

An independent Research Evaluation of Shropshire Supports Refugees (SSR) 2023-2024

Impact Evaluation Report

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Aims of the Research

Shropshire Supports Refugees (SSR) was set up in 2016 by Amanda Jones to help support families who were resettling in Shropshire under the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS). At this time, the resettlement team in the Local Authority consisted of one person, working job share as a Refugee Coordinator. Charity provision was sparse in this area for refugee support and did not address ground level need. Consequently, SSR filled the gaps left by a lack of formal funding and time resources. Having initially envisioned their support would no longer be needed once the Syrian refugees were settled, other cohorts of refugees began to arrive in Shropshire, from Afghanistan in 2021.

In 2017 SSR became a not-for-profit Community Interest Company (CIC) before gaining charity status as a registered charity (a Charitable Incorporated Organisation, CIO) in 2021. Their aim is to support people who have migrated to the UK. SSR then worked with the local council to help resettle around 600 families from Ukraine following the Russian invasion in February 2022. More recently, they have been working with local hotels in Shrewsbury and Telford which have been taking part in a government-backed scheme to house asylum seekers. In 2021 the use of hotels to accommodate asylum seekers was reported to have tripled, with 26,380 people housed in hotels at the end of 2021 (Refugee Council, 2022). In Spring 2024, the hotel in Shrewsbury stopped housing people seeking asylum. The county did though see a growth in the use of army bases to house people seeking asylum, with the arrival of a further 400 refugees from Afghanistan in December 2023. This represented an ever-increasing need for the services of SSR.

SSR has grown from a small-scale, home-based organisation, which was, according to the CEO of SSR about *“doing nice things and keeping people feeling included”* (P03, SSR CEO).

It has transformed to a registered charity, employing staff, with 50 registered volunteers.

SSR have adapted their services and the support they provide to welcome refugees and asylum seekers in a swift and agile way. They provide a range of services, many of which are offered directly through their Community Hub in Shrewsbury. The Hub provides an ad-hoc support clinic in collaboration with Shropshire Council’s refugee resettlement co-ordinator. Support in relation to housing, benefits and healthcare is provided, along with group sessions that are concerned with English language, children’s educational support (and school holiday activities), online mental health support and family groups. SSR also takes local donations for refugees and

engages with fundraising activities to try and help source key items that migrant families may need. The charity is partly funded by the Local Authority.

Dr Clare Griffiths received funding from Keele University to carry out an independent research project that broadly aimed to explore local responses to immigration in rural areas such as Shropshire. Part of the project was to assess the work of Shropshire Supports Refugees, its processes, and its impact across the county. The methods of data collection involved:

- 10 Interviews with stakeholders across Shropshire (including Shropshire council, migrant charities, police, city of sanctuary)
- 10 Interviews with CEO and employees of SSR
- 20 Interviews with refugees and people seeking asylum in Shrewsbury
- 12 Interviews with local residents in Shrewsbury

The Local Context

The ONS (2021) census reports that in 2021 Shropshire had a population of 323,600. Shropshire has a higher proportion of residents over age 65 compared to the rest of England (25.3% vs 18.4%), and 5.9% of people in Shropshire in 2021 were born outside the UK, compared to 17.4% nationally. This rural area has therefore experienced little diversity and previously had limited experience of migration. This has changed in recent years however with pockets of the county beginning to see refugees settle in the area. Limited research has been conducted in rural settings that explore the local adaptations to migration. As Crawley et al (2019: 106) suggest, ‘popular constructions of rural England have perpetuated images of idyllic, problem-free environments and have largely masked the process of ‘othering’ that works to marginalize particular groups within rural society ... The existing, if limited, literature on the experiences of ethnic minorities living in rural areas suggests that racism may be more prevalent and/or socially acceptable in these areas due to the fact that rural populations have less exposure to diversity.’ Nevertheless, there is a great deal of evidence of hospitality, tolerance, and positive meaningful social contact in such rural areas as Shropshire that have the potential for social inclusion and to counter the prevailing hostile political and media rhetoric. In 2021 Shrewsbury Town Council backed a campaign led by Shropshire Supports Refugees, for Shrewsbury to become a ‘Town of Sanctuary’.

Key Findings

Summary of SSR Activities: Scope of services offered

As a local charity, SSR combine their geographical and neighbourhood knowledge to develop solutions that meet the social, emotional and physical needs of those seeking refuge or asylum:

“So, you know, I think you know definitely what we’ve learned is that we know Shropshire and when I say we, I mean us as a community, you know, as a wider group, we know Shropshire the best and therefore the services that need to be provided need to be provided by locals that also understands some of those challenges and you know concerns and actually how do we mitigate that, how do we make that easier?” (P07, Local Authority Stakeholder).

SSR work to provide material items to fulfil physical needs but identified that refugees were missing the sense of collective, peer-to-peer support. The existence of a community hub (the

Hub) in Shrewsbury town centre provides this as a base for people who have migrated to Shrewsbury and who may be seeking refuge or asylum to come together as a community, to celebrate their own culture by offering a venue and amenities for religious celebrations or national celebration days.

“They make like, a room for Syrian people to see each other every Eid. We have special Eid every year and when I see that, oh, I see in my family, in my country, we do special Eid every year this” (P21, Syrian Refugee).

It further facilitates coffee mornings, educational classes, crafting, cooking and laundry facilities. Notably it is a visible presence in the community, encouraging interaction between refugees and local residents. However, as a rural county, the Hub in Shrewsbury is not easily accessible to the whole county. This particularly affected the Ukrainian guests who were often dispersed within the more rural communities and more recently the Afghan refugees housed in military bases. Whilst transport services assisted by providing free public transport to certain cohorts, those transport links were often scant and unreliable which isolated some of the refugees:

“Buses are very unreliable and they don't stop when you ask them to stop. They well, you have to go to the bus stop. In Ukraine you can just stop them anywhere. You just wave them down, yeah”, (P24, Ukrainian Refugee).

‘So transport is an issue in terms of access to cars. It's very difficult to navigate Shropshire without a car, particularly the more rural patches’ (P01, Shropshire Employment Service Stakeholder).

In identifying and addressing this barrier to accessing support, SSR operates satellite hubs across the county to ensure that service users are not missing out on vital networks available to assist them:

“So Ludlow's got the biggest one, Oswestry, is the next one. Then we got, like Market Drayton, Bridgnorth, Church Stretton, Much Wenlock, there's lots of little pockets of refugee friendly [hubs]” (P03, CEO SSR).

The ‘Human side’

SSR steadfastly envelops the ‘human side’ of supporting refugees and asylum seekers. Through befriending, listening and interacting with refugees, they develop an insight into the enormity of fear, culture contrast, isolation and deprivation experienced. They acknowledge the trauma associated with refugees leaving their own country, family, loved ones and belongings and put services into place to mitigate these traumas. In listening and learning from the people who walk through their doors, they tailor their environment and services accordingly to provide a safe and comfortable space with activities that minimise barriers and maximise use of their facilities. SSR realised, for example, that the Syrian women struggled to feel at ease in an environment where there were men who were not their husbands. In sourcing a separate space for them, the women could relax, take off their headscarves and were much more open to being there and accessing support. There is now a regular coffee morning every two weeks for Syrian women:

“Yes, when I see my friend it’s like I see my family. It’s very good. I said I can like, can we come? Can we drink coffee together? She speak about his family. I speak with about my family. I find some person who understand me without translator”, (P21, Syrian Refugee).

The interviews conducted reveal the transformative impact of the ‘hub’ as a lifeline for refugees and asylum seekers, illustrating its role in addressing diverse and complex needs. The recurring themes include practical support, emotional validation, community integration, and empowerment through education and resources.

Refugees and asylum seekers appreciate the hub's practical support in meeting essential needs such as housing, clothing, transportation, and internet access:

“A big help was [from the hub]. She was my, she helped me in different ways. She brought me to estate agency. She brought me to social housing team and we tried to find how to solve it, and at least we did it. So I suppose it's a big problem for Ukrainians. But as I know here in Shropshire support refugee hub, there is a person who very helpful in this” (P20, Ukrainian Refugee).

“They [the hub] have helped me a lot because they were, when I need for example like they normally buy for a jacket and the weather is, we are with winter. And we normally get like jacket, like shoes, internet access like for the phone lines. [...] Really, we appreciate if we have a challenge. And we if we have appointment, they like assist us, they normally provide us transport, because maybe you'll get a solicitor from far area, like London. Yeah, yeah, they help us. I really appreciate myself” (P23, Somalian Asylum Seeker).

The hub creates a space where refugees and people seeking asylum feel heard and understood, counteracting the alienation they often experience in local communities. One interviewee remarked on the importance of the hub as a space for people to share experiences and feel validated, emphasising its role in emotional support, fostering community and solidarity:

“But yeah, they want to be understood. They want to be heard and listen to, and often local people don't have time or ability to. This is good to have a Hub. They can come and speak to people and share experience. It's incredible. It just, you know people. It gives people some sort of space. Yes, I think it's a very good idea” (P24, Ukrainian Refugee).

The hub also employs individuals with refugee backgrounds, enhancing its ability to empathise with and meet the needs of its service users. This was particularly noted by a participant who described the volunteers and staff as "angels" who offer culturally aware support to individuals from diverse countries such as Pakistan and Hong Kong:

“The brilliant Amanda is just an Angel. She's a real Angel. Not only Ukrainians, other people from other countries with different backgrounds. Some of my students come from Pakistan. And the Hong Kong, quite a few people from Hong Kong and they all get receive the support and help and it's incredible and volunteers do their best. And I assume having some people working here at the hub who are themselves refugees, it helps a lot because they can, they know they know how it feels, right?” (P24, Ukrainian Refugee).

The hub supports educational development and empowerment, such as facilitating English learning and access to college. One asylum seeker credited the hub for their current educational

opportunities, which they might not have pursued otherwise, describing the volunteers as motivational figures who guide them towards a brighter future:

“Big it's massive [the hub]. Yeah, I mean, for us, it's not easy. Maybe for them it's normal because that's their activity. After we came here, if we didn't meet them, maybe everything is not like this, for example me, I'm not going to college maybe. Now, uh, because of them, they have a teacher. They they're really nice. They treat us like, you know, their kid as their sons. And because of them, now we start college. They study, they teach us a lot of things in English’ (P28, Eritrean Asylum Seeker).

The hub's commitment to inclusivity is underscored by participants' comments on its universal welcome. It provides more than material aid—offering hope, belonging, and a structured pathway toward stability and integration:

‘And they show us the future. They will show us the way how to be there and they give us motivation. If, for example, if I am not here and if I'm not, if I am in another city and if there is not like hub, maybe I'm just stuck in the in the room and there's no more activity maybe. So hub, the first day we came here we didn't have even enough clothes. We came here. We took. And we got like something like this, you know, Internet, we have free Internets everywhere we go, so. Many things here, so it's so good for everyone. Yeah, for everyone. They're welcome everyone’’. (P28, Eritrean Asylum Seeker).

The high level of interaction between SSR and refugees / asylum seekers has enabled an awareness of cultural limitations, tensions and conflicting political positions between different cohorts and even members of the same cohorts. SSR have had to learn how to sensitively handle delicate situations which exist between individuals and cohorts in order to ensure that refugees and asylum seekers feel safeguarded in their homes, at the Hub and in the community:

“So and even, you know, in Syria, neighbours knew each other so well. Little villages and towns. Everyone knew everyone. But you could get shopped in by your neighbour or someone to the police, and then that would be it. You know, your partner would be killed or you'd be whipped off and tortured. So there's a deep suspicion of each other, and it took a long time for them to trust each other.

And we've also got the same in the Hong Kongers because they feel like most people that have come here should hate the Chinese Government, should resent them. And they're also fearful of the Chinese government because they haven't really left them behind. They've followed them. But there are a number of people that have come over on the opportunity to just have a better life who aren't particularly anti-Chinese government.

But when you put an activity on in Shropshire. And it's close knit and there's not many of them. They don't relax unless they know whether that person is blue or yellow. Blue being pro government, yellow being anti government.

So we've got this group of 30 families that have come out and had a few trips and had a few get togethers and come to our English classes. But they are too scared to open up to the group of people from Telford in case there's people that are blue and are gonna infiltrate their nice, safe group that they've got. So I'm having to try and find a way of doing that as well. Which. Is quite tricky. So there's all sorts’ (P03, CEO of SSR).

SSR identified some negative rhetoric in the media of hatred and hostility towards immigration generally and refugees and asylum seekers in particular. They worked hard therefore to positively counteract this with gestures and support to make people feel welcome, such as offering hampers and children's toys. The CEO recites that:

“people would cry with relief that they were welcome” (P03, CEO SSR).

By being so present and accessible in the lives of the refugees, SSR operate as a reactive service which grows to adapt to the changing needs of individuals, families and cohorts of immigrants and refugees across time. SSR identifies that information and communication are key to accessing support. They developed a WhatsApp group for the refugees to facilitate the dissemination of information. They discovered that the most popular time for its use was around 21:00 in the evening, when families had settled their children to bed. The CEO responded to this by making sure she was available at this time to answer their questions. Similarly, for asylum seekers residing in the hotels, by SSR support staff being present, they found the most popular times of day to in which to offer the most support:

“So in the end I tried to do as much face to face and talking to the service users directly and getting to know them directly and trying to learn their names, where they're from and what they needed. And I would do that, the best time to catch them was at breakfast and that fit with our schedule. So I'll be in there 8:30 every morning Monday to Friday and just talk to as many people as possible. And if need be, I would go in at lunchtime and occasionally I was even going in the evening as well for a while”, (P05, SSR Support Worker).

Whilst striving to meet their most immediate needs of food, clothing, housing, education and employment, the CEO remains passionate about mental health and healing, providing services through SSR to address the traumas and distress experienced. The CEO networked amongst friends and the local community to find people willing to volunteer their therapeutic services and was overwhelmed by the positive response she had. SSR overcame potential barriers to accessing this support by providing activities for children so their parents could make use of healing therapies. SSR recognise that even the smallest of gestures can make a big difference to the lived experience of the refugees / asylum seekers. In identifying the isolation felt by Afghan refugees housed at army barracks, they arranged for services to visit them. In embracing not only the vital services for acute need, this included arranging for a hairdresser to visit:

“Two days solid, doing hair to the women and they were over the moon and the guys from the army said that they'd never seen them so happy. So it's just really lovely” (P03, CEO SSR).

Feedback from the asylum seekers highlighted that having nothing to do and too much thinking time in the hotel all day compounded the effects of traumas experienced:

“You know, all the time we are staying in hotel room and just too boring except like 2 days, 2 days we have a English class here”, (P33, Sudanese Asylum Seeker).

“And because if you are stuck in the room, you remind the past. Just because there is nothing to do. So if you remind the past that makes you depressed”, (P28, Eritrean Asylum Seeker).

‘If you locked one day a house, how do you feel? Yeah, not comfortable. Like arrested for in jail.’ [P23 Somalian Asylum Seeker]

SSR responded to this by initialising activities to encourage refugees to spend time outside of the hotels:

“They arranged to the sports also, tennis, cricket, football. Also, they also they arrange one day, one hour for the free gyms also if you want to join”, (P29, Afghan Asylum Seeker).

Engaging in community cohesion

Through the use of social media pages, community events and the visibility of the Hub, SSR empowers the local community to assist in meeting the needs of the refugees / asylum seekers. SSR have received an overwhelming response through volunteers, offers of services and donations from the people of Shropshire, something which the CEO feels the community should be proud of. SSR facilitate these offers, store and manage donations from the community, no small task due to the overwhelming response from the community for donated clothing, toys and gifts.

With a negative narrative in the national press and isolated incidents in the local press around refugees and asylum seekers, SSR are keen to promote cohesion between them and the local community. A largely positive response to their arrival in Shropshire has expedited this process and SSR continue to build on this by running arts, crafts, poetry and music projects which integrate the locals with the refugees / asylum seekers. A local and nationally renowned playwright facilitated a poetry workshop which was performed to the community in the town square. It gave refugees a chance to have their voices heard, breaking down cultural barriers and enabling them to have a voice and a choice in their own future:

“By the refugees telling their own stories to the community – it is educating people it gives refugees some element of control and crucially shows the human side”, (P16, SSR Support Worker).

SSR listened to the voices of refugees / asylum seekers who articulated that it was important to them to fit in with English culture whilst protecting links with their own. SSR responded to this by providing cooking activities where traditional English cooking can be learned and international dishes can be shared:

“because I would like to have more experience to learn how... can like how can I make English bread not Arabic bread, cooking English food? Because very important I need to learn everything what English people like, because I now I live in English country not in Arabic country”, (P22, Syrian Refugee).

It became apparent that it was important to refugee families that their children not only learned English to a sufficient standard but that they did not lose their ability to speak in their native language. The Hub provides space and activities for children to meet within their native cohorts to ensure that their language skills are retained:

“When [the hub] did some activity at the weekend, yeah, the different place. “Ohh my mom. I was very happy today because I see the children, I can speak like Arabic” because he but yes, this very difficult. Please if you can improve this for children.” (P22, Syrian Refugee).

SSR further keeps a look out for events which might interest different cohorts, for example, in collaboration with an organisation called Arts for All, they arranged a trip to Birmingham where a Ukrainian orchestra was performing.

SSR recognises that the language is one of the most substantial barriers to refugees and asylum seekers accessing services and feeling part of their community. English lessons are run at the Hub, outreach hubs and hotels housing asylum seekers. These are gratefully appreciated by the service users and provide the key to accessing education, employment and navigating the complex systems of opening bank accounts or applying for benefits and housing:

“Yeah, big better [command of English language]. I mean it's, it's it's a lot because I'm happy now because I'm studying. That's a big thing for me. So because of them, if they there wasn't them. I can't continue my education today” (P28, Eritrean Asylum Seeker).

Processes and monitoring success

One of the challenges for SSR is the bureaucracy around policy and processes that can be somewhat restrictive but necessary, particularly now that there is a larger staff and volunteer base who need a degree of guidance and something to hold onto to make them feel secure. SSR now have a more formal staff structure with Head of Service, Business Administrators, and Volunteer Lead roles ensuring that essential bureaucratic and support systems are in place. SSR recognise the need though to balance this against an ability to be flexible and agile to ensure policy and procedure does not restrict the help which they strive to achieve for service users as *‘one size fits all doesn't work in Shropshire’ [P07, Local Authority]* and organisations such as SSR are able to work in ways that others such as the Local Authority are unable to. The CEO is a keen campaigner for the use of initiative and worries that policy and procedure might restrict this. She wants to continue to make decisions which are dictated by *“compassion, trust, faith and love” (P03, SSR CEO).*

Those seeking refuge and asylum in Shropshire do overwhelmingly report feeling welcomed, feeling protected and safe, and contrast this to their memories of war, conflict and unsafety in the countries they had to flee:

‘you're most welcome. And they say now you are you are safe in Shrewsbury like your own land.’ [P29 Afghan Refugee]

‘but what I would say Shropshire does really well is that is that Community, that kind of wrapping around people.’ [P07, Local Authority]

A member of staff at SSR had this to say about navigating policy and process dictated by local government:

“I think some of the processes that the local authority and just the general government have in place, kind of. I'm trying not to use the word dehumanising, but I think they are kind of like one solution fits all and they're very general and what we do is we look at the individual and the needs of the individual and give that human side” (P54, SSR staff).

Individual staff, who are encouraged to use initiative have developed ways to help navigate policies whilst also providing a sense of humanity often lacking in sterile policy and process documents.

Following the arrival of various cohorts since 2016, SSR have developed a better understanding of the general and more specific needs of refugees. They have introduced systems and processes to manage resources, which empower refugees to do their own research and help themselves. The development of WhatsApp groups for different language cohorts helps disseminate information quickly. The development of padlets (an online notice system) share resources on specific common issues such as housing, health, education, banking, benefits. They use workshops, classes and drop ins to enable larger groups to access their services at the same time.

The increase in funding that comes with successful service provision leads to a greater need to focus on outcomes, impact and evaluations of the activities SSR undertake. The CEO of SSR recognises this and feels this is an area for future development. The impact of success through accessing SSR support is often measured through what has been prevented rather than what has been achieved. This then makes such success difficult to measure. Nevertheless, SSR do have broadly defined targets, such as the reduction and prevention of mental health issues and stress related conditions. It is the additional acts noted throughout that go beyond the practical support of supplying clothes, food, support with documents, accommodation, and so on that have a profound effect on people's lives and sense of wellbeing, particularly for those who have been through traumatic journeys and continue to live in 'limbo':

'they show us the future [...] they give us motivation. It's so good for everyone [...] they welcome everyone' [P28 Eritrean Asylum Seeker]

'So community centres, like Shropshire support refugee a lot more responding to what I need and they listen to me more than Serco which is the organisation who involved with the hotel ' [P30 Libyan Asylum seeker]

This target is at the heart of what SSR aim to achieve and the current research project has found evidence of the significant positive impact SSR has had on the mental health of refugees and asylum seekers by addressing isolation, creating community, fostering a sense of safety, and supporting personal growth.

Many individuals faced intense feelings of loneliness and despair upon arrival due to language barriers, lack of social connections, and cultural dislocation. SSR alleviated these struggles by fostering friendships and creating a supportive community. For example, one refugee found solace after meeting English and Syrian friends, which reduced her loneliness and emotional distress:

"Then we came to here, and when we came I found everything difficult because I don't speak English. I don't have a friend. I every day crying. I need my family, everything. All the life would change. I told my husband. Please bring. I would like to come back to the (unknown).

I missed everything and then one week, two weeks I found that it's a little bit change to better because I found the Syrian friend, I found. lovely English friend. They very helpful us just to the problem, when I would like to talk to anybody. I can't because I don't know how to speak English because just I speak one language, Arabic language.

Yes. And then some lady come to our house and help us about speaking English. And she start with a little words. Then two or three the until I can understand a little bit from her. She's a lovely lady. Yes, about 2-3 months. I feeling better.' (P22, Syrian Refugee).

SSR provide activities that help participants shift focus away from past trauma and avoid depressive states caused by inactivity. One asylum seeker noted that staying busy through SSR services prevented them from ruminating on past hardships, significantly improving their mental well-being:

Interviewer: "So it helps to be busy? "

P28: "Yeah, yeah. And to forget everything at the past. And because if you are stuck in the room, you remind the past. Just because there is nothing to do. So if you remind the past that makes you depressed" (P28, Eritrean Asylum Seeker).

Many refugees expressed relief in feeling safe and valued in their new environment, facilitated by SSR. A participant highlighted how the charity's family-like treatment helped them adapt and feel secure, contrasting with their initial unhappiness and cultural displacement:

"I'm not really happy, but when I come here to the refugees centres here (SSR), there was a deal like a family. And yeah, first time I will meet [SSR CEO] and she treat like a like a child, like a family member, and I feel so happy' [P29, Afghan Refugee]

Another refugee emphasised the safety they felt compared to their experiences in Lebanon, contributing to their mental recovery:

"And then I found here it's safe, safer than Lebanon. And then. And then I bought a phone speak with my mom with my dad. All the family. I feeling very happy.

Yes, and everything did. It changed to better and better. My children went to school. They found a friend. Yes. And that's make me a little bit happy because uh, when I tell my children was a little bit scared and not anyone they would like to play with the children. Yes, that is just that" (P22, Syrian Refugee).

SSR's educational programmes, such as English lessons and pathways to further education, empower participants. One asylum seeker expressed happiness and pride in continuing their studies, which improved their mental health and confidence (P28, Eritrean Asylum Seeker). Another noted how SSR's support enabled them to take on roles like translating for others, enhancing their sense of purpose:

'and I feel so happy and I think one of the all of Afghans, I will speak a little bit English when I come and I translate for everyone in I communication to everyone with the how on what they need at refugee centre" (P29, Afghan Asylum Seeker).

Support from SSR also helped individuals reconnect with their families, which played a crucial role in improving their mental health. For example, one participant described the joy of being able to speak with their parents back home after receiving help to access communication tools (P22, Syrian Refugee). Initial discomfort with cultural and environmental differences was mitigated through SSR's services. While one participant initially felt disoriented by the lack of familiar

cultural markers, SSR's supportive environment and practical assistance made them feel at ease, even preferring the smaller town setting eventually (P29, Afghan Refugee).

To further their understanding of what works, SSR have appointed a Service Manager, who's role it will be to find ways of capturing data which showcases the difference support from SSR has made. This is particularly important when applying for funding and demonstrating the ongoing need for their services. Although statistics are important in recording the success of SSR, they feel that the qualitative data holds more value than the quantitative. Whilst the numbers coming through the doors indicate the success of the Hub as a welcoming and safe environment, by exhibiting qualitative data through case studies, reports, and publishing feedback from the hundreds of activities which they have put on, the CEO hopes this will display the more human side of the impact SSR has on its service users.

SSR is keen to learn what service users think about the support they have received, what can be done differently or better, what helped and what did not. They have previously initiated community committees from the cohorts, to measure how well they have felt supported. One problem SSR have found so far with reports from community committees is that the participants in these committees are so grateful for the support they receive they do not raise any negatives for fear of appearing ungrateful.

There is a sensitivity required here as speaking freely is often what has caused service users to seek asylum or refugee status. In overcoming this barrier, SSR intends to revisit these committees with service users who received the majority of their support some time ago, hoping that they will now feel in a position to give more constructive feedback.

Partnerships with other organisations

SSR are acutely aware of the depth of complexity associated with refugees / asylum seekers and issues surrounding housing, education, employment, benefits, health etc. Whilst most of these services are provided by statutory agencies, SSR identified multiple barriers to these services being accessed by refugees and asylum seekers. These included lack of knowledge of awareness of available services, location, travel issues, access times and procedures, language, cultural barriers and general confidence in accessing services. SSR strove to break down these barriers by building partnerships with statutory and other volunteer agencies to ensure signposting and access between them becomes less complex and more supported. For example, they will accompany someone to the job centre enough times until they feel comfortable doing it themselves, knowing where to go, which queue to stand in, how to sign in, how to recognise when it's their turn. They will accompany refugees / asylum seekers to NHS appointments at hospital, ensuring they know which public transport will get them there on time and navigating their way around the hospital. This reduces the risk of not accessing these crucial services and empowers individuals to be confident in managing their own affairs in the long term. The crucial role that SSR play in this is recognised by other local agencies who describe SSR as 'gold dust':

'I was lucky it was gold dust that I found [...] Without [SSR] and her intervention and her team being there and being able to do, I don't think there would be any support at all for the clients' [P02, Migrant Support Charity]

The Hub offers an environment used by multiple agencies, including other charitable organisations such as Women's Aid and the local authority's Domestic Abuse Team and their Housing and Resettlement Team, which becomes a central place where refugees and asylum seekers can navigate numerous services at one time. The space they provide is safe, culturally appropriate and relaxing which SSR finds promotes engagement. This enables SSR to bridge the gap between formal and informal support.

The CEO of SSR attributes much of the success of SSR to the positive relationships she shares with her local authority, particularly in housing and resettlement. Having built good initial relationships, the CEO was invited early on into local authority meetings which enabled her to portray the voices of refugees and asylum seekers whilst systems and processes were being set up:

"the funding that we do get from government, actually we give to Shropshire Support Refugees because they are best placed to deal with it. It's real partnership working and it works really well" (P10, Local Authority).

Furthermore, SSR encouraged and facilitated members of the local authority to come to the Hub / hotels and meet the refugees and asylum seekers. Hearing their stories first-hand humanised the often 'bureaucratic' processes and, in some instances moved the officers to tears:

"I think we recognise as a local authority that, I said at the beginning that we are an authority figure, you know, and we have responsibilities that we have to report into central government. But SSR don't have that. You know, to a certain extent they do everything from well just everything really. Yeah, we couldn't do it without them. 100% couldn't do it without them. I just, I love working with SSR. They are a brilliant bunch of people, you know, they care about individuals, as in an individual. You know what I mean? They make sure that each individual person is OK and I can't say it enough we just would not be able to meet our statutory requirements, which sounds quite you know, but we couldn't do it without them because sometimes we can't do that nice stuff" (P07, Local Authority).

Catering for the needs of the asylum seekers has been as new to the local authority as it has to SSR and the CEO feels they complement each other with their working relationship in developing the most humane problem-solving solutions:

"So when you look at asylum, local authorities don't get funding for that. But when you've got an asylum hotel in your area, you need eyes on. You need to know what's going on and so it would be naive of us, I think, to not be involved, even though there's no dedicated funding around that. So actually SSR are my eyes and ears on the ground, you know, and they are the ones that are able to go in" (P07, Local Authority).

This eases the process of engaging with asylum seekers who are beginning to receive their leave to remain status and suddenly do need to access statutory services. SSR are able to anticipate what needs will be required and the asylum seekers will have been prepped with skills needed to access these services by the support they have received:

"I think we're in a bit of a privileged position in the fact that Shropshire Supports Refugees do go in and offer them help so they know them before they get their leave to stay. So they

already have those links with that support system. So I think as long as they've been engaging up to that point, I can imagine that they would continue to engage with that service and get the support that they need because they know from past experience that if they ask for help from them, they'll get help. So I think, yeah. We are very lucky to have them" (P11, Local Authority).

As much as SSR learn from the Local Authority about what is and isn't available from statutory services, the Local Authority learn from SSR about the observance of cultural and social practices of refugees and asylum seekers. These encourage respect and acceptance and help pave the way for better relationships between partner agencies and the refugees / asylum seekers:

"And I've learnt so much from [SSR] in terms of... I'll give you a really basic example and I'm going to say what I said to her. So I said to her when, you know, when we get the refugees, well they weren't called refugees were they at the time, when we get the people fleeing from the Ukraine, she said "don't say The Ukraine". And I said "why not?" She said "Because that's how Russia describes them". Now, I didn't know that. But it was said to me a number of times by Ukrainian refugees who said whenever we've heard you speak, you have never said "The Ukraine". No, because I was told very early on not to do that and told why. She said "that's incredible, so few people know that" (P10, Local Authority).

Partnership working extends to other public services such as the police. SSR recognise the police as an institution often feared by refugees and asylum seekers as corrupt and violent through experiences in their native countries. SSR therefore organise events such as 'meet the police', to demonstrate the difference of policing in the UK and to convince refugees and asylum seekers they are a service to approach for help and assistance.

SSR acknowledge their limitations in being able to provide support to all. They work to develop partnerships with other community groups to encourage these to become a source of support in themselves. After a call for community assistance, a local Church were the first to respond, and after collaborating with them, other religious and community organisations became involved. A community network began of sports and activities being laid on for the refugees. The CEO believes that the role of SSR is to initiate partnerships, by attending a coffee morning, collecting some donations, talking to the community members and this can quickly progress to refugees being specifically invited to general community activities and result in a sense of cohesion between local refugees and the local community:

"but what I would say Shropshire does really well is that is that Community, that kind of wrapping around people" (P07, Interview, Local Authority).

An example of the above approach is their current provision of support to Shrewsbury Town Council in its application to be classed as a town of sanctuary. This would provide recognition of its support for asylum seekers and refugees and the value which they can contribute to the local community. It acknowledges an infrastructure of inclusive services, something which SSR have been instrumental in delivering.

Moving forward

Moving forward, there is an anticipated continued need for the services SSR provides. The cohort from Ukraine have most of their needs met now in terms of housing, education, employment but

they are less than 2 years away from their visas running out and the conflict in Ukraine shows no sign of imminent resolve. SSR are already considering what happens next in terms of the bureaucracy around their visas and resulting entitlements through to preparing them for the possibility of returning home. Their children are now engaged with the British education system, English has become a first language for many of them:

“The problem is that I don't know how, for example, when our visas are finished. The problem is that I don't know how we need to, how we can to come back to Ukraine? Because he doesn't know Ukrainian education system at all, and after two years he will be here in the year 8. All his school life is here. He doesn't know Ukraine, he doesn't remember Ukrainian system. And now it's scaring me because I don't know how it will be when I'm looking at him, it will be 14, he will be 14. It's teenage age and this is very difficult time in simple life when you're just going to school, but for him it will be more stressful. Because he needs to learn again, Ukrainian system, make friends there again, but also he has friends here. So I don't know what would be when I'm looking at children who are here in this age” (P36, Ukrainian Refugee).

Furthermore, at the time of our last interview, some asylum seekers were beginning to receive their leave to remain decisions. SSR were swiftly having to consider what support they will need if they get approved / denied. This would be new territory for the local authority and SSR to navigate. SSR are acutely aware that uncertainty over their future weighed heavily on the minds of asylum seekers and continued to re-traumatise and breed fear and anxiety which requires ongoing support:

“The 100% I will change because I have a chance to live in here, remain to the UK and I was thinking about my future here better than before because when you don't have a decision, you don't know how to do it, in case and what's going wrong with you” (P29, interview, asylum seeker).

This sense of ‘limbo’ and the impacts this had on mental health was a common theme amongst refugees and asylum seekers:

‘It's good for the government to keep in mind that keeping people in this limbo? It's not a good thing to do, so now people know visas are extended or possibility of this extension is has been granted. That is great. But then what's next? What's next? What happens after that? This is what bothers people most of all. They cannot make plans. They cannot think about the future[...] How do you see yourself in five years? They have no idea. It's all blank page for them. Yeah, they're just living in hope, yeah.’ [P24 Ukrainian Refugee]

One of the key barriers SSR identify for asylum seekers is the lack of formal, legal immigration advice available in a rural community such as Shropshire. Many hours are spent trying to find legal immigration support for those applying for, receiving or appealing their leave to remain status. Having secured money, from the National Lottery, SSR were about to employ two level 2 immigration officers which they anticipate would make a considerable difference to giving formal immigration advice with aims to eventually employ a level 3 immigration officer. In order to comply with site security safety, new data systems and processes would need to be put into place before this could happen, in addition to making room in the building for more staff. With those who are refused their leave to remain and are imminently homeless with no money, SSR are examining whether there is any support on a human level which can be offered to these

people without breaking the law, for example, how to put information packs together for them, trying to source tents and sleeping bags.

A further barrier for the asylum seekers which SSR have identified is some are unable to read in their own language, so any benefits of having information translated into their native language are redundant. With their decision letters imminent and the need for effective communication crucial, SSR are looking at different ways of displaying information so non-readers are not excluded:

“And that again, it's another engagement issue. It's just building relations, building trust and finding a way of communicating what we're doing and how it's going to benefit them in a way that they can understand it, whether it's culturally, whether it's non verbally, whether it's that we, we have to go and look at making videos and I'm really convinced this is the way forward” (P03, CEO SSR).

In observing the success of the support she has put into place, the CEO's vision is to see the model of SSR replicated in other towns and villages, particularly rural communities such as Shropshire. Her passion to implement this sees the CEO role concentrating more on networking, learning, training, sitting in on strategic groups, local authority and cross-party groups, steering and voluntary groups and delivering talks and presentations. The CEO's key focus is on empowerment:

“So I'm really passionate about putting the power into the people's hands. Empowering people, empowering communities. Which creates sustainability. It creates a better level of education across not just for refugees” (P03, CEO SSR).

The CEO is acutely aware that the future of SSR's service rests on needs and resources, where the need exists and funding is available. SSR are confident they can deliver a comprehensive service which goes above and beyond meeting physical needs, and provides a service which is essential for community cohesiveness and integration. What SSR appear to do really well is focus at the individual level and provide extra support above the basic requirements. What separates SSR from the national, larger refugee and migrant charities is their focus on detail, the time given to listening, the effort put into what the individual wants as well as just what they need.

Change is constantly on the horizon, funding sources are always time limited, plenty of thought is going into what's next and where the next pot of funding might come from. With a bigger team and people who can focus on these individual things, it frees the CEO position up to do more strategic planning. The CEO's focus for SSR now, remains in dealing with need which is presented in front of her, building partnerships, putting in policies and processes and upskilling her workers.

Conclusion: Summary of Key Findings & Recommendations

- SSR provides crucial support to refugees and asylum seekers, significantly improving their quality of life. They fill a crucial gap in service provision that others (such as the Local Authority) are not able to provide.
- SSR help to provide a safe place for people seeking refuge or asylum in Shropshire and appear to be regarded as a service that is trusted.
- The charity's programmes, including housing support, educational classes, and mental health services, have been highly effective in addressing the needs of refugees and

asylum seekers, with reports of improvements in mental health and feelings of ‘hope’ and a ‘future’.

- Educational programmes, including English language classes and support for children's education, have empowered refugees and asylum seekers, which helps with integration and people's sense of value and contribution to community life.
- SSR's work integrates refugees into the local community through various activities and partnerships, promoting mutual understanding and support and fostering social cohesion.
- The charity faces challenges such as limited funding, logistical issues in rural areas, and the need for more formal immigration advice. We make the following recommendations based on this.

Recommendations:

1. SSR should have longer term funding. This would ensure sustainability, job security for front line staff, and a continued offer to those seeking refuge and asylum in Shropshire. It would also allow for strategic planning, including how to broaden and diversify the offer. The below recommendations can only be achieved if this longer-term secure funding is in place.
2. Implement robust data collection, monitoring systems, and regular feedback mechanisms, such as surveys and focus groups, to gather input from refugees on the services provided and areas for improvement.
3. Regularly publish impact reports to demonstrate the effectiveness of SSR's programmes and attract potential funders and supporters. Launch campaigns to raise awareness about the charity's impact and encourage community support and involvement. Continue to organise events that bring together refugees, asylum seekers, and local residents to foster mutual understanding and support.
4. Consider establishing more satellite hubs in rural areas to ensure wider reach and accessibility.
5. Employ or partner with legal professionals to provide immigration advice and support for refugees navigating the legal system. Develop comprehensive information packs or drop-in legal advice clinics for refugees to ensure they have access to necessary resources and support. Continue to explore ways to communicate essential information to non-readers.
6. Continue building strong partnerships with local authorities, other charities, and community groups to enhance service delivery and support networks. Partner with local schools and colleges to provide educational opportunities and support for refugee children and adults.
7. Expand mental health services and therapeutic activities to address the trauma and stress experienced by refugees and asylum seekers.
8. Continue to actively engage with local and national media to promote positive stories about refugees and the contributions they make to the community. Launch campaigns to raise awareness about the challenges refugees face and the importance of community support.
9. Continue to develop, train, and recruit staff to ensure a clear structure and equitable distribution of workload, thereby reducing the burden on the CEO.