



Trustees Annual Report

October 1st 2023 – September 30th 2024



Northumberland County of Sanctuary (NCOS)

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Registered Charity 1185663

NCOS – Appreciation 1.

You provide a rare and much-needed voice of truth about refugees and asylum seekers, countering the growing hostility and misinformation surrounding migration.

For most of us, migration is not a choice—it is a necessity, a last resort for survival. No one willingly leaves behind their home, culture, and loved ones unless staying means facing persecution, war, or unbearable hardship. The journey itself is filled with unimaginable risks, but the challenges do not end upon arrival. Instead of finding safety and acceptance, many refugees are met with suspicion, bureaucratic obstacles, and policies that make integration nearly impossible.

One of the most devastating aspects of forced migration is its impact on children. They carry the trauma of displacement, struggle to adapt to a foreign language and culture, and often witness their parents battling with an unwelcoming system. Instead of supporting them to rebuild their lives, the government's restrictive policies push them further into isolation, denying them the opportunity to contribute and belong.

As you regularly point out, refugees bring resilience, skills, and ambition—qualities that could help strengthen and enrich this country. If given the chance, they would not be a burden but an asset. The UK, with its proud history of fairness and tolerance, should recognize this and build pathways for integration rather than barriers that lead to exclusion and despair.

You are a beacon of hope in these difficult times. Knowing that NCOS exists reminds us that there are still people who believe in justice, humanity, and the true values of this country. Thank you for standing up for people like me, for challenging the harmful narratives, and for calling for a system that treats refugees with dignity.

NCOS Member

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1. Northumberland County of Sanctuary (NCOS)

Northumberland County of Sanctuary (NCOS) was founded from a public meeting on October 1st 2016 and registered as a charitable incorporate organisation (CIO) whose only voting members are its charity trustees in November 2019.

NCOS is governed by a Charity Commission Foundation Model Constitution. It is a group of the national organisation City of Sanctuary (about to become an affiliate organisation) and a membership organisation which takes pride in the participation of people with asylum and refugee experience throughout our work.

We welcome people to Northumberland and help them become part of wonderful communities in places we call home. Throughout our work we try to engage members with the ordinary life of the community and help them integrate with the rich variety of activities open to all.

2. Objects of Northumberland County of Sanctuary (NCOS)

The promotion of social inclusion for the public benefit among people who are refugees and people seeking asylum, by promoting and co-ordinating services and facilities to help them adapt to life within a new community.

The relief of financial hardship among people seeking asylum and refugees living and working in Northumberland by acting as an umbrella and resource for local refugee support services.

The advancement of the education of the public in general about the issues relating to refugees and those seeking asylum and human rights.

The promotion of equality and diversity for the public benefit by promoting activities to foster understanding and good relations between the general public and people seeking sanctuary.

3. Governance

NCOS Annual General Meeting (AGM) is held in April and our financial year is from October 1st to September 30th. This enables full scrutiny of the previous year's accounts as well as the work of NCOS at each AGM.

The governance of NCOS is in the hands of the Board of Trustees.

The Board meets ten times per year on the fourth Wednesday of each month apart from August and December. The trustees co-opt some other volunteers on to the Board with a full role of participation except for those matters which are by the constitution reserved for trustees. Members who would like to join the Board can submit themselves for election at the Annual General Meeting (AGM)

The Board appoints an Executive Committee to meet between Board meetings to undertake day to day governance and for any urgent decisions. The Executive reports to each Board meeting. Minutes of Board meetings are freely available.



4. Officers

October 1st 2023 – September 30th 2024

Chair – Murtala Touray

Secretary – Hilton Dawson

Treasurer – Muhammad Virk

Assistant Treasurer – Zara Galaeva

Data Protection Officer – John Stenhouse

Volunteer Organiser – Hilton Dawson

5. Trustees

Murtala Touray
Muhammad Virk
Zara Galaeva
Elena Kassis
John Stenhouse
Wendy Bond
Hilton Dawson – retiring April 2025

6. Board Members

Daniel Meija (to April 2024)
Lucia Maharero (from April 2024)
Mohammed Zahed (from April 2024 to April 2025)
Sarah Wright (June – December 2024)
Ben Hopkinson (to December 2024)



7. Development Plan and Progress

In 2022-23 NCOS consulted, debated and agreed upon a Development Plan which committed us to working towards financial sustainability, with the means to employ a Co-ordinator, who would work from our own identifiable, accessible base in the community.

2023-24 saw us make some progress towards those goals with the employment of a consultant to help create a fund-raising strategy and continuing efforts with key partners to fund important parts of our regular programme. After a few unsuccessful attempts to locate and rent premises we have come together with other partners in the Hirst Regeneration Project to help establish a shared office base. This should come to fruition in 2025.

Finance is always a struggle, but there is evidence that NCOS is being valued both for the work that we do and for our vision for the future of the communities in which we work. We are grateful to the local authorities, charitable trusts and individuals who are so generous in funding our day to day work. We now need to focus more on sustained fund raising, coupled with the organisational development which will encourage longer term investment in the NCOS which employs a member of staff, from our own base.

8. Volunteers and their Work

However successful we become, NCOS is a voluntary organisation, currently made up solely of volunteers and we are all very proud to be NCOS Volunteers.

A huge pitfall of volunteering is that keen and committed people can quickly end up becoming over-committed and burnt out. We are working hard to recruit people for specific, well-managed roles which would-be volunteers can more easily fit into busy lives alongside other responsibilities and commitments.

One of the absolute joys of NCOS is working with talented and able people who wish to give back to the community where they are seeking asylum and (at least for a while) sometimes have considerable time on their hands. However, it is also vital to recognise that once people gain leave to remain, their whole world will change. Even if they remain living in Northumberland, the pressures of work and new responsibilities must take priority over volunteering.

We have utilised some 50 volunteers during the course of 2023-24, almost 40% of whom have been people currently living in the asylum system.



There are good reasons for a considerable turnover and there are always opportunities as NCOS continues to develop and grow, so we are constantly on the look out for new people to join us. A considerable aid to recruitment is the film 'Hjem' produced by Jamie Sinclair with the participation of many NCOS members and volunteers. This provides an inspirational introduction to our work and is available on the NCOS website and facebook page. Please consider volunteering with NCOS and feel free to get in contact.

Many volunteers join in with existing projects, taking part in the invaluable work of meeting and befriending people at drop ins, advising them about life here in the communities of Ashington and Blyth and Bedlington and helping them access services for them and their families. Additionally, there are great opportunities to employ particular skills and help develop new initiatives to the benefit of people seeking asylum.

In 2023-24 M. an architect from Afghanistan worked with E. S. a company director from Northumberland, to produce an excellent information pack for people seeking asylum to apply for scholarships to Higher Education in the UK and to be mentored in doing so. The first fruit of this programme was M himself obtaining a place on a Masters Degree at a major UK university and all the signs are that others will be following in his footsteps.

Another exemplar of real progress was A, who in a few months seeking asylum in Northumberland found his own volunteering opportunities doing administrative work with Girl Guiding UK and became a regular DJ at a local community radio station as well as working with our Tuesday Drop in to help people register for NHS, helped make NHS appointments, helped with translation, advocated for others to report crime to the Police, participated in meetings with partner agencies, and took part in training with City of Sanctuary online and in London. Much of this created a considerable profile right across the community, helping him gain the confidence to approach local business with proposals for new deals and better access for people seeking asylum.

NCOS Bikes is a fantastic enterprise driven by two volunteers, Bob originally from Birmingham and Victor originally from El Salvador. Bob (ably assisted by Alison) procures old bicycles from all around, Victor who qualified as a cycle mechanic at the local College, fixes them and NCOS supply a helmet, a lock and refer every rider to cycle training. In one year NCOS bikes have provided almost eighty, safe, refurbished bicycles for members of all ages.

These are just some examples of outstanding work from volunteers and there are many more. The more we raise our profile and talk about the excellent opportunities to work with people offered by NCOS the more we are finding real interest and enthusiasm among would-be volunteers, from wherever they originate.

9. Membership



Northumberland County of Sanctuary (NCOS) is the only organisation in Northumberland with a focus upon the needs of people seeking asylum.

Despite all attempts to find further, more detailed information we are only made aware of the broadest information about people seeking asylum who are dispersed to the County.

We believe that there are approximately 1,000 people living in Northumberland who are seeking asylum and are refugees and that there are several hundred more people who have come here via Ukraine resettlement schemes.

We often find out about people who may benefit from our services when they turn up to our drop ins, or occasionally are referred by other agencies. During 2023-24 we began a membership scheme which is open to anyone who supports NCOS objects, whatever their status. Membership is free and conditional only on the supply of an email address which we can use to alert members to our work and activities.

We are gradually building an invaluable database, numbering several hundred people, but we know we have a long way to go to achieve full coverage of all people who might benefit from and contribute to the work of NCOS.

10. Regular Weekly Activities

Monday	10am - 12pm	Members Office Ashington
Tuesday	11am - 1pm	Drop in Ashington
Tuesday	2pm - 4 pm	Art Group Ashington
Thursday	2pm - 3 pm	Support Group Bedlington
Friday	11am - 12pm	Drop in Blyth
Saturday	1pm - 3pm	Drop in Blyth
Saturday	1pm - 3pm	Drop in Ashington

11. Events

NCOS celebrates people and encourages them to enjoy life in Northumberland. Warmth and hospitality is always reciprocal and people are often very keen to take part in opportunities to celebrate culture and their memories of home with food, art, music, clothes and generous sharing and giving.

There are lots of celebrations; one of the biggest is our annual International Day where we invite local people and their representatives to join in a real festival, featuring many of the almost 50 nationalities who are now represented in Northumberland.

Of course, Christmas is very important. This is the report of our volunteer Sarah Bredin Kemp of the 16th December 2023 Christmas Party.

In Ashington, we have developed an excellent partnership with the Salvation Army over a number of years. The Salvation Army ask for an anonymised list of children's ages and genders, then provide us with the appropriate gifts for the children.

Collating the list is a difficult undertaking for volunteers whilst information can become out-of-date quickly and new arrivals come often.

As well as gifts for 68 children, the Salvation Army also gave us a box of sensory toys for neurodivergent children and some additional donations for adults.

From our own donated stock, we added in extra gifts in recognition of the frequency of new families arriving after the deadline for Salvation Army gifts.

The gifts then went to Full Circle Food Project where they were wrapped by the Crafty Lunch group.

NCOS volunteers then sorted the gifts into family bags which would be given to parents/guardians to avoid children opening presents at the party (a hard-learned lesson from previous years!).



Adults were invited to take a 'lucky dip' gift, which were small parcels of toiletries and chocolate from donations and some (mainly men's) purchased from the party budget.

Eleven members offered to bring a dish to share. We offered a £10 contribution towards ingredients which was accepted by 8 people; 3 people wanted to make their contribution themselves. Full Circle Food Project donated 3 traditional yule logs.

We also provided additional food like crudites and dips, crisps, mince pies and drinks. Approximately 100 people attended the party. We organised music and games for the children with small prizes including pass-the-parcel and musical chairs. The amazing spread of food was thoroughly enjoyed by everybody.

Gifts were given out at the end of the party.

Northumberland is a wonderful place to live and NCOS members take good advantage of wonderful amenities such as Woodhorn Museum and the beaches and seaside of Newbiggin and Blyth throughout the year.

Summer is obviously the best time for a holiday programme and visits include both coast and countryside and the glories of Alnwick, Wallington, Craggside, Tynemouth as well as kind supporters who have made their own farms and gardens and amenities available to us. Special mention to the good folk of St Lawrence Warkworth, who have regularly invited people to drop in to the church from their visits around the County to take afternoon tea. One of our members recently housed in the west of the County not only enjoyed volunteering in the community shop but fell in love with the air and splendour of Hadrian's Wall and encourages people to visit.

12. Sport

The 'universal language of football' and sport in general – cricket, boxing, athletics is of huge value in bringing people and communities for together and for health and enjoyment and all-round well-being.

The NCOS walking football team makes a huge impact at the annual 'walking football' tournament held in Hirst Park, while football training goes on throughout the year and many of the young people from NCOS take part in local teams. Both Blyth and Newbiggin boxing clubs have welcomed men and women from NCOS and Blyth and Ashington cricket clubs, are warm and friendly places.

Tatiana took part in the Great North Run in September, completing the half marathon in just over 2 hours.



13. Partners

NCOS members' office and drop in activities are held at the church halls belonging to St Andrews Church, Ashington and St Cuthbert's Church, Blyth. Our new support group is held at the Northumberland County Council Family Hub in Bedlington and our new Art group takes place at Council for Voluntary Action (CVA).

Our Tuesday and Friday drop ins are attended by Northumberland County Council Refugees Service who take on new referrals who have gained 'leave to remain' and also by Mears Housing Association, Northumbria Police and by the British Red Cross. 2024-25 will also see a major partnership with NHS midwifery services develop and grow.

NCOS have just been invited to join the quarterly meetings of the Northumberland Adult and Children Safeguarding Partnership, we participate in the quarterly strategic forum chaired by Northumberland County Council Refugee services and we chair the monthly Northumberland Ukraine network which links members of the Ukrainian community, local support groups in Warkworth, Alnwick, Morpeth, Hexham and the County Council refugee manager in what has become a very positive partnership.

Both Blyth and Ashington Town Councils have exemplified a warm, inclusive community spirit at all times and have engaged our members in their activities, supported us financially and attended and participated in our events. Susan Dungworth, newly elected Police and Crime Commissioner for Northumbria made a point of attending an NCOS drop in very soon after her election in May 2024 and she remains in good contact with our work.

Thankfully, Northumberland was spared the disgraceful, racist riots which were fomented in various parts of England during August 2024. At a very worrying time, we were determined to carry on providing services to members and were enormously strengthened and heartened by the reassuring presence of community police officers. We were glad to be part of a weekly strategic meeting led by senior police officers and we will always be keen to take part in any such forums. While people have been very well received within warm Northumbrian communities, we are vigilant about racism and any sign of organised hate crime.

Northumberland is a warm welcoming place and there are fine, decent people in all its communities who go out of the way to support NCOS and our members in a host of ways, often displaying simple kindness through a thousand actions.

We are enormously grateful to everyone who cares and offers help.

14. Parliament

Ian Lavery MP for Ashington and Blyth and his staff are enormously helpful and supportive at an individual casework level, in responding to our advocacy on changes needed to the asylum system and in their support for NCOS as an organisation.



NCOS are particularly grateful to Ian and his team for their support of the regional group of Asylum organisations which were able to visit Parliament in November 2023 and then prepared for a second lobby late in 2024.

Two NCOS members have played key roles in the lobbying of MPs on asylum issues on behalf of thousands of others. It is wonderful to have the whole-hearted support of the local MP in our work, thus exemplifying to all members that we live in a democratic country in which everyone can participate in the making of law.

15. Destitution

One issue which we continue to pursue with Ian and indeed with the Home Secretary and Home Office Ministers is the disgraceful and absurd practice of removing housing and financial support from people as soon as their initial asylum claims fail and before they can make an appeal. At the end of the day if someone has no right to live in the UK then they can be removed in a humane and respectful way to their country of origin. However, the continuing high success rate at appeal, surely indicates that our current asylum system is quite inefficient in deciding asylum claims.

Whatever the merits of anyone's case there can be no justification for compounding everyone's problems by deliberately making people homeless and destitute. NCOS Safeguarding Policy declares that we do not accept any member being made homeless and destitute in Northumberland and we have always stretched our resources in such cases to pay for bed and breakfast accommodation and indeed to the point where some members have taken people into their own homes.

Such cases are often amongst an increasing number where people do not have any access to legal services and we are enormously grateful to colleagues from British Red Cross and North East Refugee Services (NERS) in helping to sustain people and their human and legal rights.

16. Continuing Contact

NCOS has worked with many hundreds of people over the past eight years. While many people wait many years for a resolution of their asylum case, we have found it extremely rare for someone to fail to be granted Leave to Remain and the refugee status which entitles them to work and to live anywhere in the UK.

Thereafter, many people choose to stay in Northumberland, others move away, often to live nearer to family and some stay in touch. During 2024, Anne Murray travelled the UK from Glasgow to Manchester, Nottingham, London and south east England to meet with ex NCOS people and to hear about their experiences.

No doubt there'll eventually be a book, but in the meantime we can report it was a joyous experience and Anne found people who were doing well, who looked so much better when freed from the pressures of seeking asylum and who are so committed to their future in the UK that they immediately set about becoming British Citizens, once they have been here for 5 years.

17. Looking Forward

NCOS is very busy and in April 2025 looking back on the year from October 1st 2023 – September 2024 it already seems a long time ago.

By October 1st 2026 NCOS will be ten years old and that will be cause for another celebration. By then perhaps we will have our new base, our new worker and more and more new people taking NCOS forward.

It seems unlikely that the world will be taking real steps to end the war, genocide, oppression, climate degradation and poverty which have created 100 million refugees across the globe. Hopefully, the United Kingdom will have become a kinder, more welcoming place for all who need to come here.

Whatever happens, Northumberland County of Sanctuary (NCOS) will undoubtedly carry on.



18. Thank You


Many people help anonymously or so quietly that we never catch their names, so many people assist us that it's inevitable that some may be missed out. Please let our thanks to the good people and organisations identified here, stand as a very big gesture of gratitude to you all.

Ashington Town Council, Blyth Town Council, Ian Lavery M.P. and his team, Northumberland CVA, British Red Cross, North East Refugee Services (NERS), Ashington and Bedlington Family Hubs, The Bothy, St Andrews Church, St Cuthbert's Church, Ashington, Blyth Rotary Club, Bedlington and Blyth Food Banks, Heart of Blyth co-ordinator Adeline Keogh, Empire School of Boxing, Newcastle Utd Foundation, Iryna Zhomer, Northumberland Homes for Ukraine Network, Northumberland County Council refugee and housing teams, social prescribers from medical practices in Blyth and Ashington, Jane Bassam – Rainbow House, Learn English Together (LET), Northumberland College, Northumberland County Council training and ESOL teams, Rowan Brown and team at Woodhorn Museum.



19. Finance

Thank you very much to every individual and every organisation who have supported our work with your donations. NCOS is entirely funded through grants and donations and nothing could have been achieved without your generous support.

CHARITY COMMISSION FOR ENGLAND AND WALES		Independent examiner's report on the accounts	
Section A Independent Examiner's Report			
Report to the trustees/ members of	County Name NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY OF SANCTUARY		
On accounts for the year ended	30 SEPTEMBER 2024	Charity no (if any)	1185663
Set out on pages	(remember to include the page numbers of additional sheets)		
	I report to the trustees on my examination of the accounts of the above charity ("the Trust") for the year ended DD / MM / YYYY.		
Responsibilities and basis of report	As the charity trustees of the Trust, you are responsible for the preparation of the accounts in accordance with the requirements of the Charities Act 2011 ("the Act").		
	I report in respect of my examination of the Trust's accounts carried out under section 145 of the 2011 Act and in carrying out my examination, I have followed the applicable Directions given by the Charity Commission under section 145(5)(b) of the Act.		
Independent examiner's statement	I have completed my examination. I confirm that no material matters have come to my attention (other than those disclosed below *) in connection with the examination which gives me cause to believe that in, any material respect: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> accounting records were not kept in accordance with section 130 of the Act or the accounts do not accord with the accounting records 		
	I have no concerns and have come across no other matters in connection with the examination to which attention should be drawn in order to enable a proper understanding of the accounts to be reached. * Please delete the words in the brackets if they do not apply.		
Signed:		Date:	24/3/24
Name:	MALCOLM W SHIELDS		
Relevant professional qualification(s) or body (if any):	FCMA		
Address:	18 WATERSHAUGH ROAD WARKWORTH MORPETH NE 65 0TX		

Northumberland County of Sanctuary



Income and Expenditure account Year to 30th September 2024

	2024		2023	
	£	£	£	£
Income				
Restricted Funds				
Donations	10,060		960	
Grants	3,607		10,053	
		13,667		11,013
Unrestricted Funds	4,493		5,040	
		4,493		5,040
Total Income Received		<u>18,160</u>		<u>16,053</u>
Expenditure				
Charities Activities- Restricted	13,198		28,750	
Charitable Activities	9,505		4,174	
Total Expenditure Incurred		<u>22,703</u>		<u>32,924</u>
Net Income/(Expenditure)				
Restricted	469		(17,737)	
Unrestricted	(5,011)		866	
		(4,542)		(16,871)
Funds Brought Forward		30,003		46,874
Funds Carried Forward		25,461		30,003

Northumberland County of Sanctuary



Balance Sheet

as at 30th September 2024

	2024 £	2023 £
Current Assets		
Cash at Bank	25,461	30,003
Funds of the Charity		
Restricted Funds¹	22,276	21,806
Unrestricted Funds	3,185	8,196
Total Funds	25,461	30,002
Restricted Funds as at 30 September		
Shoe Fund	582	608
Women's Group Fund	1,591	1,591
Summer Visits Fund	-	43
Warkworth Ukraine Refugee Funds	-	-
Blyth Drop In	3,125	
Ashington Drop In	1,723	
P&G Fund	2,489	
Sir Jamed Knott Trust	0	647
NAP Welcoming Grant	2,660	3,925
Lottery Funding	4,801	4,881
St Hilda Grant	267	1,413
International Day	-	567
Rise North East (Blyth Sports Project)	-	1,348
Homes of Northumberland	-	395
Dicksn Fund (Duke of Edinburgh Project)	240	240
Barbour Fund	-	-
Book Club	1,797	1,797
Newcastle City Council Heritage Fund	-	1
Youth Club	0	4,350
Community Foundation	3,000	-
Total Restricted Fund	22,276	21,806

NCOS – Appreciation 2.

As a refugee myself, I want to thank NCOS personally for your compassion, understanding, and tireless advocacy for people like me.

The journey of a refugee is never easy, but having people like you who stand up for our rights and highlight our struggles makes a tremendous difference. Your work and dedication give hope to many of us, reminding us that kindness and humanity still prevail.

I am one of the many who have received support and opportunities in this country, and I am forever grateful. I just want to express my appreciation for everything you do.

Wishing you all the best and thank you again for being a voice for those who need it most.



Join us to celebrate

Refugee Week 2024

When:

11 am – 1 pm

On Tuesday 18/06/2024

Address:

St Andrew Church Hall

Ashington



Craft Activities and refreshments will be provided.

