



## Better Connections End of First Year Report, 3 March 2025

### Introduction

Inclusive Exeter's Better Connections project supports our aim to work with grassroots groups in Exeter and the surrounding areas to run a range of projects for the benefit of people from ethnically diverse backgrounds, promoting integration with the wider community and thus enhancing social cohesion, making Exeter a better and more welcoming city for everyone.

We are pleased to now be operating two days a week at Southernhay United Reformed Church premises, a city centre venue where we can run our Drop-In Support Service, our Women's Yoga, our English Conversation Group and other activities under one roof. The venue also acts as a meeting place for staff and volunteers to meet others keen to engage.

During this first year Inclusive Exeter has become a stronger, more established presence in the city; we are also supporting diverse communities not directly involved in our Better Connections project as well as assisting external organisations to link with diverse communities, enabling better communication and co-operation between organisations which previously have struggled to connect.

This report, coming at the end of the first year of our project, describes the events and activities funded by The National Lottery Community Fund and is supported by feedback from our beneficiaries (accessed by clicking on the relevant links), including challenges we have faced and steps we are taking to address these.

### Staff

The three staff funded by the project are themselves from ethnically diverse backgrounds and have lived experience and in-depth understanding of their communities. They have been joined by one staff member, funded by Devon Community Foundation.

### Steering Group Committee

A Steering Group made up of representatives from the six participating communities, Inclusive Exeter Directors, staff and other stakeholders directs the Project. Meetings cover updates on events and activities and scrutiny of expenditure. Details of expenditure are sent out to Steering Group members for study in advance of the meetings so that members are kept well-informed and Inclusive Exeter upholds its commitment to transparency. For Steering group pictures, [click here](#)



## Community Events Overview

Over the past twelve months, Inclusive Exeter has successfully organised ten community events in collaboration with six community groups, fostering cultural exchange, social cohesion, and cross-community bonding. More than 3,000 attendees participated, celebrating diverse traditions while strengthening inclusivity in Exeter.

### Events & Attendance:

- Easter/Vishu/Eid Celebration (13th April 2024) – Exeter Kerala Community | America Hall | 350 attendees
- Eid Reunion & Community Picnic (30th June 2024) – Afghan Community in Exeter | Exmouth Park | 300 attendees
- Annual Sports Day (30th June 2024) – Exeter Kerala Community | Ludwell Valley Park | 150 attendees
- NCIE Family Fun Day (21st July 2024) – Nigerian Community in Exeter | Wonford Community Centre & Playing Field | 450 attendees
- Filipino Sports Fest (27–28 July 2024) – Filipino Community Association | ISCA Academy & Heavitree | 350 attendees
- Family Fun Day (20–23 September 2024) – Filipino Community Association | Tom Roberts Adventure Centre | 50 attendees
- Onam Celebration (22nd September 2024) – Exeter Kerala Community | Clyst St Mary Village Hall | 350 attendees
- NCIE Cultural Day Celebration (19th October 2024) – Nigerian Community in Exeter | Exeter City AFC | 200 attendees
- All Souls' Day (27th October 2024) – Community St Thomas | St Thomas the Apostle Church | 500 attendees
- DBA Victory Day Celebration (12th January 2025) – Devon Bengali Association | St James School | 350 attendees

For insights into the experiences of organisers and participants' feedback and reflections, [Click here](#).

One of Inclusive Exeter's aims is to strengthen relationships between the city's ethnically diverse communities and the wider community. With the Better Connections project, we have tried to further this aim with varying success. All the events, whilst being delivered by given communities, have been open to everyone but we have found that those which include activities, eg the Family Fun Days and Sportsfest, have attracted more cross-cultural interest than those whose content is more focused on the culture of a particular ethnicity.

One of the ways we are trying to make more progress in this aspect of our project is by bringing together participating community representatives with Exeter's Community Builders and others to pool ideas and broaden our reach.





## Physical Activities Programme

Over the past year, we have successfully delivered four regular physical activity sessions, uniting diverse communities and fostering inclusivity. We also contribute to Live & Move Community of Practice (CoP) events, which bring together organisations across the city that promote physical activities. For pictures, [click here](#)

### Sunday Badminton

Every Sunday | 12 PM – 2 PM | Venue: Wonford Sports Centre | Facilitators: Devon Bengali Association

Badminton has become a vibrant multicultural hub, engaging participants from Bangladesh, Hong Kong, India, Malaysia, the Philippines, and White British communities. With all four courts in use, sessions are well-attended, and updates are shared via social media and WhatsApp.

Impact: 84% reported better physical health, 89% experienced improved mental well-being, and 74% made new friends.

### Volleyball

Every Tuesday | 6 PM – 7:30 PM | Venue: Riverside Sports Centre | Facilitators: Afghan Community

Volleyball has become a key activity for Afghan and Pakistani communities, as well as refugees in Exeter hotels. Each session averages 12-15 participants across two courts. To sustain this initiative, Inclusive Exeter covers venue hire for six months, with the Afghan community contributing half of their Better Connections funding.

### Women's Only Yoga

Tuesdays: 12:30 PM - 1:30 PM | Thursdays: 11:00 AM - 12:00 PM | Venue: Southernhay URC Hall Room | Facilitators: Women of Iraqi and White British heritage

Yoga has become a vital space for women's relaxation, exercise, and social connection. Since moving to Southernhay Church from Mint Methodist Church in January 2025, participation has grown, attracting women from Bangladesh, India, Syria, Ukraine, Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Hong Kong, and more. Updates are shared via WhatsApp, CRM, and Facebook.

### Martial Arts

Every Saturday | 4 PM – 5:30 PM | Venue: Wonford Sports Centre | Facilitators: Hong Kong Community

Martial arts sessions, run by the Hong Kong community, have been a fantastic addition, promoting fitness and discipline. Facilitators appreciate this opportunity, and we maintain regular communication to ensure ongoing support.

Through these activities, we continue to break down barriers, encourage active lifestyles, and create spaces where diverse communities can connect, grow, and thrive together.

For participant testimonials and attendance figures, [Click here](#)



*This is a computer-generated representation of the Drop-In Support Service session*

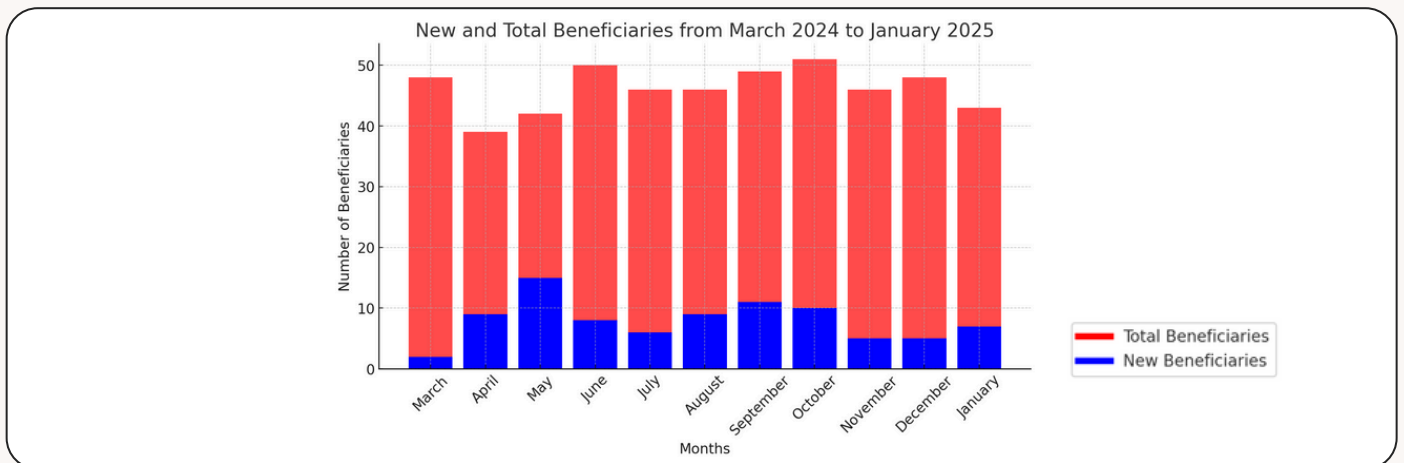
## Introduction:

The Better Connections project enabled the expansion of the Drop-In Support Service, which originally began in 2020 in response to COVID-19. The service operates at Southernhay United Reformed Church in Dix's Field, Exeter, EX1 1QD, every Tuesday and Thursday from 9:30 AM to 1:30 PM, with the exception of the first Thursday of each month.

The service has grown significantly since its inception, expanding from 46 registered beneficiaries in March 2024 as more individuals from diverse backgrounds seek assistance. It is supported by 2 paid caseworkers and 2 ad hoc volunteer caseworkers, all thoroughly vetted with valid DBS checks and mandatory online training.

## Beneficiary Growth:

From March 2024 to January 2025, the service experienced consistent growth, with new beneficiaries attending each month.



## Impact and Key Issues Addressed :

Over the past year, the Drop-In Support Service has been crucial in helping individuals navigate essential services and urgent needs, particularly within Exeter's diverse communities. Beneficiaries come from various ethnic backgrounds, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Iraq (Kurdish), India, Libya, Morocco, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Turkey (Kurdish).

Caseworkers uphold strict confidentiality, and personal information is shared only with the beneficiary's consent, except within the team for workload distribution. The service continues to grow, reflecting the ongoing demand for support, addressing key issues such as:

- Housing - Devon Home Choice
- Blue Badge applications/appeals
- Universal Credit issues
- Council tax and housing cost support
- Job searches, CV updates, and applications
- eVisa/ILR/Naturalisation and British Citizenship matters
- Workplace discrimination

Housing and Universal Credit remain the most common concerns, with some cases involving severe instances of homelessness and food deprivation. A full list of services handled by our caseworkers is available [here](#).





To enhance accessibility, we have:

- Introduced online feedback forms to gather insights from beneficiaries, helping us refine services and address any gaps. The form is anonymized, available in multiple languages, and can be accessed [here](#).
- Distributed flyers in key locations such as international shops, restaurants, hospitals, and community centers.

For many, the Drop-In Support Service is a lifeline, particularly for those with limited English, digital literacy, or knowledge of UK systems. Without proper guidance, they face financial hardship, housing instability, and restricted access to healthcare, education, and legal aid. Our case studies highlight the real-life impact of these challenges. For case studies [click here](#)

The service also supports individuals who are vulnerable to deprivation, harm, and prejudice, ensuring they understand their rights and can access appropriate support. By operating under one roof, we reduce social isolation by connecting people with well-being activities that bring together individuals from diverse backgrounds.

### Key Referrals Made:

Beneficiaries were frequently referred to external organizations for additional support, ensuring they received comprehensive assistance beyond the scope of the Drop-In Support Service. These referrals included:

- Amicus Law – Immigration and legal support
- Citizens' Advice – General financial and legal guidance
- Employment Plus (Salvation Army) – Job search assistance and employment support
- Exeter Foodbank – Support for individuals facing food insecurity
- USDAW (trade union) – Workplace rights and employment-related assistance
- Turntable Furniture – Provision of essential furniture for those in need

### Challenges:

- The increasing number of beneficiaries has led to time constraints for caseworkers.
- While urgent cases receive extra time, we must ensure fair and accessible support for all.
- Processes like eVisa, Universal Credit, and housing applications take over an hour, limiting the number of beneficiaries served.
- Some applications, such as Blue Badge, must be completed within 10 days, adding pressure on both beneficiaries and caseworkers.
- Managing multiple time-consuming cases daily remains a challenge.
- With limited staff and time, maintaining the quality and availability of support is becoming increasingly difficult.

### Future Outlook:

For the second year of the Better Connections project, the Drop-In Support Service aims to:

- Continue strengthening partnerships with external organizations to provide more comprehensive referrals and support services.
- Enhance outreach efforts by engaging with community gatekeepers and local organizations to increase beneficiary numbers.
- Expand visibility through public engagement, including participation in the Respect Festival 2025 and the Volunteer Fayre at Exeter Cathedral to promote awareness of the service.



## Digital Presence

Inclusive Exeter has expanded its digital reach across multiple platforms to better engage our community:

**Website:** Regularly updated with events, resources, and team profiles. (To View [Click Here](#))

**Social Media:** [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [LinkedIn](#), [X \(formerly Twitter\)](#)

**Newsletter:** We publish seasonal editions to keep our community informed. Check out our Summer and Winter editions for updates, success stories, and upcoming events. (To View [Click Here](#))

## Looking to the Future: Challenges & Reflections

Our aim remains to enhance social cohesion by connecting diverse communities, amplifying minoritised voices, and supporting individuals to live their best lives. We plan to strengthen our presence at Southernhay United Reformed Church, making Tuesdays and Thursdays a meeting point for our Drop-In Support Service, community activities, and social engagement.

Reflecting on past experiences from Exeter Communities Together and Better Connections, we have identified key challenges:

- **Event Inclusivity** – Religion-focused and nationality-based events often attract only specific groups, reinforcing segregation and favouring wealthier community members. In contrast, events like Family Fundays, Sports Days, and Community Picnics bring together diverse working-class communities but require more resources. Our physical activities have been particularly effective in fostering inclusivity.
- **Community Leadership Gaps** – Many long-standing community leaders come from privileged backgrounds, creating barriers for working-class individuals who may feel judged or unheard. While authorities tend to engage with these leaders, true grassroots representation requires direct outreach. Through our physical activities and Drop-In sessions, we are slowly building trust and tailoring future activities to these communities' needs.
- **Access to Services & Institutional Barriers** – Many working-class individuals, especially those with limited English, struggle to access local services due to systemic discrimination. Addressing these barriers remains a priority.

Based on our first year's learning, we have updated our Terms & Conditions, agreed upon with our six participating communities. We are also inviting Community Builders, those Exeter City Councillors with portfolio responsibility for communities, and stakeholders to our steering group meetings. (To view, [click here](#)).

To improve inclusivity, we will provide Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion training, focusing on gender, sexuality, and religion, ensuring all feel welcome. This will also enhance awareness of broader societal issues.

Our first year of Better Connections has been both busy and rewarding, and we look forward to building on this momentum in year two.

## Appendix :

Take a glimpse into last year's events and hear testimonials from our beneficiaries and facilitators. [Click here to view.](#)

## Thank you

Our sincere thanks to The National Lottery Community Fund and the Lottery Players – your support is enabling us to achieve good things and make our great little city an even better place to live for all of us!