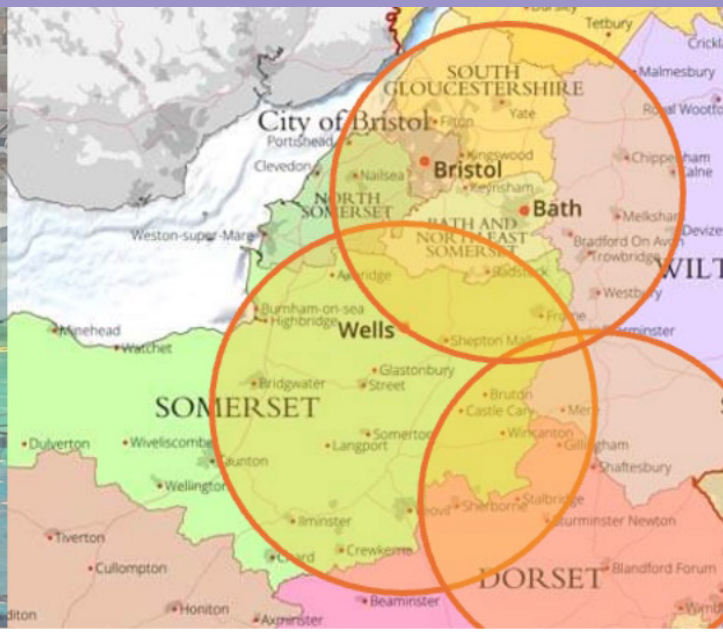
Language, Belonging and Women in Action:

Creating an 18-session informal ESOL programme in South-West England



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Contents

Introduction from Helen Patuck, Lead Facilitator

Programme Origins & Development

The idea for this programme began while I was volunteering at a local Conversation Group for newcomer women in Glastonbury, Somerset. I first encountered Somerset's ESOL community at my local swimming pool, where I met a Turkish woman swimming in full hijab. She was the only person I had ever seen doing this, in a tiny rural pool in Street, and I admired her courage. After several conversations over time, she invited me to her Conversation Group, where I met tutor Nicola Haynes and began volunteering.

For eighteen months, I supported women from Kurdistan, Turkey, Iraq and beyond, many of whom I had previously worked with internationally. During this time, women began asking whether I could offer informal swimming sessions. I realised there was strong interest not only in English learning but also in culturally safe leisure and exercise spaces.

In late 2023, I was invited to take over the Conversation Groups professionally. With a TEFL qualification, I began delivering ESOL across Somerset as a tutor for local charity, Thrive. As relationships deepened, women consistently expressed a desire for learning beyond the classroom, including: swimming, creative writing and women-only activity spaces.

When the South West Councils tender for informal ESOL funding was released, I saw the opportunity to formalise this blended model with Kitabna's community objectives of supporting women and children affected by war. I recruited programme assistants from newcomer backgrounds, many with lived experience of displacement and relevant language skills (Ukrainian, Cantonese, Dari, Polish). I established a WhatsApp community to coordinate cohorts and contacted local authorities, Welcome Hubs and ESOL networks across the South West to assess demand.

Expressions of interest identified viable cohorts in:

- Gillingham (Dorset) - largely Ukrainian learners
- Wells (Somerset) - largely Ukrainian learners
- North Petherton (Somerset) - largely Afghan learners
- Bristol (South Gloucestershire area) - largely Hongkonger learners

In parallel, I completed my Swim England Level 1 and Level 2 Swim Assistant and Swim Teacher qualification to ensure professional delivery of water-based sessions before the Programme began in 2026.

By December 2025, preliminary venues were secured and the programme launched in January 2026. I also developed a bespoke handbook to support vocabulary development, writing exercises and independent practice, reviewed by programme assistants with ESOL qualifications and lived exeprience of displacement.

Across the programme we supported:

Total learners: 42 learners (exceeding the original target of 40)
Nationalities represented: Ukrainian, Afghan, Hong Konger, Pakistani, Indian, Nepali
Locations: Dorset, Somerset and Bristol
Programme assistants recruited: 6, with 4 assistants from Ukrainian and Hongkonger backgrounds

- Helen Patuck
Founder and Director of Kitabna - Our Book CIC
March 2026

Building a team of Programme Assistants

One of the most daunting parts of planning the programme was the recruitment of 40+ learners, so it felt necessary to bring Programme Assistants on board as early as possible. This was an open recruitment process, advertised through the Kitabna website's jobs page, and shared directly with people expressing interest in facilitating the programme. Recruitment focused on languages spoken by the national groups targeted by the MHCLG funding: Afghan, Ukrainian and Hongkonger.

I finally recruited seven women to help deliver the programme. One of them, Inna, also an ESOL tutor based in Wells, Somerset, shares her experience below.

"As a programme assistant attending Book Club and Creative Writing + ESOL Sessions, I observed a friendly, calm, and supportive learning environment. The facilitator's gentle and encouraging approach contributed to a relaxed atmosphere, enabling participants to feel comfortable and engaged throughout the session."

- Inna, Ukrainian Programme Assistant

Programme Assistants were recruited throughout the early phases of the project. Successful candidates applied through the Kitabna website jobs portal, which was shared via local authorities, with a letter of motivation and CV with relevant skills. It was particularly important to recruit Assistants from affected backgrounds, with the language skills (Ukrainian, Cantonese, Pashto) to support learners in attending the sessions. This poster was shared with learners, so they could feel confidence in the multi-lingual team supporting them.

Developing a learner handbook

The programme was originally designed in a conversation-group format: spoken English practice, key vocabulary introduction, activity-based learning, followed by reflection and discussion. I had not initially planned to create a learner handbook. However, as sessions progressed, it became clear that the programme offered a valuable opportunity to introduce essential vocabulary not only within sessions, but for use beyond them.

Each activity required specific, practical language. For example:

- Water safety vocabulary in swimming sessions
- Story structure and character vocabulary in creative writing
- Gardening tools and plant terminology
- Body parts and movement language in exercise classes
- Vocabulary for organising and discussing books
- The handbook evolved as a way to consolidate this learning. It provided:
- Visual diagrams linking images to vocabulary
- Space for journal reflections
- Conversation prompts
- Independent practice between sessions

Importantly, it also introduced emotional vocabulary — words such as confident, comfortable, unsure, okay. A simple visual scale allowed learners with limited English to point to how they were feeling at the start and end of sessions.

This not only supported communication but also enabled us to observe and measure shifts in confidence over time.

What began as an unplanned addition became a core tool for language reinforcement, emotional literacy and learner reflection.

Swimming

Lar
(Voc

Label the pool

- Lane
- Poolside
- Lane rope
- Flags
- Lifeguard
- Noodle
- ving platform
- n Teacher
- n Assistant
- p end
- llow end

flags

lane

swim teacher

the swimmer

- eyes
- arms
- hands
- feet
- head
- torso
- costumes
- swimming cap

Building a WhatsApp community

The idea to build a structured WhatsApp community came from Lucinda, a programme assistant who had previously volunteered with me in a conversation group. She introduced me to the concept of creating a single umbrella community containing multiple activity-specific groups. This model allowed us to host all programme strands in one organised digital space.

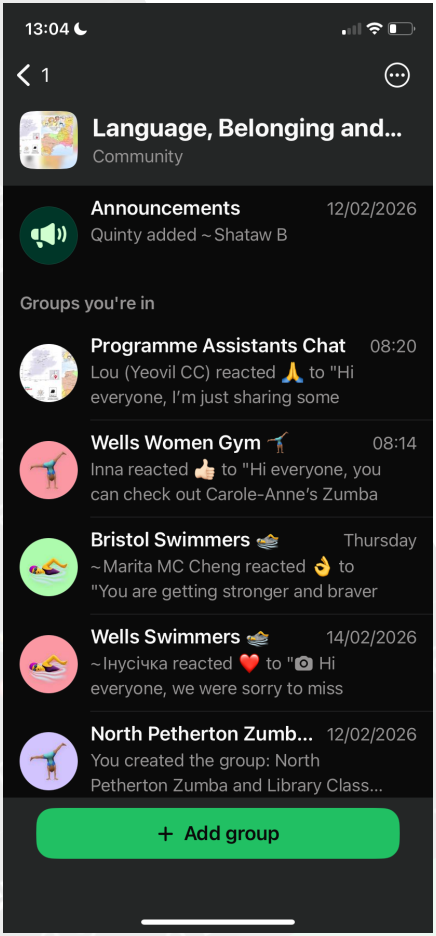
Each activity had its own small, safe group within the wider community structure. This gave participants a sense of belonging while keeping communication manageable.

This structure significantly supported recruitment and onboarding. Once programme assistants had spoken with potential learners and identified their interests, they could immediately add them to the relevant group. The process was simple, familiar and culturally accessible.

The system also enabled cross-site mobility. For example, Hong Kong women swimming in Bristol joined sessions in Wells when transport allowed. This created blended cohorts — Hong Kong and Ukrainian women learning together — strengthening intercultural connection.

The use of emojis as a universal communication tool further reduced language barriers and allowed quick emotional expression across cultures.

The WhatsApp model became a low-cost but powerful community infrastructure supporting participation, retention and peer connection.

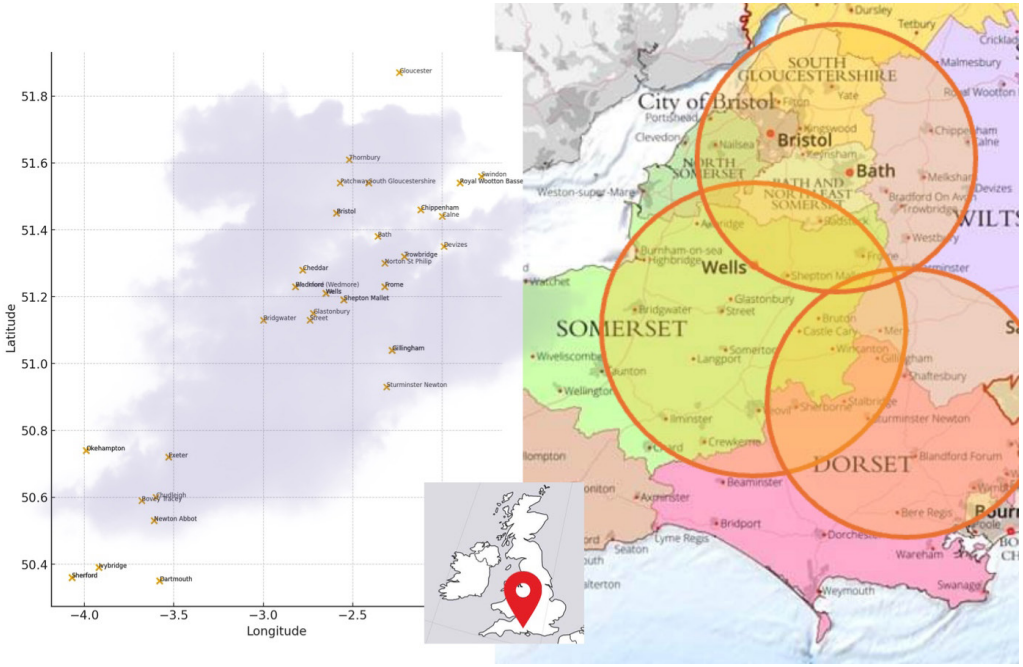


Learner Recruitment & Identification of Locations

Learner recruitment began with the creation of an Expression of Interest form using Google Forms. This form was shared widely through the South West Councils ESOL Network and partner organisations.

Over a three-week period, responses were collected and analysed to identify geographic concentrations of interest. The accompanying data map illustrates the geographic distribution of expressions of interest and informed our final site selection. While enquiries were spread across the region, clear clusters emerged in:

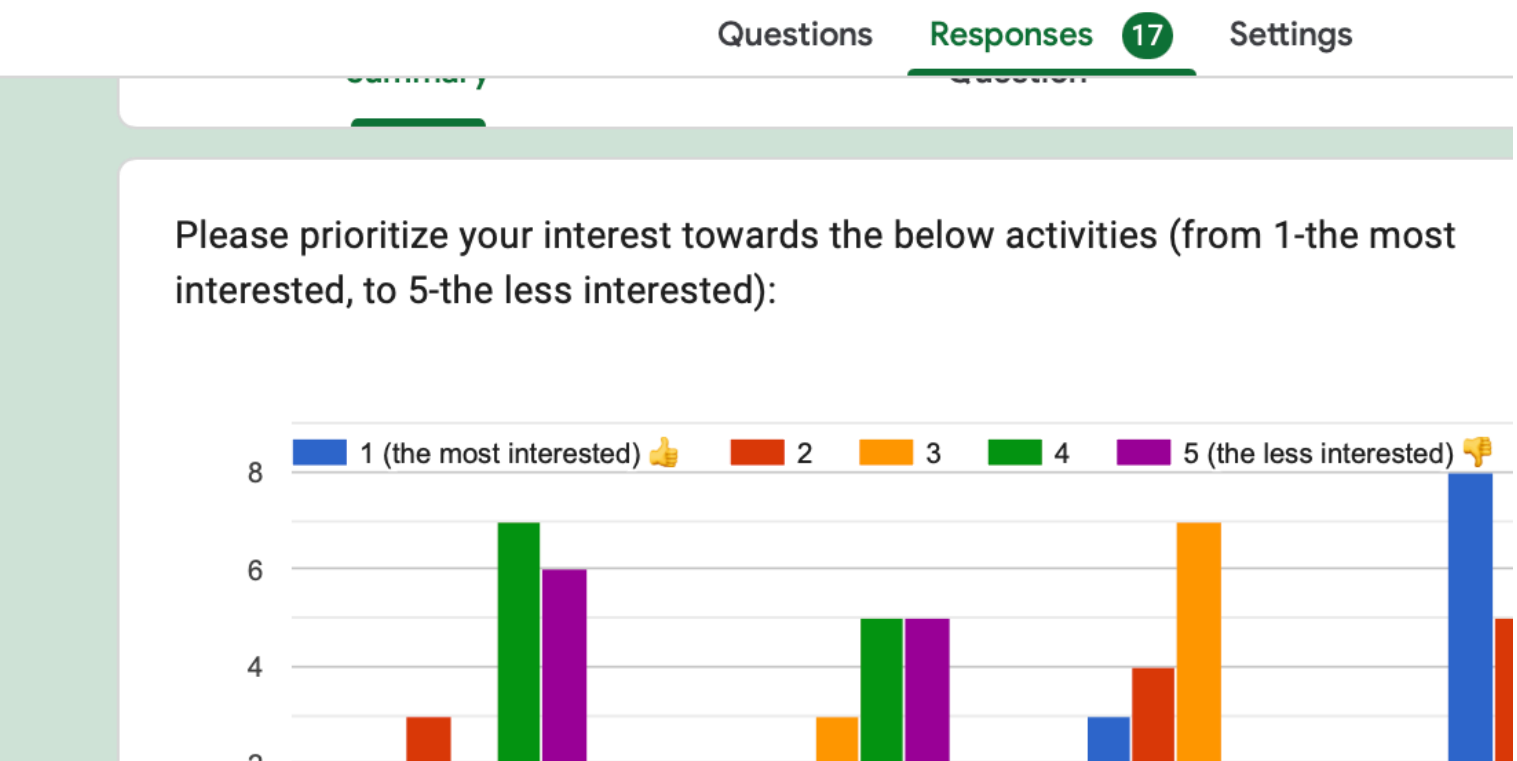
- Gillingham (Dorset)
- Wells, Frome, North Petherton (Somerset)
- Bristol (South Gloucestershire)



Based on response volume and feasibility, programme delivery was prioritised in Gillingham, Wells and Bristol. We are grateful to partner organisations who supported outreach and shared the form directly with learners, including:

- North Dorset Refugee Support
- Julian House (South Gloucestershire)
- Wells Welcome Hub
- Local ESOL teacher networks across Somerset

In some cases, particularly with Afghan families in North Petherton, initial contact was made via a male relative representing interested women in the household. This reflected cultural norms and access considerations. Sessions were then coordinated in a culturally appropriate way, ensuring the women themselves had agency in participation once engaged.



Contacting venues

Learner recruitment began with the creation of an Expression of Interest form using Google Forms. This form was shared widely through the South West Councils ESOL Network and partner organisations.

Over a three-week period, responses were collected and analysed to identify geographic concentrations of interest. While enquiries were spread across the region, clear clusters emerged in the following places, where we could secure teaching venues:

- Gillingham (Dorset) - Rivers Meet Active Pool
- Wells (Somerset) - The Portway Annex and Wells Leisure Centre
- Bristol (South Gloucestershire) - The University of Bristol Pool
- North Petherton (Somerset) - The North Petherton Community Centre

Gillingham, Dorset
3 x ESOL + swimming

Location: RiversMeet Leisure Centre, Gillingham, Dorset
Total number of learners: 4 learners (plus wider ESOL network engagement)
Backgrounds and nationalities: Ukrainian women

Group Overview

This was a small, consistent cohort combining informal ESOL with swimming. The intimate group size allowed for personalised instruction and strong trust-building. Although one learner could not enter the pool due to health problems, and another became ill between sessions, all engaged with Stage 1 Swim England Adult Learning requirements (Being Water Confident) and one learner completed Stage 2 Swim England Adult Learning requirements (Be a Swimmer). The sessions blended water safety, stroke development and emotional vocabulary, leading to kinship and hopes to continue visiting the pool, together and alone.

What We Achieved

- Improved water confidence (floating, push and glide, sculling, log rolls)
- Completion of Stage 1 requirements for two learners
- Completion of Stage 2 requirements for one learner
- Increased emotional vocabulary and confidence expression
- Strong individual progression due to small group focus
- Deepened peer trust and reflective practice through journals

Learners reported feeling:

- "More confident" and "fabulous after swimming"
- Calm and less nervous
- Proud of learning in deep water
- One learner attended despite a broken foot to support the group, reflecting strong commitment.

“It’s not just helpful for our language skills, but it also helps us feel more confident with our surroundings and with English people. It’s really beneficial for our mental health as well. So thank you so much.”

- Ukrainian learner in Gillingham

“Today this lesson was very important for my nervous situation. I was nervous, but speaking with the students in our group, I relaxed. I feel calm and more confident. Swimming also improved this feeling. After swimming, I felt fabulous. It is a very good idea to combine speaking classes with swimming, sport, or gardening. You have me!”

- Ukrainian learner in Gillingham

> I very appreciate these lessons. I learned a lot about swimming techniques, and I feel much more comfortable than I was, and hopefully my English has improved as well. So thank you so much."
>
> *- Ukrainian learner in Gillingham*

Bristol and South Gloucestershire

4 x ESOL + swimming

Location: University of Bristol Pool, Bristol
Total number of learners: 7 regular learners (plus wider ESOL network engagement)
Backgrounds and nationalities: Hong Konger women, Ukrainian women, British-Indian participant

Group Overview

This was multi-level swimming and ESOL group with high retention, attracting mostly Hongkonger women and women from other backgrounds. The group evolved into two ability levels (developing and intermediate), including use of both in small and 25m pools. Cultural exchange was strong: learners would exchange facts about Lunar New Year, their celebrations, their swimming experiences from their home countries, and actively try to meet each other outside of class.

What We Achieved

- Increased independent swimming practice (learners attending pools outside sessions)
- Transition of confident swimmers into 25m pool
- Mastery of push & glide, log rolls, sculling
- Strengthened breaststroke and backstroke technique
- Growing peer friendships (exchange of phone numbers)
- Emotional processing of water-related fears

Learners described feeling:

- "Very happy"
- "Excited"
- "Less afraid"
- "Well cared for"
- Proud of bravery in deep water
- Some learners began meeting independently - a major community outcome.

“I feel very happy today because this is the first time I formally learn swimming. Because when I know some techniques of swimming, and it’s all by my friends, my husband, and when I was young in Hong Kong. But this is the first time I learn. I have a teacher to teach me the correct position and what to do. So I feel very happy .”

- Hongkonger learner in Bristol

"Today first, when I come, I'm little bit nervous because I look at deep water. So I'm scared because my height is not too much. When I go to water, I'm just — my body and everything — I'm just scared. I'm falling down, I can't breathe. But when Helen is a good teacher, she gives me confidence.

She give noodle and my hand, hold hand, and she learn me how to do everything. And then again, I'm scared, but she hold my hand and one round all land. A little bit my confidence come — okay, I can do it!

But inside, I'm little nervous, but I'm very, very happy with Helen teacher. Okay, one day, see my scared, my nervous, everything down, and one day I do my best.

And new words also learned me, new people. And I'm really, really too much happy today."

- Indian learner in Bristol

“

“I enjoyed the class today very much because teacher Helen gave us very clear instructions on how to swim. Before I came to the class, I thought I was already able to survive in the sea or water, but I realised I had never attended official swimming classes before. I knew my posture was not correct. Today Helen showed me how to correct my posture to make me feel more comfortable in the water. I will keep going to the class.

- Hongkonger learner in Bristol

“I felt very great today because I can swim by myself in deep water now and I am not afraid of that anymore. If I get tired I can tread water or float. So I feel comfortable and I will try to swim more.”

- Hongkonger learner in Bristol

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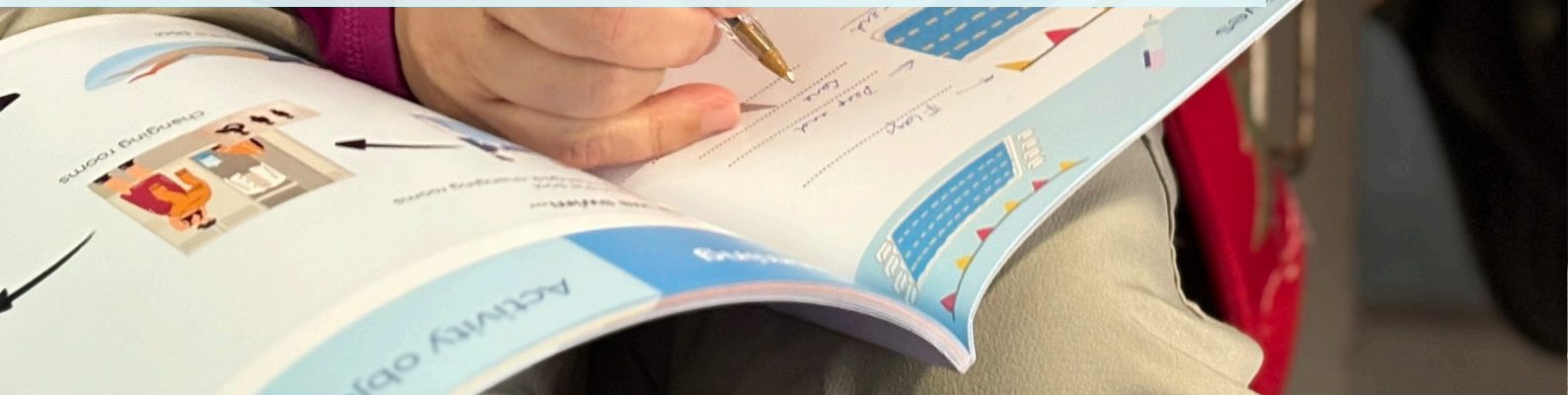
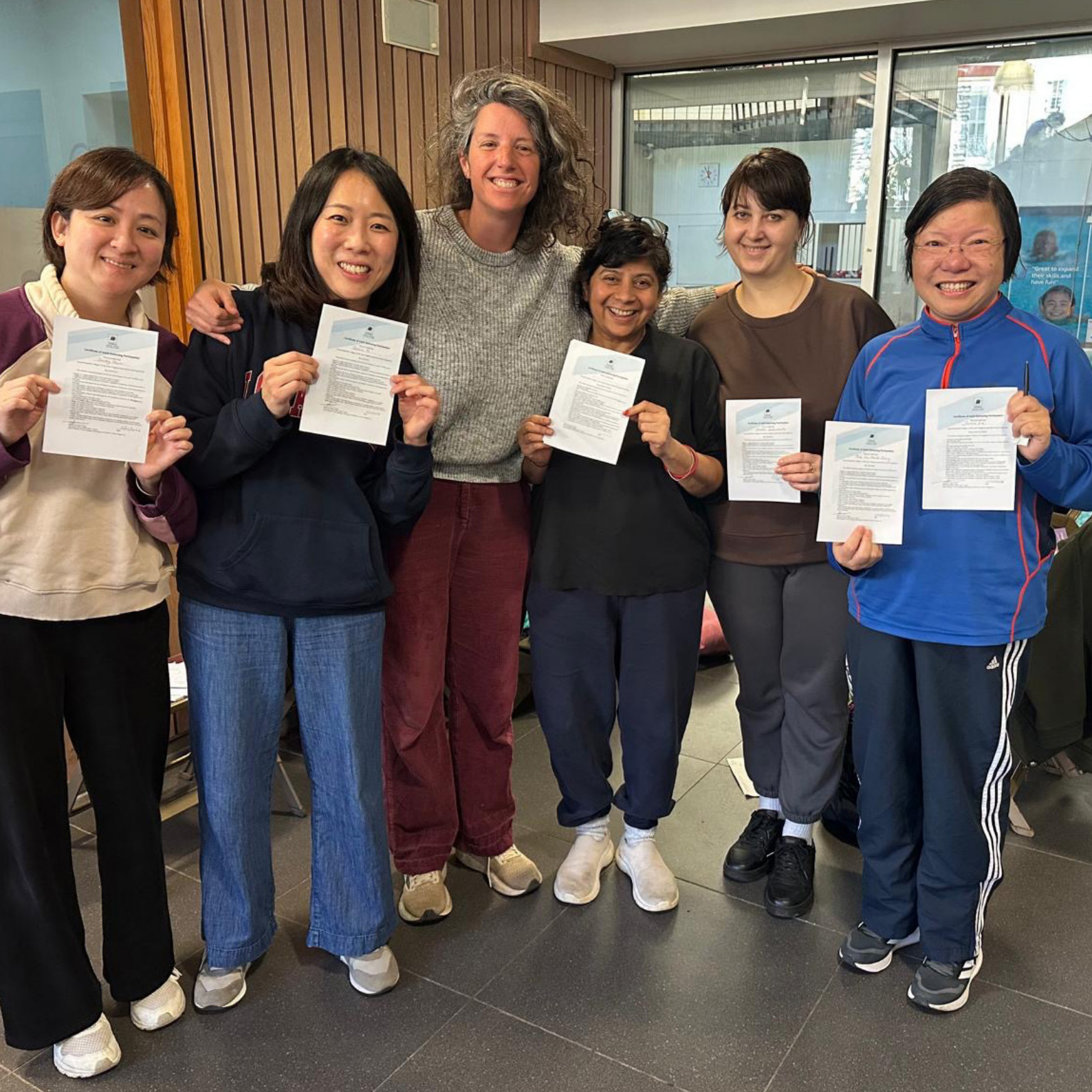




Wells, Somerset

8 x ESOL + swimming, book club, creative writing and exercise class

Location: Wells Leisure Centre and The Portway Annex, Wells
Total number of learners: 22 learners (plus wider ESOL network engagement)
Backgrounds and nationalities: Hong Konger women, Ukrainian women, British-Pakistani women

Group Overview

Wells became a blended hub offering swimming, Zumba, book club and creative writing. Cohorts merged across Bristol and Somerset, creating intercultural exchanges between Ukrainian and Hongkonger women. The mix of activities allowed women to choose where they felt more comfortable, and to join physical or emotional activities, suiting their personalities and moods. A large swimming cohort passed Stages 1 and 2 and engaged in races, diving and social swimming, alongside bonding together over wellbeing practices in exercise class.

What We Achieved

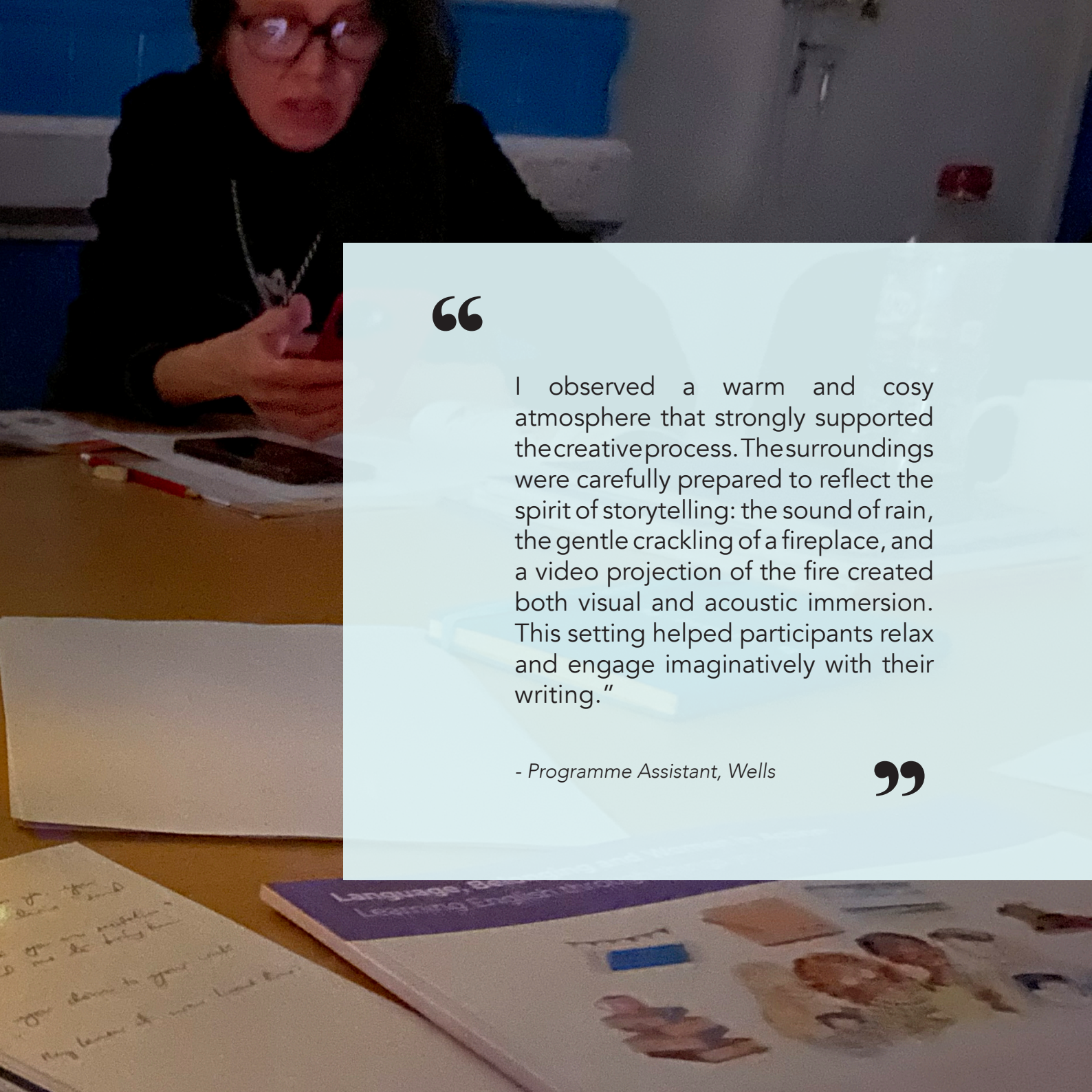
- Stage 1 swimming proficiency for all swimmers
- Stage 2 swimming competencies for majority of swimmers
- Log rolls, sculling, 30-second treading water
- Front crawl introduction leading to races
- Strong creative writing outputs (dialogue, compelling narratives, multi-lingual expression)
- Cross-cultural swimming groups (Hong Kong + Ukrainian women together)
- Increased confidence discussing themes such as emotional coping, marriage, poverty

Learners described sessions as:

- "Very exciting"
- "Challenging but interesting"
- "Fun"
- Empowering
- Being "a good team"

“The swimming sessions have been absolutely amazing. From my experience, swimming using the correct techniques is really hard. But the most important thing is that despite enjoying the lessons, we should continue practising ourselves.”

- Learner in Wells



“

I observed a warm and cosy atmosphere that strongly supported the creative process. The surroundings were carefully prepared to reflect the spirit of storytelling: the sound of rain, the gentle crackling of a fireplace, and a video projection of the fire created both visual and acoustic immersion. This setting helped participants relax and engage imaginatively with their writing.”

- Programme Assistant, Wells

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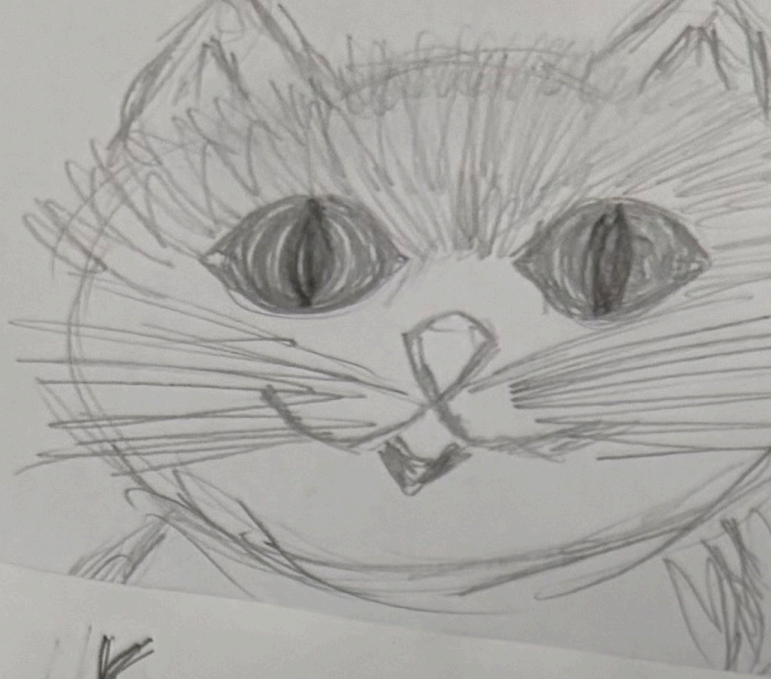

Коли ми виріш
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адаптувалася, во
їжа та вода, ва
ною та спокійн
одно довчий ма
себе не підпускал
колодяки. Ми до
для неї ім'я та во
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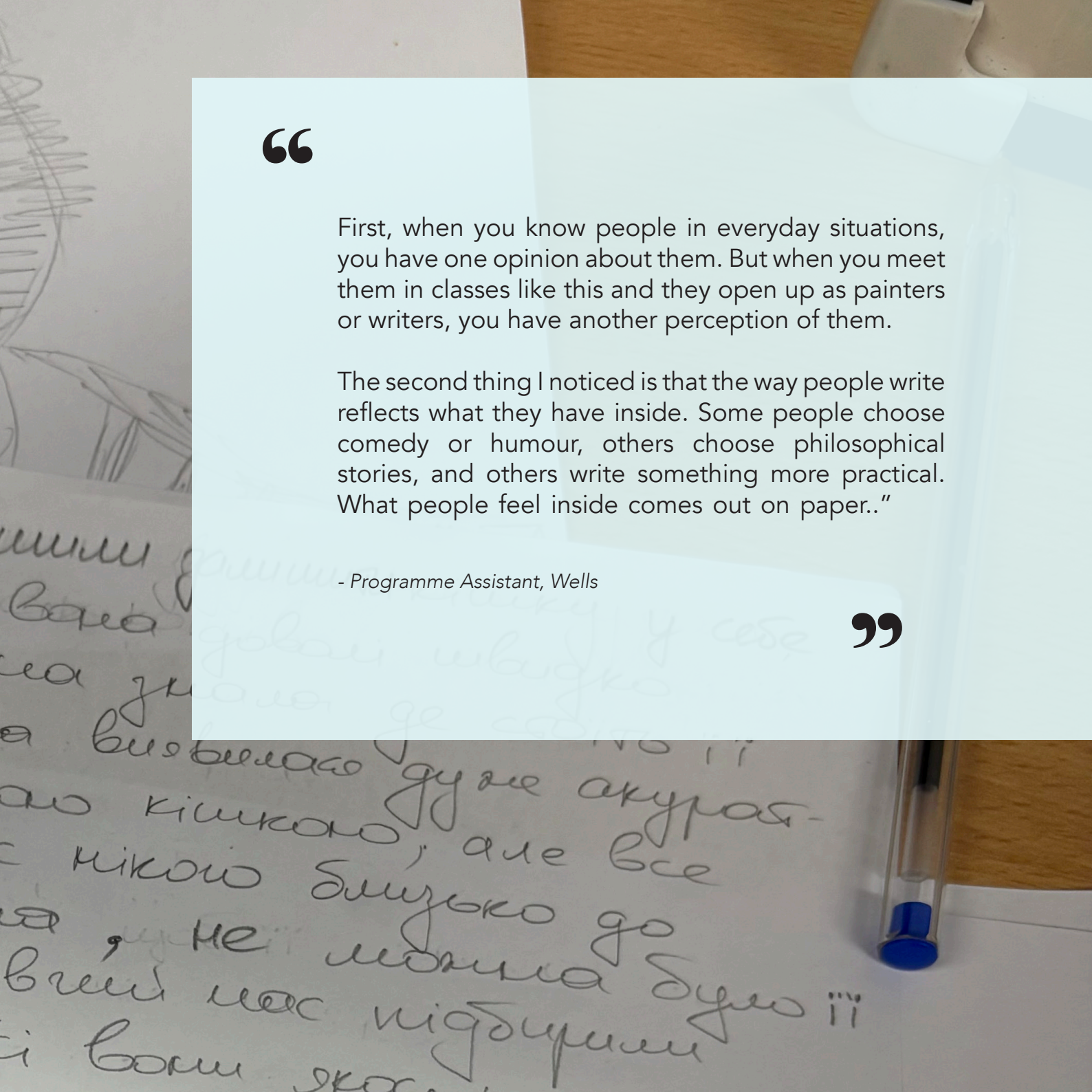


“

First, when you know people in everyday situations, you have one opinion about them. But when you meet them in classes like this and they open up as painters or writers, you have another perception of them.

The second thing I noticed is that the way people write reflects what they have inside. Some people choose comedy or humour, others choose philosophical stories, and others write something more practical. What people feel inside comes out on paper..”

- Programme Assistant, Wells

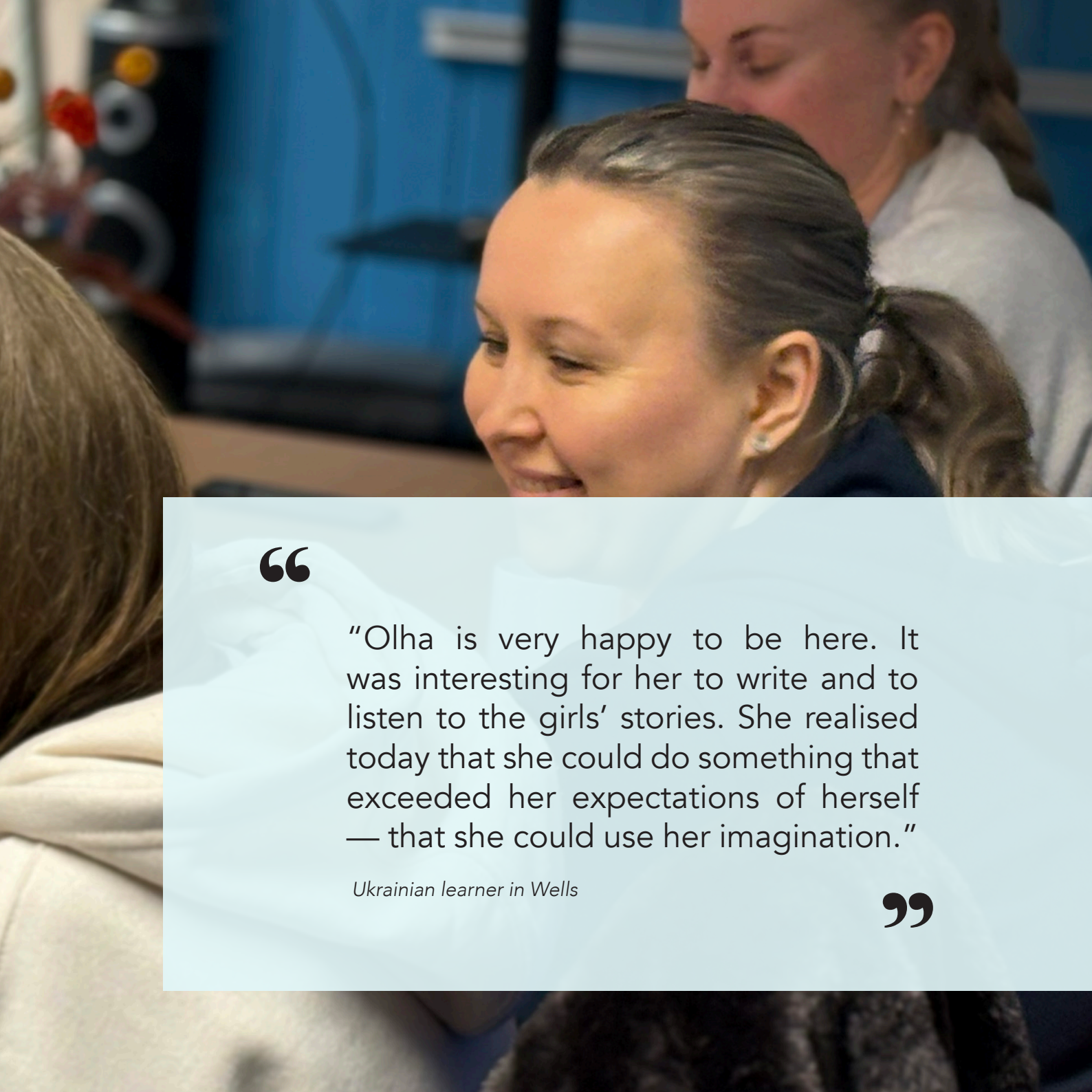
”

"Today Zumba was a very good experience. I feel very relaxed and in a very nice mood. I enjoyed speaking and communicating with very nice women. It's nice to be a small group with lovely company."

- Ukrainian learner in Wells


Fire exit


Language objectives
(Vocabulary)



“Olha is very happy to be here. It was interesting for her to write and to listen to the girls’ stories. She realised today that she could do something that exceeded her expectations of herself — that she could use her imagination.”

Ukrainian learner in Wells

North Petherton, Somerset
3 x ESOL + painting and exercise class

Location: North Petherton Community Centre, North Petherton
Total number of learners: 9 regular learners (plus wider ESOL network engagement)
Backgrounds and nationalities: Afghan women

Group Overview

This group of Afghan sisters and cousins were formerly resident in an asylum hotel, and have not had formal ESOL tutoring due to their isolation. Because of mental health challenges, we designed a culturally responsive ESOL and movement session delivered at the local community centre during Ramadan. Combined painting, emotional expression and adapted seated/standing Zumba, we worked with a local "legs, bums and tums" instructor to create a sensitive session for wellbeing, teaching vocabulary around feeling and self-care, with planned trips to the local library.

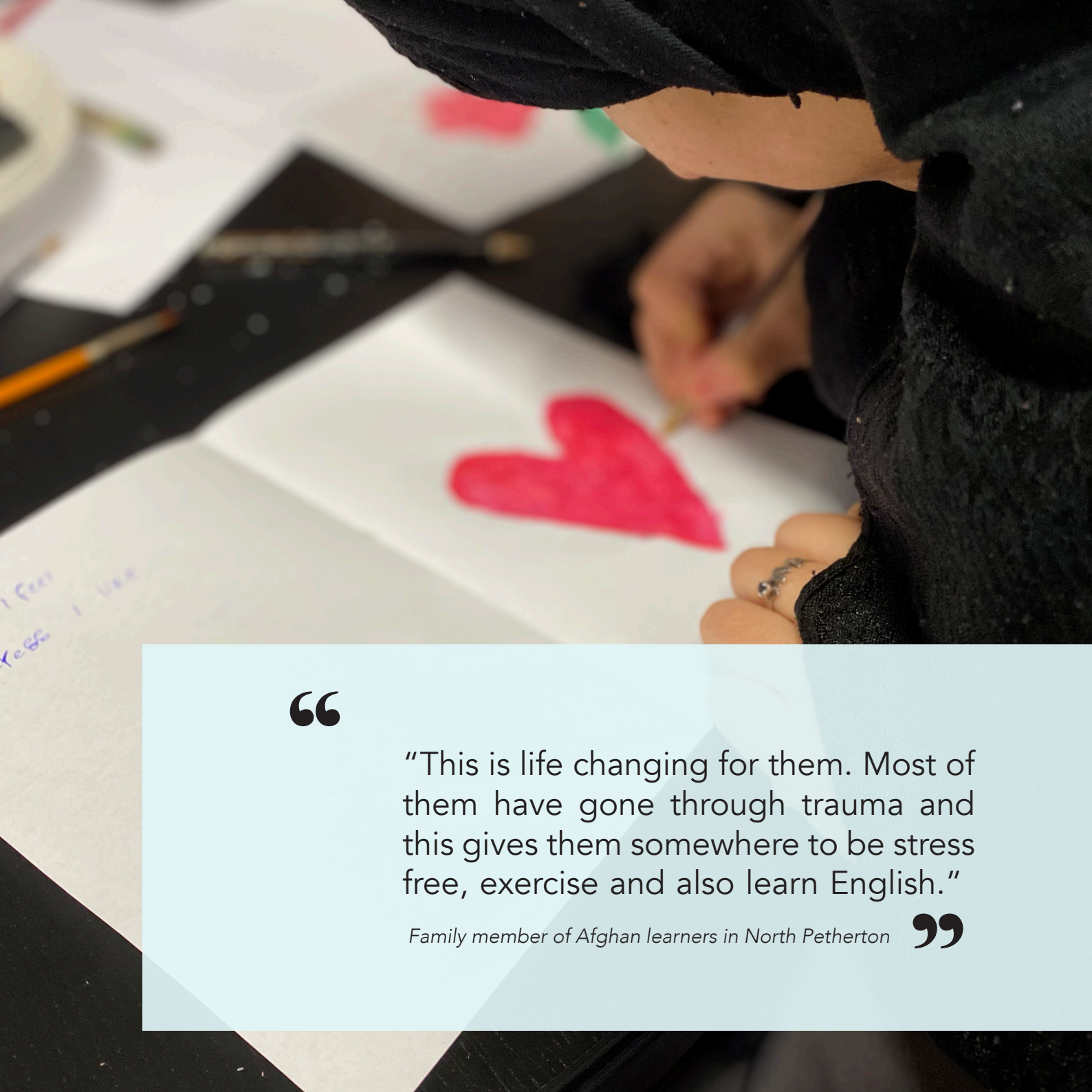
What We Achieved

- Created a culturally safe women-only exercise space
- Adapted movement for fasting participants
- Introduced emotional vocabulary through art
- Built trust with a newly engaged cohort
- Established foundation for ongoing participation

We noticed that learners:

- Smiled and expressed happiness
- Reported feeling relaxed and positive
- Thanked facilitators warmly
- Strongly requested continuation

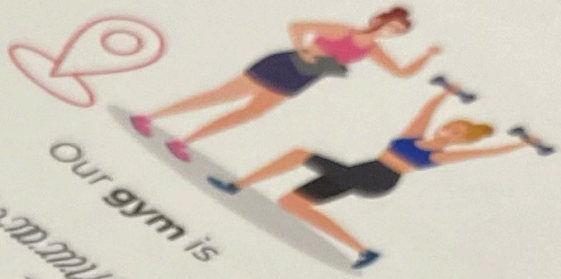
Despite fasting, energy and engagement remained strong.



“This is life changing for them. Most of them have gone through trauma and this gives them somewhere to be stress free, exercise and also learn English.”

Family member of Afghan learners in North Petherton

Activity



Our **gym** is

The community
in the Zu Mondu

Our **exercise** is

Zumba dance

Our

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ing our exercise

oosing our space
hoosing our exercise
ooking and caring
eeling stronger together

n 1) Starting women-only exercise

ssion we talk about women-only exercise classes. We talk about why women exercise together in
. We share how we move in daily life and how our bodies feel. We learn simple words for the body, exer
. We try gentle movements together. We can stop at any time.

g together

rcise together. We move slowly and breathe. We stretch and rest when we need to. W
w to ask for a break. Everyone moves in their own way. We support each othe

ouing

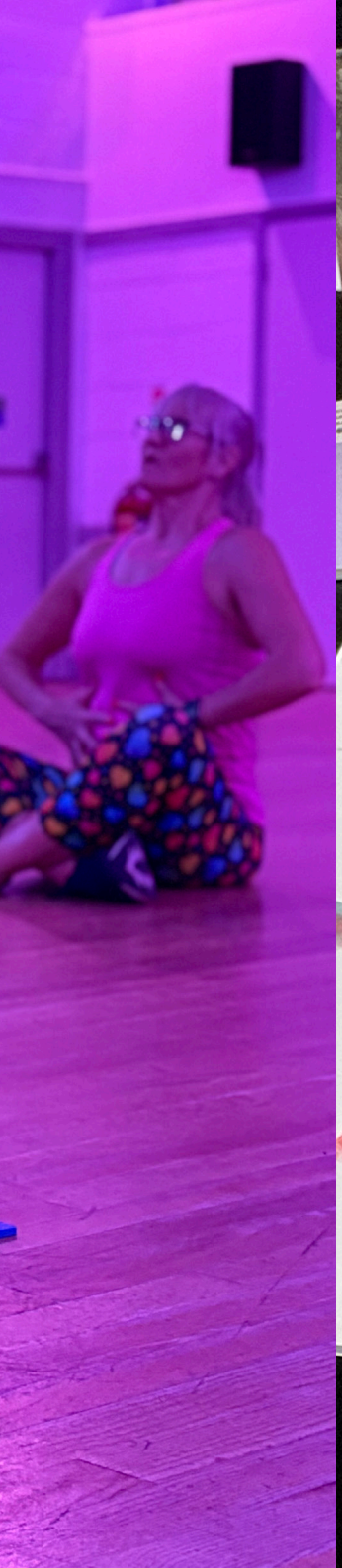
e makes us feel. We share what we enjoy and what feels
fident. We learn how to find women-only exercise

"The girls absolutely love your classes and exercise."

Family member of Afghan learners in North Petherton

“The girls look forward to it every week and have told me how much they love the classes. Some even mentioned that they had the best night sleep.”

Family member of Afghan learners in North Petherton



Unplanned additional outcomes, and continuation

An allotment space in Chard, Somerset

Location: Chard, Somerset
Total number of learners: 6 regular learners
Backgrounds and nationalities: Ukrainian women, Portuguese women, Angolan women and Latvian women

Group Overview

As funding for the 2025-26 programme ends in March 2026, Kitabna applied for an allotment space from Chard Council where one Ukrainian learner previously had no access to ESOL lessons. In March learners could visit the site and choose an allotment which they will hold as a group until March 2027 for peer support, volunteering and informal English learning. Because... *we've got a-llot-ment in common!*

A book group in Cheddar, Somerset

Location: Cheddar, Somerset
Total number of learners: 8 regular learners
Backgrounds and nationalities: Ukrainian women

Group Overview

Participants of the original Wells Book Club decided to meet even more locally with local ESOL tutor, Nicola, to start a new book group with early learner books.

> “We’ve got a-llotment in common!”
>
> *The Language, Belonging and Women in Action Programme, 2026*

What worked well (and what we could improve)

Blended Model (ESOL + Activity)

Combining language learning with swimming, Zumba, book club and creative writing was the programme's strongest innovation. This approach:

- Reduced classroom pressure
- Encouraged natural vocabulary acquisition
- Increased attendance (women attended for both wellbeing activities and English learning)
- Helped overcome fear (especially around water)

The embodied learning element was transformative.

Trust-Based Recruitment

We didn't build up communities "cold", or from nothing. We reached out to learners through:

- Existing conversation groups
- Welcome hubs
- Community connectors
- Programme assistants from newcomer backgrounds

This led to high retention, strong word-of-mouth referrals and genuine buy-in to the integrity of the programme.

Programme Assistants from Within Communities

This was strategic and ethical, leading to improved language access, increased safeguarding sensitivity, leadership pathways, distributed responsibilities.

WhatsApp Infrastructure

This was a cost-effective way of connecting learners. It:

- Enabled mobility across towns
- Strengthened peer bonds
- Reduced admin
- Allowed fast onboarding
- Cross-site blending of learners (Hong Kong + Ukrainian learners) was a big success.

The Handbook

What began as improvised became structural. It:

- Reinforced vocabulary
- Measured confidence shifts
- Provided emotional language tools
- Supported low-level English learners

What we could improve

- Finding out how learners engage with new activities outside of class
- Tracking independent activity uptake (e.g., “swam outside class”)
- Understanding new bonds forming between learners (peers / friendships)
- Clearer role descriptions when hiring Programme Assistants may have reduced strains on management, and perhaps more check-in time.

Next steps

Hopes for further investment from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

We are keen to share the insights of our programme with the UK government's MHCLG who so generously offered funding for Informal ESOL activities. With continued investment from the government we can start to showcase the relationship between community, learning, connection and wellbeing - something that fosters belonging in the communities we call home.

Exploring new funding sources

We are currently in the process of exploring new funding from local and national community funds, with the hopes of continuing our programme.

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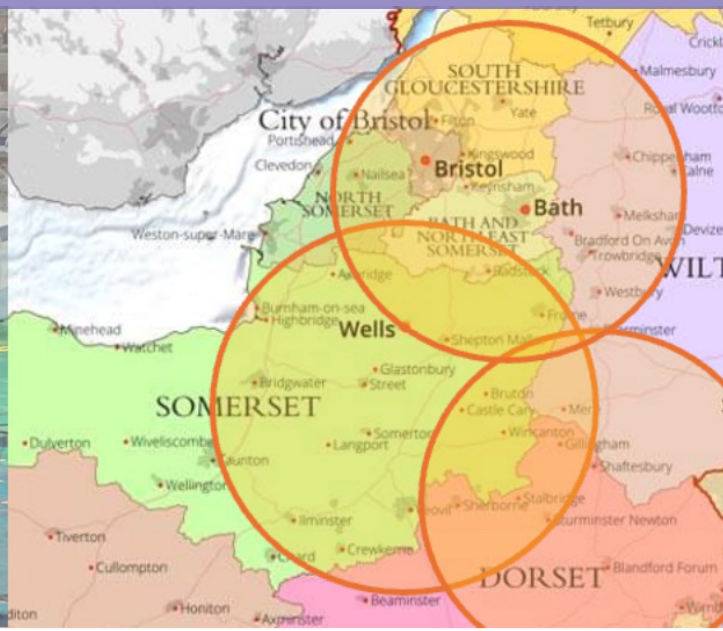

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