Leicester City of Sanctuary

A Place to Belong

IMPACT REPORT 2026

Belonging, wellbeing and opportunities to contribute

Reporting period: February–August 2026









Independent evaluation by Dr Sarah A. Hunt

01 Introduction

Understanding the difference Leicester City of Sanctuary makes

Leicester City of Sanctuary provides a welcoming and supportive community for refugees and people seeking asylum. Through opportunities for social connection, learning, practical support and participation, the Charity helps people build relationships, develop skills and navigate everyday life in an unfamiliar environment.

But what difference does this support make to people's lives, and how does meaningful change occur?

Between February and August 2026, an independent impact evaluation explored these questions through the experiences of people attending the Sanctuary. The evaluation was designed to move beyond measures of attendance and satisfaction to understand what changes, how and why those changes may occur, and what matters most to the people using the Charity.

It focused on three interconnected areas: psychological wellbeing (hope, confidence and purpose); psychosocial wellbeing (relationships, social connection and belonging); and agency (choice, finding support, independence and contributing to community life).

Service users were central to the evaluation. Their experiences informed how evidence was gathered, helped identify what meaningful change looked like and informed priorities for future learning. The findings draw on 37 unique annual survey submissions, 19 individual Conversations and two in-depth discussions.

This report shares key findings, participants' experiences and what the evaluation suggests for the Sanctuary's continued development.

Report Overview

A guide to the findings

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02 Our Outcomes Framework

How our evaluation connects to our Theory of Change and Strategic Plan (2026–31)

The Sanctuary's Outcomes Framework is linked directly to its Theory of Change, as set out in its Strategic Plan (2026–31). The independent evaluation explored how these intended outcomes relate to the changes people described in their everyday lives.

In January 2026, trustees endorsed an Impact Evaluation Framework that went beyond attendance and satisfaction measures. Its purpose was to understand what changes, how and why; involve service users in defining meaningful change; explore experiences over time; and establish an ongoing cycle of learning and improvement.

Three connected dimensions of change

- **Psychological wellbeing:** Hope, confidence, feeling calmer, coping and having a sense of purpose.
- **Psychosocial wellbeing:** Welcome, friendships, supportive relationships and connection to community.
- **Agency:** Being able to make choices, speak up, navigate services, learn and contribute.

Connecting activities, experiences and outcomes

The Sanctuary's activities include English-language learning, creative and wellbeing activities, physical activities, trips, life-skills opportunities and practical support. Its Outcomes Framework sets out intended connections between these activities and outcomes such as reduced distress, increased confidence, belonging, greater familiarity with local areas, and independence and agency.

The independent evaluation examined these connections through participants' reported experiences, without assuming that any single activity necessarily produces a particular change.

> *"Being able to help others after the charity helped me."*
>
> Annual survey response

The following framework identifies five intended outcomes, alongside the activities that may contribute to them and ways in which change may occur. It illustrates the relationship with the Sanctuary's long-term strategy; the evaluation findings are presented in the sections that follow.

01 Reduced Anxiety & Emotional Distress

ACTIVITIES THAT CONTRIBUTE

ESOL Language Learning Classes • Creative Activities (art, crafts, sewing) • Women's Wellbeing Session • Trips • Physical Activities (exercise session, guided walks) • Life Skills Workshops • NEST (New Evidence Search Team)

HOW ACTIVITIES MAY CONTRIBUTE TO CHANGE

Activities provide calm, structured spaces; reduce uncertainty and language barriers; support emotional regulation; build familiarity with places and routines; and offer reassurance through trusted relationships.

02 Increased Confidence

ACTIVITIES THAT CONTRIBUTE

ESOL Language Learning Classes • Creative Activities (art, crafts, sewing) • Women's Wellbeing Session • Life Skills Workshops • Trips • Physical Activities (exercise session, guided walks) • NEST (New Evidence Search Team)

HOW ACTIVITIES MAY CONTRIBUTE TO CHANGE

Activities build skills, mastery, communication ability, independent use of services, and opportunities to succeed, while encouraging initiative and self-belief.

03 Social Connection & Belonging

ACTIVITIES THAT CONTRIBUTE

Creative Activities (art, crafts, sewing) • Women's Wellbeing Session • Physical Activities (exercise session, guided walks) • Trips • ESOL Language Learning Classes • Life Skills Workshops • NEST (New Evidence Search Team)

HOW ACTIVITIES MAY CONTRIBUTE TO CHANGE

Activities create shared experiences, foster bonding and trust, expand peer networks, and offer predictable, safe group environments that support belonging.

04 Environmental Mastery (Familiarity with Local Areas)

ACTIVITIES THAT CONTRIBUTE

ESOL Language Learning Classes • Life Skills Workshops • Trips • Physical Activities (exercise session, guided walks) • NEST (New Evidence Search Team)

HOW ACTIVITIES MAY CONTRIBUTE TO CHANGE

Activities introduce local amenities and services, reduce fear of unfamiliar environments, and build geographical familiarity and independent movement.

05 Independence & Agency

ACTIVITIES THAT CONTRIBUTE

ESOL Language Learning Classes • Life Skills Workshops • Trips • Physical Activities (exercise session, guided walks) • NEST (New Evidence Search Team)

HOW ACTIVITIES MAY CONTRIBUTE TO CHANGE

Activities strengthen decision-making, problem-solving, self-advocacy, confidence navigating systems, and independent travel and movement.

03 Impact at a Glance

The annual survey offers an overview of the changes respondents associated with attending Leicester City of Sanctuary. Four headline findings are presented below; the number of people responding varies by question.

93%

Reported a difference to day-to-day life
28 of 30 respondents

100%

Reported feeling more welcome
33 of 33 respondents

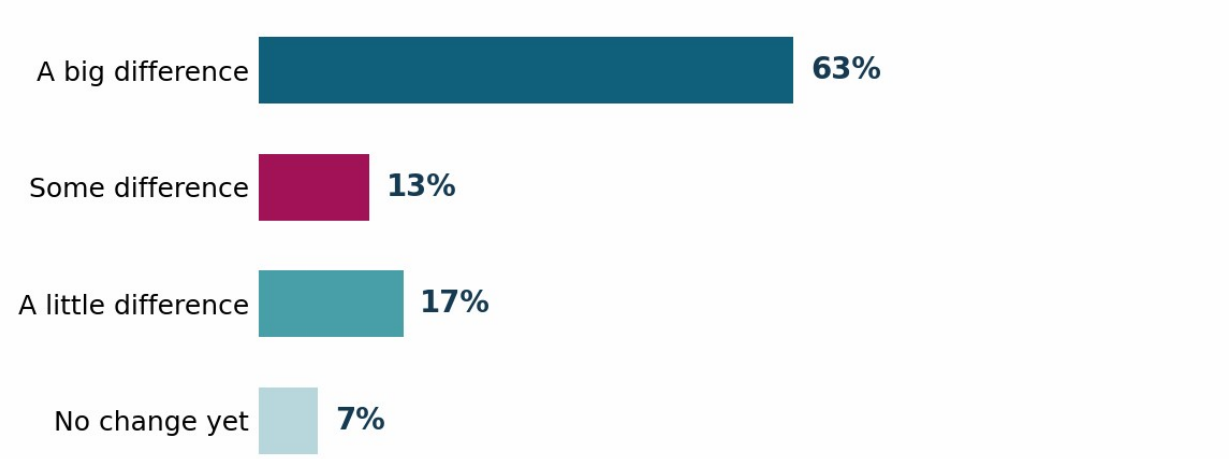
97%

Reported stronger community connection
32 of 33 respondents

93%

Reported feeling less alone
27 of 29 respondents

How much difference to everyday life?



Annual survey, (n=30 for this question): a big difference: 19; some difference: 4; a little difference: 5; no change yet: 2. Percentages are rounded.

"This place is like a bridge from solitude to be with people."

Participant Conversation

04 What Changed?

Belonging and social connection · Psychosocial wellbeing

A dependable place to go, friendships and feeling accepted were recurring themes. All 33 respondents to the relevant question reported feeling more welcome, while 32 of 33 reported greater community connection. Twenty-seven of 29 reported feeling less alone. Participants described the value of ordinary conversations and a place to return to during periods of uncertainty.



Annual survey. Percentages represent respondents reporting some or a lot of positive change; the number answering each question is shown beside the measure.

"I come with nobody - this charity - now I have a family."

Participant Conversation

Hope, confidence and emotional wellbeing · Psychological wellbeing

All respondents answering the relevant questions reported greater hope, confidence, a more positive view of themselves and things to look forward to. Most also described feeling calmer. Twenty-eight of 30 respondents said they were better able to cope with challenges; two reported no change yet.

Participants associated emotional relief and a sense of purpose with conversation, friendships, creative activities, volunteering and opportunities to work towards personal goals. These reflect self-reported experiences of wellbeing, rather than clinical measures of mental health.

Choice, independence and contribution · Agency

Agency refers to opportunities to make choices and act on what matters to individuals. All 33 respondents answering the relevant questions reported greater ability to speak up for themselves and more opportunities to contribute. Most also reported better understanding of services, knowing where to find help and greater independence.

People described helping others, translating, teaching, sharing creative skills and volunteering. These accounts suggest that participants are not only receiving support but also drawing on their knowledge and experience to contribute within the community.

“Now I understand people when we talk to each other, and I can answer questions.”

Annual survey response

Language and communication across all three dimensions

Language and communication were prominent across both the survey and Conversations. In the open-ended question about the most important change, 11 of 27 interpretable responses highlighted language and communication capability. Participants described speaking more confidently, understanding others and participating beyond the Sanctuary.

Change is not identical for everyone

Some respondents reported no change yet in particular areas, including coping, learning skills or decision-making. People may develop confidence and relationships while continuing to face housing, financial or immigration uncertainty. The evaluation therefore considers both reported progress and continuing needs.

Changes service users identified as most important

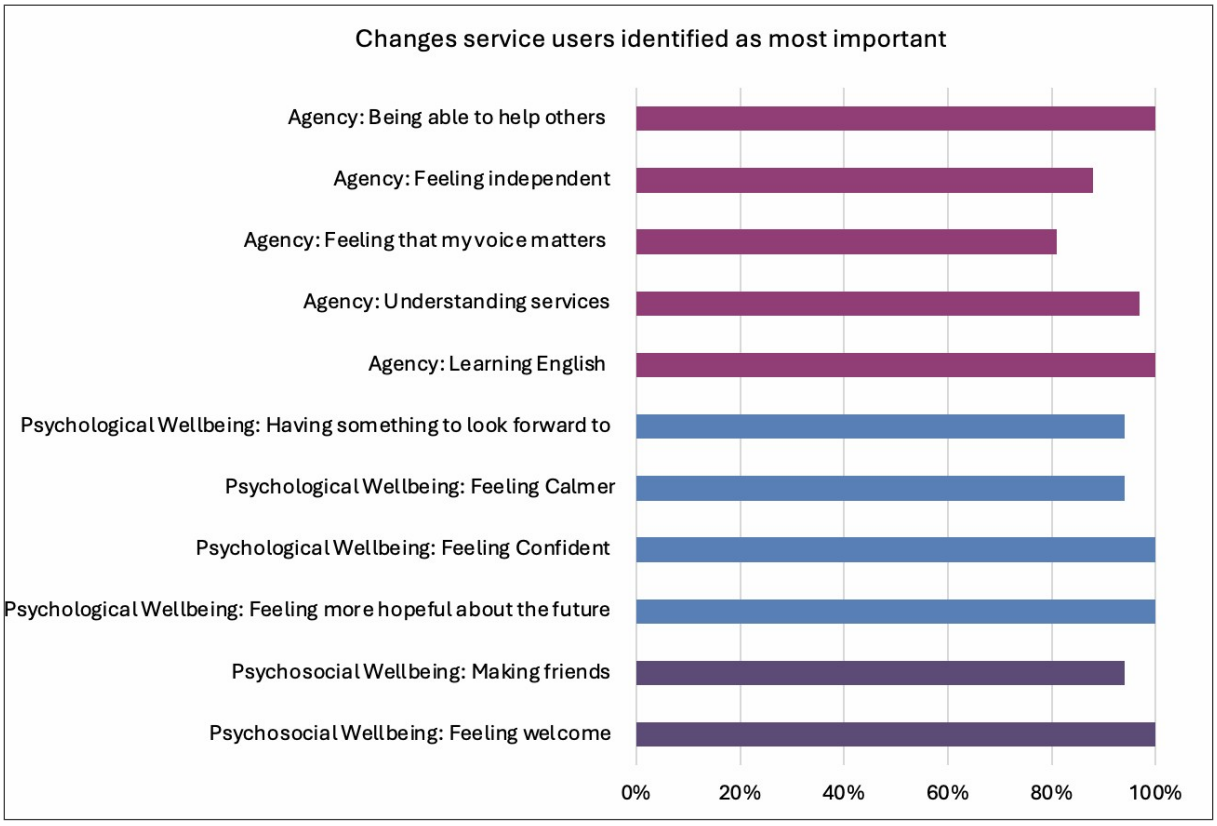


Figure 1. Survey responses across selected agency, psychological wellbeing and psychosocial wellbeing measures.

05 Beyond the Statistics

Themes from Participant Conversations



Figure 2. Curated themes reflecting experiences of belonging, wellbeing and agency described in participant Conversations.

This figure is a thematic illustration informed by the evaluation framework. Word size reflects editorial emphasis, not calculated word frequencies. Some expressions have been standardised from notes and are not verbatim.

What people told us about their experiences

Nineteen individual Conversations explored what attending the Sanctuary meant in everyday life. Two in-depth discussions provided perspectives on how connection, purpose and participation can develop or be sustained over time.

“Somewhere to go to socialise, to meet people. I look forward to the hours and minutes until I come back on a Wednesday.”

Participant Conversation

A dependable place to belong

Participants described moving from isolation and uncertainty towards familiarity, friendship and feeling understood. The value of the weekly drop-in was not restricted to scheduled activities: it also offered continuity, an opportunity to talk and a welcoming environment.

“Language is the door - the door between society and asylum seeker or refugee - how can you do for the future.”

Participant Conversation

Communication opens opportunities

English learning, conversation and accessible practical information helped people ask questions, navigate courses and services, and interact with the wider community. Participants linked these opportunities to growing independence and confidence.

“The City of Sanctuary help me, now I have to pass on to other people.”

Participant Conversation

From receiving help to helping others

Sharing skills and helping newcomers offered meaningful roles and opportunities to contribute. In one in-depth discussion, a participant described a developing sense of direction and usefulness. Another participant, involved for approximately a decade, described the continuing importance of belonging and giving back alongside ongoing hardship.

06 How the Sanctuary Appears to Help

Understanding what changes, how and why

The findings do not suggest that one particular activity necessarily produces one particular outcome. Rather, participants described the combined importance of welcome, relationships, communication, information and opportunities to participate.

01 **A dependable, welcoming place**

Repeated human contact and a non-judgemental environment can support trust and belonging.

02 **Connection and communication**

Friendships and opportunities to practise English can help people speak, learn and interact.

03 **Confidence and practical capability**

Accessible information and everyday experiences can make unfamiliar services and settings easier to navigate.

04 **Participation, purpose and contribution**

Using skills, volunteering and helping others can create valued roles and greater opportunities to act.

An interconnected contribution pathway

Welcome and relational safety → Connection and communication → Confidence and capability → Participation → Purpose, agency and contribution

This pathway is an interpretation supported by participants' accounts, rather than a tested sequence that everyone follows. Different dimensions of change may also reinforce one another.

"Leicester City of Sanctuary gave me a soft landing."

In-depth discussion participant

07 Learning and Looking Ahead

Protect what works. Build on what matters.

The findings provide a basis for continuing the Sanctuary's cycle of learning informed by service users. The priorities below are drawn from evaluation findings and are not commitments to introduce new services.

Protect belonging

Maintain a dependable, welcoming environment, ordinary conversation and relationships of trust.

Strengthen communication and navigation

Explore accessible English-speaking opportunities, clearer information and signposting at important transitions.

Open paths to contribute

Make opportunities to volunteer, share skills, support peers and take part in creative activity easier to access.

Keep learning with service users

Invite participants to help shape the questions, methods and priorities of the 2026–27 evaluation.

The wider circumstances shaping people's lives remain important. The Sanctuary can support wellbeing, confidence and connection while some participants continue to experience uncertainty and restricted opportunities.

"Thank you so much for helping people like me to flourish."

Annual survey response

08 About the Evaluation

A service-user-informed approach

The independent evaluation covered February to August 2026 and drew on 37 unique annual survey submissions, 19 brief, framework-informed Conversations across five weekly drop-ins, and two in-depth discussions.

The framework was endorsed by trustees in January 2026. Participants' preferences shaped how evidence was gathered: following a pilot focus group, individual Conversations were used because people indicated they would feel more comfortable speaking individually. The survey was available through English- and Arabic-language routes.

Survey responses were reported using the number of people answering each question. Accounts from Conversations, open survey responses and longer discussions were considered together to understand both the breadth and meaning of reported change.

Throughout this report, figures describe the answers provided by respondents. The evaluation explores the Sanctuary's plausible contribution to reported change; it does not establish that the Charity alone caused the outcomes described.

Evaluation and acknowledgements

Independent evaluation by Dr Sarah A. Hunt, Impact Evaluation Lead. Based on the full Leicester City of Sanctuary Impact & Evaluation Report (February–August 2026), prepared for the National Lottery Community Fund.

Thank you to the participants who shared their experiences, and to the Sanctuary staff and volunteers who supported the evaluation.