



# OUR SHARED LANGUAGE



**CALDERDALE**

Eve Emsley. Dance Artist.  
Freelance Facilitator.

## WHAT IS THE OUR SHARED LANGUAGE PROJECT ABOUT?

**Our Shared Language** is a **dance and movement project, reaching and empowering men** who are stuck in limbo as they are **seeking sanctuary, in the asylum processing system and currently placed in a remote hotel**. The project is being **led** by local dance artist and freelance facilitator, **Eve Emsley**, with support from project assistant **Mamadou Barry, from St. Augustine's Centre**.

A series of **connecting moments and workshops** provided **space and time** to focus on increasing **bodily awareness, stress reduction and gentle dance, exploring movement that unites us as human beings**. After each session, space was created for **reflection and structured discussions** around the Refugee Week 2025 theme of **"Community as a Superpower"**, with the support of interpreters where needed.

In the absence of a shared common spoken language, this project **amplifies dance as a unifying and equal method of communication, a shared language and exchange**. Sessions were not labelled as "dance" and often started as something else.

*"Our starting point would develop naturally often starting with a cup of tea, a conversation about someone's favourite sport or listening to music from around the world and from countries such as Sudan or Eritrea or Iraq - by the time we had spent some time together, every single body in the space, was dancing or moving - without labelling it".*

After around **six weeks of sharing the space and getting to know each other**, 'conversing' through movement games and activities that **aimed to strengthen connection and friendship**, further **activities that involved 'touch' were facilitated**.

Together, participants explored taking the weight of another person, **sensing, leaning in and supporting others**. The act of **'touch' and working to support another body** whilst also **being supported simultaneously stood in powerful contrast to the realities of most participants**. Many of whom were **seeking sanctuary in England, with no family support**.

The movement sessions **culminated in a shared lunch** based at **Blackley Baptist Church during Refugee Week** to **celebrate the close of the project** and allow the men an **opportunity to cook and eat together**. This is something that is cherished due to having no access to cooking facilities in the hotel.

## HOW IS THE PROJECT FUNDED?

Our Shared Language is proudly **supported by grant funding from 'CultureDale'**—Calderdale's Year of Culture. The project is also made **possible through self-funding efforts**.

## WHAT ASPECTS OF HEALTH DOES THE PROJECT ADDRESS?

The Our Shared Language project addresses **mental health, physical health, health prevention, social isolation and health inequalities**.

## WHO ARE THE BENEFICIARIES OF THE PROJECT?

Our Shared Language project **supports male asylum seekers aged 18 and over, representing diverse backgrounds** including Sudanese, Eritrean, Somali, Vietnamese, Pakistani, Iranian, Palestinian, Syrian, Iraqi, Albanian, and others. Asylum seekers placed in hotels receive around £9.88 a week to live on. These men are **placed remotely**, public transport is expensive, therefore, they are **often isolated, spending much of their time alone in their rooms**. **Mental health** can often be a **significant barrier to engaging with the outside world and developing connections with people and communities**. There are also **disabled men (often disabled on journey to reach safety) and men suffering from PTSD and trauma**.

*"Children who have had their ages assessed incorrectly can be housed in adult accommodation and joined the sessions whilst awaiting re-assessment and a transfer into children's care services"*

—Eve Emsley, Project facilitator and lead

## HOW DO YOU DEMONSTRATE IMPACT AND SUCCESS?

The Our Shared Language project **directly engaged 47 participants**, with the most meaningful outcomes seen among 27 male asylum seekers at the hotel. Their **consistent attendance and improved confidence showcase the project's success**. The contribution of Hazel, **a volunteer and President of the Rotary Club**, also **strengthened community involvement**.

At **Calderdale College, 19 participants (16 males, 3 females)** further extended the project's reach. Following two Refugee Week events in June—with approximately 50 attendees at Rock and Rotary—**participation is expected to grow**.

The project's impact is evident in the numerous **powerful testimonials collected from participants, which highlight the transformative effects it has had on individuals**.

*"I feel Good to day in dance class"*

*"I feel good, and you have good talent for fun"*

*"I am alive"*

*"It's very good, it's good, you don't think about it, it stimulates the body, it's great. Thank you"*

*"Hi I see that you are doing something good, like encouraging people to overcome the loneliness and worry, because here people are locked in their rooms. But you help take them out of the darkness and into a place where life is enjoyable—where there is interaction and entertainment. Personally, I don't feel anything bad from you—only goodness, relief from stress, and a sense of being active and alive."*

*"My body feel strong and my mind forget my stress"*

*"I really like dancing and the warmup it's refreshing and relaxing - I would really like it if the class is not immediately after lunch. And I would also really like if we can have more dance lessons like learning moves for a song maybe and longer sessions."*

*"I feel really good and enjoy the sessions. I think the teacher is great and we would like to see more of these sessions. I'm also very grateful to St Augustine's for helping to organise the sessions"*

*"I really feel very good when I share with you I find myself happy and this may make me forget a lot of worries and problems and constant thinking about things I can't conjure up"*



## HOW HAS THE PROJECT MADE A DIFFERENCE TO PEOPLE'S WELLBEING?

By creating an **accessible and inclusive space, grounded in empathy and cultural understanding**, the Our Shared Language project has made a significant contribution to participants' wellbeing and their sense of belonging. Led by a facilitator experienced in working with asylum-seeking and refugee communities, the **sessions featured music that resonated deeply with participants' personal histories**, ranging from Arabic and African to Middle Eastern tracks, many of which echoed sounds from their own villages.

Participants were **not merely recipients of the activity but active co-creators**. They **contributed to the shared playlist and introduced traditional dances from their respective cultures, fostering a sense of ownership, achievement, joy, and mutual respect**. In one particularly memorable session, the **group celebrated their diversity through a spontaneous fusion of Vietnamese electronic beats, Kurdish dance, and Iranian folk music, demonstrating not only the therapeutic power of creative expression but also the strong connections formed across cultural lines**.

Taking this **culturally responsive and participatory approach** nurtured **emotional well-being, self-expression, personal growth and community connection**, helping individuals feel **seen, valued, and empowered**.

## WHAT KEY LEARNINGS HAVE EMERGED FROM THE PROJECT AND HOW ARE THESE INFORMING YOUR PRACTICE?

One of the most **significant challenges was space**. This often meant **delivering the dance and movement part of the sessions in the car park**. This brought **feelings of anxiety among facilitators and participants, due to the rise of far-right activity locally and the potential risks of this**.

There were also **many barriers present and unexpected issues relating to individuals' circumstances that facilitators and participants needed to navigate** throughout the project, many of which were complex. **Mental health and loneliness played a significant role**, as well as the **anticipation of looming asylum interviews**, which **increased feelings of stress and anxiety** among participants.

“One person only had flip flops and they kept falling apart in the session - I organised with St Augustine's Centre, to get him some shoes”

“One person had to leave one of the sessions suddenly - he received a call from his girlfriend who had been placed in an asylum hotel down South, it was being attacked and "men were trying to break into their bedrooms" - after 30 mins of panic, he felt reassured his girlfriend was safe due to the police arriving”.

## HOW ARE YOU ENSURING LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY?

Our shared Language is an **important community project supporting men on their journey of seeking safety, belonging and hope**. To **continue this vital work, further funding has been sought through the Support and Integration Fund at Calderdale Council**.



Support the incredible work of St Augustine's Centre—sign up [HERE](#) or donate at their website and help make a difference today!



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