

## New Roots, Active Lives: Forced Migrant Wellbeing, Community Sport and Physical Activity in Charnwood

### About the Project

UK government data show that there were 108,138 asylum seekers in the UK in 2024, an 18% increase from 2023, surpassing the previous peak in 2022 (gov.uk), alongside 79,000 arrivals through humanitarian routes and 44,000 irregular migrants. Refugees and asylum seekers experience significantly higher rates of mental health challenges compared to the general population, often compounded by prolonged uncertainty, social isolation, and systemic barriers to support. Leicester is one of the largest multicultural cities in England. With a growing refugee community, there is urgent need for culturally grounded, community-driven approaches that centre resilience, wellbeing, and belonging.

This innovative community-led project will explore how refugees and asylum seekers in Leicester experience, make sense of, shape, and share their mental health, wellbeing, resilience, and placemaking. The research will be carried out in close collaboration with Leicester City of Sanctuary (LCoS), part of the vibrant national City of Sanctuary network (<https://cityofsanctuary.org/>), providing welcome, support, and opportunities through weekly gatherings that offer vital spaces for connection and rebuilding life after displacement.

Through creative and participatory action research (PAR) methodology using photovoice and storytelling, our project will create space for individuals to reflect on their own paths, challenges, and sources of strength. Many participants will be navigating unfamiliar and challenging systems, coping with trauma, while building new lives in the face of systemic barriers. Yet within these realities, powerful acts of resilience, place-making, and collective care are continually emerging. The psychological distress and experiences resulting from migration can indeed be a risk factor for higher prevalence of mental health issues, but the lack of knowledge on how this community mediates risk amid adversities and constructs resilience for positive living is an untold story.

By co-producing knowledge with asylum seekers and refugee communities about what wellbeing and resilience look like in real, lived, evolving practices; our project will enable their narratives and agency to shape community-informed insights and practical recommendations. These will support both individuals and local services in making wellbeing more accessible, relevant, and culturally meaningful. These findings may also offer valuable insights to support Leicester City of Sanctuary's emerging peer-support program, ensuring it is grounded in community needs and strengths.

## About the project

By centring lived expertise and creative methodologies, this collaborative project will not only enhance understanding within Leicester's diverse community but will also offer insights relevant to other UK cities and service providers seeking to build more inclusive, trauma-informed, and community-rooted systems of support.

This project has been co-created and is supported by researchers from De Montfort University, Loughborough University and partners at Leicester City of Sanctuary. The successful candidate for this project will be enrolled at De Montfort University.

## Project Aims

The overall aims of this project are :

1. Explore what matters most to the wellbeing of forced migrants living in Charnwood.
2. Understand needs, preferences and challenges faced by local forced migrants, in particular among women, children, and youth, in accessing physical activity and sporting opportunities and spaces in Charnwood.
3. Collaboratively co-create recommendations for local community organisations in developing inclusive and needs-based sport and physical activity programmes with, and for, local forced migrants.

## Supervisory Team

1. Lead Academic Supervisor: [Dr Robyn Smith \(Loughborough University\)](#)
2. Academic Co-Supervisor(s): [Dr Justine Anthony \(University of Leicester\)](#)
3. Community Supervisor(s): [Joe McSharry \(Leicester City in the Community\)](#)

## What will the successful candidate be doing ?

- Exploring relevant literature to develop a broad understanding of the current academic contexts relating to the project and its community challenges.
- Collecting data through conducting interviews with refugee and asylum seeker participants during site visits to local sports and wellbeing activities for forced migrants.
- Co-facilitating four participatory workshops with academic supervisors to collect further data through collaborating with community participants.
- Developing a summary report and resources to be used to share the findings of the work with the Charnwood Asylum Seeker and Refugee Network meeting.

## Key Details

Host University:	Loughborough University
Start date:	Monday 06 October 2025
Funding offer:	Tax-free bursary of £1,300 (paid in 2 parts, in arrears)
Working hours	Part-time (11-14 hrs per week).
Working Style:	Primarily in-person at host university. Flexible working supported. Working pattern to be agreed between successful candidate and lead supervisor.

**NOTE:** The successful applicant will be required to undertake an enhanced DBS check

## Competencies

Collaboratory Core Competencies		
Category	Competency	Assessed: Application (A), Interview (I)
Comprehension and evaluation	Strong understanding of the project and its subject matter.	A / I
	Analytical, researcher mindset with keen attention to detail.	A / I
	Communicate complex concepts with clarity and precision.	A / I
	Able to identify connections, patterns, gaps, and irregularities in information/data.	I
	Able to interpret data/information confidently with logic and empathy to derive meaning.	I
Social and emotional	Demonstrable experience of responding effectively changing contexts, information and demands.	A
	Ability to persevere in the face of challenges/failures and to remain constructive in developing solutions.	A
	Demonstrable passion for learning with clear drive and curiosity to undertake this specific research project.	A / I
	Willingness to immerse oneself in the research subject matter and make a contribute to new knowledge through a PhD.	A / I
	Strong desire to make a positive community impact through the research.	A / I
	Willingness to think deeply about complex concepts and engage with academic ideas and theory.	A / I
Preparedness and potential for success	Experience of working, collaborating and communicating effectively with different stakeholders.	A
	High level of self-motivation and ability to work with minimal guidance.	A / I
	Strong organisational and time-management skills with the ability to balance and prioritise multiple tasks.	A / I
	Ability to identify potential challenges and complexities and thoughtfully consider possible solutions.	A / I
	Able to identify the technical, personal, or professional skills required for a task and take action to develop these.	A / I
Community Context	Genuine desire to undertake community-engaged research over more traditional approaches to research.	A
	Understand the impact of and need for the inclusion of diverse experiences and points of view in research.	A / I
	Appreciation/understanding of the importance of community insight and experience in the generation of new knowledge.	A / I
	Awareness/understanding of the broader societal context related to the subject matter of the project.	A / I

## Competencies

Project Specific Competencies			
Essential	Assessed: Application (A), Interview (I)	Desirable	Assessed: Application (A), Interview (I)
Experience in building and maintaining trusting and culturally-sensitive relationships with diverse stakeholders.	A / I	An understanding of the UK policy landscape and current debates surrounding refugees and asylum seekers, including the social and legal challenges they experience.	A / I
Demonstrable commitment to social justice and equity, particularly in working with marginalised populations, with an awareness of how systemic inequalities shape lived experiences.	A / I	Experience in delivering workshops/training with and for diverse groups, in particular using creative, participatory and arts-based approaches.	A / I
Working understanding of the social factors that influence health	A / I	Experience directly working with forced migrants in either community, advocacy, sport, therapeutic, support, research, or educational settings.	A / I
Knowledge/appreciation of the barriers faced by marginalised groups in accessing community sport and physical activity.	A / I	Lived experience of forced migration or migration.	A / I
		Proficiency in one or more additional languages including Arabic, Dari, Pashto, or Farsi, which may support relationship building and data collection.	A/I

## References for Further Reading

- House of Lord. (2022). Refugee and Asylum Seeker Policy. <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/refugees-and-asylum-seekers-uk-policy/>
- Isaacs, A., Burns, N., Macdonald, S., & O'Donnell, C. A. (2022). 'I don't think there's anything I can do which can keep me healthy': how the UK immigration and asylum system shapes the health & wellbeing of refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland. *Critical public health*, 32(3), 422-43. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09581596.2020.1853058>
- Smith, R., Mansfield, L., & Wainwright, E. (2022). 'Should I really be here?': Problems of trust and ethics in PAR with young people from refugee backgrounds in sport and leisure. *Sport in Society*, 25(3), 434-452. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17430437.2022.2017620>
- Spaaij, R., Broerse, J., Oxford, S., Luguetti, C., McLachlan, F., McDonald, B., ... & Pankowiak, A. (2019). Sport, refugees, and forced migration: A critical review of the literature. *Frontiers in sports and active living*, 1, 47. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33344970/>
- UNHCR. (2018). Sport for Protection Toolkit. <https://www.unhcr.org/media/sport-protection-toolkit>