington and Blyth providing a safe welcoming environment to members and newcomers to Northumberland (Approx 130 people per week)
- Membership numbers – 510 people are registered with NCOS as members.

- Supported people in the asylum process and in their transition to refugee status via our ongoing strong relationship with Red Cross and the North East Refugee Service in Newcastle
- Linked people with language sessions at LET and Northumberland College
- Developed a Football Session and Games Night
- Collaborated with Northumbria healthcare to provide a range of sessions ranging from smoking cessation, sexual health, general health checks. Supporting women who are pregnant by referral to specialist midwifery team at Northumbria HealthCare
- Developed relationships with community safety teams and police neighbourhood teams to promote safety for our members.
- Developed links with Family Hubs, Newcastle United Foundation, Cycle Hub, Full Circle, Wansbeck Development Group, Everyturn. Woodhorn Museums
- Secured office space one day a week at Heart of the Hirst courtesy of NCC and the Hirst Regeneration Team
- Participated in litter picking sessions in Ashington and Blyth
- Ran a successful summer programme to help introduce people to Northumberland including weekly walking groups and visits to local beauty spots.
- Completed an Organisation Health Check that identified areas for improvement, strengths, and weaknesses.
- We had a stall at Ashington Town Fair 8th July 2025. Generated lots of interest from attendees and provided volunteers to assist with set up and distributing leaflets.



Sessions offered in 2026-26

- Drop-in sessions – Ashington, Bedlington, Blyth
- Art group
- Football sessions
- Games night
- Men’s gym sessions
- Women’s fitness sessions
- Summer programme during school holidays
- Satellite hub in West Northumberland – Haltwhistle
- Litter Picking in Ashington

Developing partnerships

- Northumberland Asylum and Refugee Resettlement Team (NCC)
- Mears
- Family Hubs
- NCVA
- Newcastle United Foundation
- Hirst Welfare
- Full Circle
- Northumbria Police
- Community Safety Team
- Hirst Regeneration Team
- Health Trainers
- City of Sanctuary
- Red Cross
- NERS
- LET
- Northumberland College
- Northumbria Healthcare



Challenges

We continue to grow in membership numbers, but the population is transient as when people receive a positive decision, they are moved on or move out of the area. This often means we are frequently dealing with people in crisis and whilst we do what we can to assist within our limits and capabilities, there continues to be a significant amount of unmet need. Local services are often stretched to capacity and are limited to what they can respond to. We have seen a significant rise in homelessness, unmet health needs, destitution, and desperation.

The increase of people presenting with unmet need must be considered alongside the current hostile political climate. We have been targeted by individuals in online forums as well as when we have been going about our business outside Drop-in sessions in Ashington and around the town. Our members frequently report racist incidents ranging from physical assault to insults being shouted at them and attacks on homes and property. This was a daily occurrence during the period of Summer 2025 when there was a rise in community tensions and has continued to date but less frequently. The impact of this on our members has been very distressing and has led to people being frightened to leave their homes, not attend sessions and a sense of feeling unwelcome. We had to cancel a number of drop ins during July and August due to safety concerns and numbers dropped significantly with people citing fear of leaving their homes.

To counter act this we have developed a good working relationship with Northumbria Police, The NCC Community Safety Partnership, North East Against Racism Coalition as well as considering working towards integration and breaking down barriers, awareness raising and supporting people in reporting hate crimes. We also record every incident raised with us by members and liaise with Northumbria police as well as supporting people to report any hate crime and post incident.

Safeguarding and Risks

We have updated the safeguarding policy and maintain a register of any safeguarding concerns and actions taken.

The main safeguarding concerns relate to personal safety, destitution, homelessness, and exploitation. There have been two incidents of concerns relating to child neglect and in both cases, we have referred to Safeguarding services at Northumberland County Council and have been involved in relevant safeguarding discussions with Social Care and Healthcare staff.

Many of our members are vulnerable by the very nature of their situation. Social isolation, low levels of trust, language barriers, and lack of knowledge of societal rules can lead to a reluctance to share concerns or vulnerabilities and many fear a negative impact on their asylum claims if they come forward with any concerns. In

addition, some may have been trafficked to the UK and live with the threats made to their families back in their home countries should they declare any issues.

Other risks we have been faced with relates to young single men and non-substantiated allegations of sexual harassment reported on social media. There were a number of unproven allegations made on social media during summer last year which contributed to fears being stoked within the general population and contributed to community tensions and assaults.

Thirty-three incidents were recorded and reported to Northumbria Police and the Community Safety Team (NCC). We are aware that this does not represent all incidents experienced by our members. Many are reluctant to report incidents/crimes or contact the police due to previous experiences with police forces in the countries they have fled from, or a fear that it will impact their asylum claim negatively.

Policies reviewed or introduced this year.

We have developed a framework and timetable for reviewing policies to try and spread the workload. We recognise the importance of a policy structure and are continuing to work through the list with a standardised format.

Policies reviewed in 2025-26 include:-

- Safeguarding
- Risk
- Data Protection
- Code of Conduct

We have also carried out risk assessments for venues and activities that we co-ordinate. This became a key task in the summer months as we continued to receive threats to cause harm.



Plans for 2026-27

Strategic priorities

- Appoint new Chair and Trustees to the Board
- Continue to review policies and procedures.
- Source further funding opportunities.
- Explore feasibility of appointing a full-time funded worker for the charity.

Planned improvements or expansions.

- Explore potential of befriending scheme.
- Explore development of a Women's Group
- Explore development of a cricket session during the cricket season.
- Update website

Known risks or constraints.

- Continue to manage and respond to any threats we receive and liaise with appropriate agencies.
- Continue to source funding opportunities and fulfil our obligations to funders.
- Continue to monitor policy changes in Asylum process and adjust our responses to changes.
- As we continue to attract increasing attendance numbers, we are at very real risk of outgrowing current venues for a number of sessions.



Reports from Activities and Programmes

Ashington Drop In (Sarah Greaves)

The main purpose of the Drop ins to provide a welcome to all asylum seekers arriving in Northumberland. This we do by simply being there, greeting people, and offering refreshments of tea, coffee, juice, and snacks, initially. We have had generous donations from the Community Fund which have enabled us to provide healthy refreshments, fresh fruit and nuts, which people really value, and also we have been able to fund our own volunteers cooking meals to share, every so often, which enhances the sense of community our members often describe.

As well as providing a welcome to asylum seekers, both those newly arrived, and those who have become more settled as time goes on, we provide a hub where other organisations, both statutory and non-statutory, can link in with those they work with, and where people can come for help, support and advice. NCOS volunteers cannot give legal advice, and probably our most valued service is the Red Cross contribution, but other agencies who support our members now have a regular presence at the Drop in: Mears, the housing association which accommodates our members until they get Leave to Remain- or who lose their case; the Northumberland County Council Resettlement Team, and who are now joined by the Employability and Inclusion team at NCC; Northumbria Community Police; the Safer Communities Team, and most recently, the involvement of the Public Health Team.

Volunteers signpost members to appropriate services. We have two volunteers who have close links with schools and with the Traveller, Refugee and Asylum team at Northumbria County Council, and we make regular referrals to Ashington College- Our Safeguarding Officer, Caris Vardy meets regularly with Social Services, and we have made referrals to Pride Action North and the Best Start in Life team. We also make referrals to the Food bank and help with accessing hospital and dental appointments.

We have not missed a week throughout the year and reach at least 320 people regularly. We often have fifty or more attending on a Tuesday. Members benefit from the social as well as practical support, and others come for a specific reason, to speak to one of the many agencies now attending the Drop-in. When the church hall is closed for school and religious holidays, we book other venues- either the Hirst Welfare or the Family Hub.

We manage and distribute donations of clothes, bedding, toys, and household and electrical goods, help with the cost of school uniforms and school shoes, and occasionally provide emergency payments to those made destitute when their support ends.

We also have a regular Drop in on a Saturday, which is much more social in nature, and where we provide activities for children. We occasionally organise trips or picnics to Woodhorn.

The Drop ins provide a conduit for the other activities provided by our volunteers- a regular games night at The Bothy, football sessions at Hirst Welfare, and an art group at NCVA. We are very much aware that being active, socializing and creative is beneficial for individuals' mental health, but we are also focusing on integration into the local community, and breaking down barriers, by holding events in local community centres, encouraging our members to join existing groups, and making ours open to all. A number of our members have made valuable contributions to groups and projects run by NCVA.

Some of our members have joined the Ashington Litter Picking Group in their weekly clean ups of the local area, demonstrating their commitment to the place they hope to call home. We are collaborating with "Escape" and the Hirst to have a regular pre-loved sale of clothes and toys and developing links with Full Circle.

We have asked our members for their comments....

As a volunteer at the Drop-in sessions in Ashington, Blyth, and Bedlington, I would like to share my experience, which I value deeply. I joined the organisation because I believe strongly in its humanitarian mission to support asylum seekers and refugees and to promote a sense of belonging within the community. Through my involvement, I have found this work to be both meaningful and inspiring. Ali A.G.

Through my volunteering, I witness firsthand the kind of support NCOS provides — from practical guidance and administrative assistance to general advice and help in understanding procedures and available services. Equally important is the emotional and social support offered through respectful listening and treating everyone with dignity. I have often seen anxiety and uncertainty gradually replaced with reassurance simply because someone took the time to listen with compassion.

What I value most about the Drop-in sessions is the welcoming atmosphere and strong team spirit among volunteers. The sessions provide a safe space where individuals feel comfortable expressing themselves openly. The cultural diversity within the sessions also creates a rich environment of shared experiences and mutual understanding.



Blyth Drop In (John Stenhouse)

The main purpose of the Drop ins is to provide a welcome to all asylum seekers arriving in Northumberland. This we do by simply being there, greeting people, and offering refreshments of tea, coffee, juice, and snacks, initially. We have had kind donations from Blyth Rotary Club which have enabled us to provide healthy refreshments, which people appreciate.

As well as providing a welcome to asylum seekers, both those newly arrived, and those who have become more settled as time goes on, we provide a hub where other organisations, both statutory and non-statutory, can link in with those they work with, and where people can come for help, support and advice. NCOS volunteers cannot give legal advice, and probably our most valued service is the Red Cross contribution, but other agencies who support our members now have a regular presence at the Drop in: the Northumberland County Council Resettlement Team, Blyth Resource and Initiative Centre {BRIC}, Northumberland Community Police, the Community Safeguarding Team, Social Prescribers from both GP practices in Blyth, the County Council Public Health Team and on occasions, the Healthwatch team. We are also visited by staff from local primary schools. We have presented Bede Academy {North and South}, Newsham Primary, Croftway Academy and Morpeth Road Primary schools with School of Sanctuary award status in the last year.

Volunteers help to signpost members to local organisations and community groups where they can enjoy activities and make new friends. They also help with accessing medical and dental appointments. We also make referrals to the Food bank which often makes very generously donations of fresh fruit and vegetables to distribute at our drop-ins.

We average around twenty attending on a Tuesday. We have members who come every week, who benefit from the social as well as practical support, and others who come for a specific reason, to speak to one of the agencies attending the Drop-in.

We manage and distribute donations of clothes, bedding, toys, and household and electrical goods, help with the cost of school shoes, and occasionally provide emergency payments to those made destitute when their support ends. We refer members to Uniform for All in Blyth who provide school uniforms for a modest donation.

We also have a regular Drop in on a Saturday, which is much more social in nature, and where we provide activities for children. We have table tennis and a range of games for all ages to play.

Through Newcastle United Foundation, we have weekly 5 a side football at Blyth Sports Centre. We have also negotiated a second weekly session which the players run themselves.

We celebrated Eid with a wide range of food from many cultures. Eighty plus members enjoyed sharing food and meeting new friends. During the summer, we hosted our membership friends from Ashington and Bedlington to a picnic in Ridley Park. We played tennis and other games as well as enjoying the play park and water

feature. We hosted the NCOS Christmas party to include members from across Northumberland.



We take every opportunity we can to join in community activities: many of our members have joined the Blyth Litter Picking Group in their weekly clean ups of the local area and also Friends of Ridley Park, assisting in keeping the park clean, feeding birds in the bird hide area, pruning roses and cleaning benches demonstrating their determination to give back to the local area.

Bedlington Drop In (Hilton Dawson)



Members 2025-26

We have come to Bedlington from Iran, Bangladesh, Colombia, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Syria, Sierra Leone, Mauritius, Turkey. We like living in Bedlington, it is quiet and safe and people are friendly.

Sessions

We have met about every Thursday at the Bedlington Family Hub. Anne & Mark and Henryk have provided LET (Learn English Together) at 1pm and this has proved extremely helpful and useful. Some of our members have progressed to ESOL at Ashington and Blyth. Anne and Mark have retired during the year.

From 2pm we meet as a group to discuss issues and to support each other. We have also received 1-1 help from Caris and Hilton.

Samere says :

In the NCOS Group we have tried to learn how to speak English so that we can communicate confidently and integrate into society. In our group we have learned the importance of being together and supporting one another. We are there for each other, trying to understand each other's difficulties ,, offering hope and helping one another build a life here in England. NCOS is very beneficial for us. It helps us strengthen our English and it brings together caring people who support us, look out for us, and guide us.

We will continue our efforts, try harder, encourage more people to join us and find new ways to become more integrated into our community and city.

Bedlington Family Hub is a warm welcoming place, with wonderful resources for children. Our children were especially grateful for some wonderful presents at the Christmas Party.

Community

It is important to try to help people settle and integrate into society and the local community. One of our members attends a local church, where she can make a real contribution and be supported by local people. She has also attended a local art group and the Bedlington Station Learning Hive to learn English and take part in gardening. She has been publicly commended by the Learning Hive for her progress and efforts.

In November, members of our group took part in the annual Remembrance Day Service in Bedlington to remember all who have died for our freedoms and to draw attention to the contribution of service people from many other countries to our Armed Forces. We laid a wreath with messages in Bengali, Arabic and Farsi and our contribution was warmly welcomed.



We are keen advocates for improvements to services for people seeking asylum and who are refugees. Sadik from our group has gone with others to meet County Councillor Glen Sanderson, Leader of Northumberland County Council and we all recently met with County Councillor Caroline Ball who attended on behalf of Ian Lavery MP to discuss our concerns about changes to citizenship and asylum policy.

Elona says:

'Life here is very good and the people are kind and always willing to help. My sons are both part of a football club and they go to school regularly. Even my four-year-old daughter who is in Reception is going to school regularly. As for me, I'm going to college to learn English. I really enjoy living in Bedlington. It's a peaceful place and we feel very welcomed and safe here.'

Our meetings are enjoyable and even though we often discuss serious subjects, there is a lot of laughter and enjoyment of people's company.

In the Summer we enjoyed a day out to Newbiggin by the Sea and at Christmas we had a Christmas Party at the Hub.



What have we done together ?

- English Class with LET
- Christmas Party
- Picnic and trip to Newbiggin.
- accompanied someone to see a lawyer in Middlesbrough.
- Met Emma from Justice First
- Written a letter for new people.
- Took part in Remembrance Sunday in Bedlington
- Introductions to Art Class
- Accompanied a member to interview.
- Lots of phone calls to solicitors, schools, and councils
- We have written letters of support.
- Facilitated volunteering roles for some.
- Referred people for FE colleges for ESOL and courses leading to occupational qualifications.
- Helped with access to GP services, health services, and dental appointments.
- Helping some with renewing their ID cards
- Distribute donations of clothing, household goods, and bikes.
- supported people through the transition from asylum seekers to receiving leave to remain, moving into their new homes, and developing a new settled life.

Jakia says :

'Everything has been helpful.'

The Future.

We are absolutely delighted that three of our families have gained Leave to Remain

Art Group (Sarah Greaves)

Our art group began in June 2024, the aim being to provide a calm, safe space for creativity and connection, and an opportunity to develop an alternative identity to that of “asylum seeker”, with an emphasis on our common humanity. The group offers a refuge from the worries and preoccupations of the everyday experience of being an asylum seeker.

The benefits of creativity, of getting into the flow state, as a way of escaping from anxiety and promoting mental well-being, are well documented. I often hear the artists singing, laughing, as well as talking together it is a place where different nationalities come together, and it seems where differences, at least temporarily, are forgotten.

We encourage everyone to come, with no requirement to make art- sometimes people just come and sit and chat with others- including volunteers. The group takes place after our remarkably busy Tuesday Drop in. We tend to have four to six participants- some regular attenders who never miss a session, and others who may come just for one or two sessions, often at the invitation of another member.

It is an adult only space- this is deliberate policy so that adults get the attention they need without the distraction for children,

There is an opportunity to create images to help process trauma, but also many of the images connect the artists to the beauty of their homelands, the stories, and rhythms of everyday life. One of our artists, A, an engineer from Sudan, painted a striking powerful portrait of a handsome, imposing Sudanese king, in full regalia- offering the viewer and alternative perspective on his now war-torn country. This was on display at the Northumbria Police Headquarters during Black History month in October 2024



Another of our artists, Y, who has never been to school, started with simple drawings of his homeland, Iraq, and representations of his journey across Europe, finally

arriving in the UK- he has become a prolific and gifted artist with his own very identifiable style who has now sold his first painting, having gained his leave to remain.

K, an already gifted artist with his own distinctive and recognisable style, has work on display in Newbiggin Arts Centre and has had work accepted into the annual exhibition at Woodhorn, which is difficult to achieve.

We thank the Community Foundation for the generous grant we received from them which has meant that we have been able to buy the materials we need to enrich the experience of our artists and enable them to do the best work possible and prepare for our exhibition in June last year.



This was a huge success- we had visits from the police, representatives from Mears, the housing provider, the Refugee Support Team, Ashington college lecturers, the Civic Head, and other representatives of Ashington town Council, as well as friends and families. The exhibition offered the local community an alternative perspective of the asylum-seeking community.

The grant from the Watkins Family Trust also paid for the rent for the room we meet in at the NCVA offices (Northumberland Community and Voluntary Action). Having this as a base has been beneficial: it has deepened our relationship with this key community asset, has enabled us to build links with other organisations, and offered volunteering opportunities: the photography group has been especially enjoyable and beneficial for our members.

Feedback comments from the artists show how beneficial this opportunity to make art together has been for them.

Ashington Football Sessions (Caris Vardy)



In January 2025, a small group expressed an interest in setting up a football session. We set up a management group and a WhatsApp group for those who had expressed an interest and began meeting on Saturday afternoons for an informal kick about. We have grown from four interested individuals to seventy-eight members from all over the world with 20-30 people turning up to play most weeks. It is an interesting session when the common language spoken is that of football. The power of the activity is how it brings people together from diverse backgrounds, cultures and experience and unites them with a common purpose to play a game of football.

We wanted to encourage more people to engage in a sporting activity which helps improve fitness, mental health, and well-being as well as lead to opportunities for greater community integration and cohesiveness. Football gives us a universal language which could really help in breaking down barriers, misconceptions and improve community cohesion.

The change in individuals as they come to sessions is striking. People can be nervous and unsure when they approach us about the sessions. The guys really enjoy the opportunity to get together and play football, and this is evident in the laughter, chat, and sense of fun. We can signpost members to other free sessions available and have joined forces with Newcastle United Foundation to provide an additional session including a gym session. We also refer people to the Recovery College session on Fridays called Levelheaders which many guys attend.

One of the barriers to people playing was not having football boots. Most people only have one pair of trainers, and they would be ruined if using them for playing football. We tried putting out appeals for pre used football boots and have linked up with United for Sanctuary to request donated boots. We successfully submitted a bid to Ashington Town Council to set up a boot room scheme. Since then, we have kitted out 25+ people with football boots, shin pads, and socks.

We are making links with local football teams as a number of our members have expressed a desire to get involved in local teams. We have some very skilful players who could really contribute to the local grassroots football scene.

We were asked to participate in the making of a ten minute documentary film to showcase our football group and the impact the Annual Grant award from Ashington Town Council was being used. The group found this a really enjoyable experience and fully participated in the filming. The film will be available on our website.

The football sessions have been supported with a grant from Ashington Town Council to pay for kit, and support from Keir Tattersdill, Sport Development Officer at Northumberland County Council

What members have said

Attending football training sessions Monday, Friday and Saturday at Hirst Welfare Centre has been a positive experience for me. Each session helps me improve my football skill, fitness, and teamwork. And it has built relationships among us from different backgrounds, and I would love to see that progress in the near future. AG

Thank you so much for organising the football sessions. I really enjoy coming every week and playing with everyone. I usually attend the sessions on Mondays, Fridays and Saturdays. I also want to thank you from the heart. We really enjoy seeing you at the pitch with us – it makes the atmosphere even more friendly and special. Thank you again for everything you do. AA



Games Night (Caris Vardy)



Games night was established in 2024. We offer an opportunity for people to come together and participate in a range of games ranging from Fifa Dominoes, Jenga, Snakes and Ladders, Monopoly. The biggest hits by far are Fifa and Dominoes.

We meet at The Bothy, Laburnum Terrace Ashington. It is run by NCOS volunteers in a room provided by the Northumberland Recovery College.

The games night was developed to give adults an opportunity to socialise in the evening in a warm environment. Refreshments are provided and attendees have access to a wide number of board games. The room holds a maximum of ten people including volunteers and is cosy. The session is organised via a Whats app group and word of mouth and attendance has been steady with an average of eight people, plus two volunteers attending.

The session runs fortnightly and to date we have had twenty-six sessions since it first began in November 2024. There have been 169 attendances over the 15-month period.

We are grateful to the Recovery College for letting us use their room at The Bothy in Ashington. It is in a central location about 5 mins walk from the bus station and there is a bus stop just outside the venue. The staff at The Bothy are very welcoming and they provide another layer of mental health support to anyone attending. They have also signposted the session to people who have attended the Bothy for other reasons. This is developing into a successful and useful relationship with another agency who are keen to learn from us and in return provide a safe haven for our members.

We look forward to the year ahead and increasing the number of people who attend.

What members have said about Games Night

I would like to express my gratitude for the wonderful reception you and Steve have shown to us all. I love everything about the games night -AJG

You and Steve spice up the day for me. Thank you for the hospitality -CD

Thank you for the warm welcome you and Steve give to everyone. I really enjoy the games night and have a great time. I appreciate all the effort you put into organising it. MM

These sessions are not just about games. They offer something that is difficult for me to put into simple words, especially for people like myself who is feeling alone and trying my best to connect with others and be part of the community. It means a lot to know that there are people who care enough to organise sessions like this. It truly makes a positive difference. AEG

Bike Project (Bob Cadman)

We have a project to source bikes for donation, and 152 bikes have been given to our members to date, enhancing people's quality of life enormously. Bob Cadman who manages this project works closely with Victor one of our volunteers who prepares the donated bikes ready for distribution. They have also worked closely with Ashington Cycle Hub so that people can undergo cycling proficiency.

This project has been instrumental in reducing people's reliance on public transport and costs of fares to get around. It has also encouraged people to explore the immediate surrounds and local area.

Haltwhistle Hub (Wendy Bond)

A small hardworking group of local people have been supporting a growing number of people who have been resettled in West Northumberland. They provide a warm welcome and assist with practical help and support and signpost people to local services as well as orientate them to the local area.

The group aim to engender a sense of community for the newcomers to the area and to make sure they feel at home in West Northumberland and are committed to reducing the sense of social isolation by befriending and encouraging people to engage in local community activities.

Summer Programme (Sarah Greaves)

In the summer holidays we had a programme of trips out, the aim being to learn about the area they have come to live in, and to become more independent in travelling to such places. The National Trust gave us free passes to Wallington and Seaton Delaval, and we had enjoyable days out there, but we also travelled by public transport to meet friends at Blyth and have a picnic at Cresswell beach. (We filled two Arriva buses!!) We also experimented with walks in less accessible beauty spots, led by Jane Cadman, a professional walk lead- we went to Rothbury Terraces, Hadrian's wall, and walked from Craster to Dunstanburgh. Those who came told us how much they appreciated the chance to enjoy the glorious Northumbrian countryside, and how good it had been for their mental health.



Acknowledgements

We would like to extend our gratitude to the following groups of people as well as those who just go about the business of helping people adjust to a new life, and provide support and hope, without which none of this would be possible.

All our wonderful volunteers who grace us with their presence, skills, knowledge, kindness, and humanity.

All our generous funders – The work of NCOS has been made possible with grants from Ashington Town Council. The Watkins Family Trust, Community Chest, Police and Crime Commissioner.

The team at St Andrews Church who give so much of their time at LET sessions, allow us to use the church hall for sessions and their tireless energy in the practical and emotional support they have offered to many individual and families. Angela and Caroline, you are stars.

We are incredibly grateful to Mahan and Dashne, who turn up every week to Ashington Drop in and work so hard to provide the catering for the sessions as well as sort out all the donations that come in.

The partnerships we have developed have been wonderful and of immense value as we continue to grow and learn from each other. Together we are stronger.

Community Contributors – all those people who continue to donate and contribute items for the benefit of others finding themselves in less fortunate circumstances.

Thank you to everyone of you for making this all possible.

