

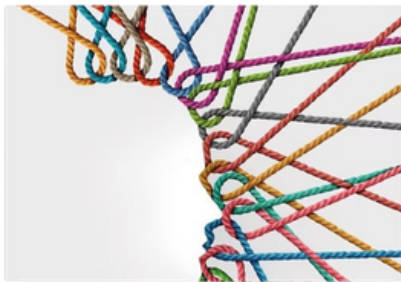


**MAKING  
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High Life Highland Countryside Rangers and Highland Council Adult Learning

# HIGHLAND REFUGEES GREEN/BLUE HEALTH PROJECT



Highland  
Communities Mental Health  
& Wellbeing Fund for Adults



**PROJECT PERIOD:  
MARCH-OCTOBER 2025**

Partnering with



# The project engaged Afghan families in outdoor activities that improved wellbeing and reduced isolation



## Executive Summary

The Highland Refugees Green/Blue Health Project supported Afghan refugee families living in Inverness through a carefully designed programme of outdoor activities aimed at improving mental health and wellbeing. Funded by the Communities Mental Health & Wellbeing Fund through Highland Third Sector Interface (HTSI) and the Scottish Government, the project combined structured hillwalking with accessible excursions to green and blue spaces.

In total, 88 participants engaged in the programme. Activities were designed to be inclusive and culturally appropriate, with a strong emphasis on reducing social isolation, supporting trauma recovery, and enabling families to spend meaningful time together outdoors. The project demonstrated clear improvements in participants' confidence, wellbeing, and connection to both nature and their local community.

# The Partners

The success of the project was underpinned by strong partnership working. High Life Highland Countryside Rangers worked closely with Highland Council Adult Learning and local community transport providers to deliver the programme. Wider collaboration through refugee support networks also ensured that participants were effectively engaged and supported.

These partnerships enabled the project to combine expertise in outdoor delivery, cultural awareness, and community development, resulting in a programme that was both accessible and impactful.



# We wanted to make a positive impact on mental health outcomes for newly settled families



## The Aims

The project was developed with a clear focus on supporting mental health through nature-based activity. Its primary aims were to reduce anxiety and depression, address loneliness and social isolation, and improve overall wellbeing through shared family experiences outdoors.

These outcomes were achieved through a blended approach. Structured hillwalking sessions enabled participants to build confidence and resilience, while family-based green and blue space visits provided opportunities for relaxation, social connection, and informal wellbeing support.

Particular attention was given to engaging women and individuals experiencing trauma, ensuring activities were delivered in a supportive and culturally sensitive way.

# Programme Delivery

The programme was delivered through a combination of hillwalking sessions and large-scale family outdoor events. Over the course of the project, 12 activity days were delivered, consisting of eight hillwalking sessions and four family green/blue space excursions.

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## Hillwalking

The hillwalking programme consisted of eight hillwalking days and was designed to meet the differing needs of participants. Separate groups for men and women were initially established to respect cultural and religious considerations and to help reduce barriers to participation. Participants were supported with appropriate equipment, including boots and waterproof clothing, ensuring that lack of resources did not prevent engagement. Through these sessions, individuals developed confidence, physical resilience, and a growing familiarity with the Highland landscape.

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## Family Days

Alongside this, four family-oriented visits to locations such as Rosemarkie Beach, Nairn Beach, Dornoch Beach, and Loch Morlich enabled much broader participation. These events were particularly valuable for families with young children or individuals with mobility or health challenges. They provided a relaxed and inclusive environment where participants could spend time together, experience new places, and develop positive associations with outdoor spaces in Scotland.





# Challenges and Adaptations

As with many community-based projects, several challenges were encountered during delivery. Large family sizes created logistical pressures, particularly in relation to transport and capacity. In addition, the initial model of men-only walking groups saw lower engagement than anticipated, with participants expressing a preference for more inclusive, family-oriented activities.



Cultural and religious considerations also required careful planning. Participants highlighted the importance of having access to quiet spaces for prayer during outings. There was also strong interest in water-based activities, which presented safety considerations in the absence of qualified lifeguards.

The project team responded to these challenges by adapting delivery throughout the programme. The focus shifted more strongly towards family-based activities, and much larger-scale picnic events were introduced. Coach transport was secured to accommodate higher numbers, and additional opportunities, such as visits to leisure facilities, were incorporated to safely meet demand for swimming.

These adaptations were key to ensuring the project remained responsive, inclusive, and effective.

# Evaluation

## Participant feedback was gathered through WhatsApp groups and informal discussions throughout the project

Many participants described a noticeable improvement in their mental wellbeing, often linked to the opportunity to spend time in natural environments that felt peaceful and restorative.



“Thank you for the wonderful day you gave me and my family today. Taking us to the beach was such a thoughtful idea. It truly was one of the best days we've had since arriving in this country.” –  
Nasim Raufi

“I feel relaxed and stress-free.” –  
Mohammad Sediq



“I am learning how to relax and spend time at the beach in the UK.” – Khairullah Naikpai



“This time is only for me. I can relax and talk with other women. It helps me feel less alone”



# Impact

The project achieved a strong level of engagement and impact, supporting 88 participants through 12 outdoor activity sessions, with up to 75 people attending individual family events. As part of the programme, 20 participants were provided with outdoor clothing and footwear, and all intended outcomes were fully achieved.

Beyond these figures, the most meaningful impact was reflected in participants' experiences. Many reported feeling less stressed and more relaxed after spending time outdoors, alongside increased confidence in visiting natural spaces independently and stronger connections within their community. Families in particular valued the opportunity to spend quality time together outdoors, which helped to strengthen relationships and foster a shared sense of wellbeing.

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## 88

participants supported across the programme

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## 12

outdoor activity sessions delivered

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## 20

participants equipped with outdoor clothing and footwear



## Case Study 1

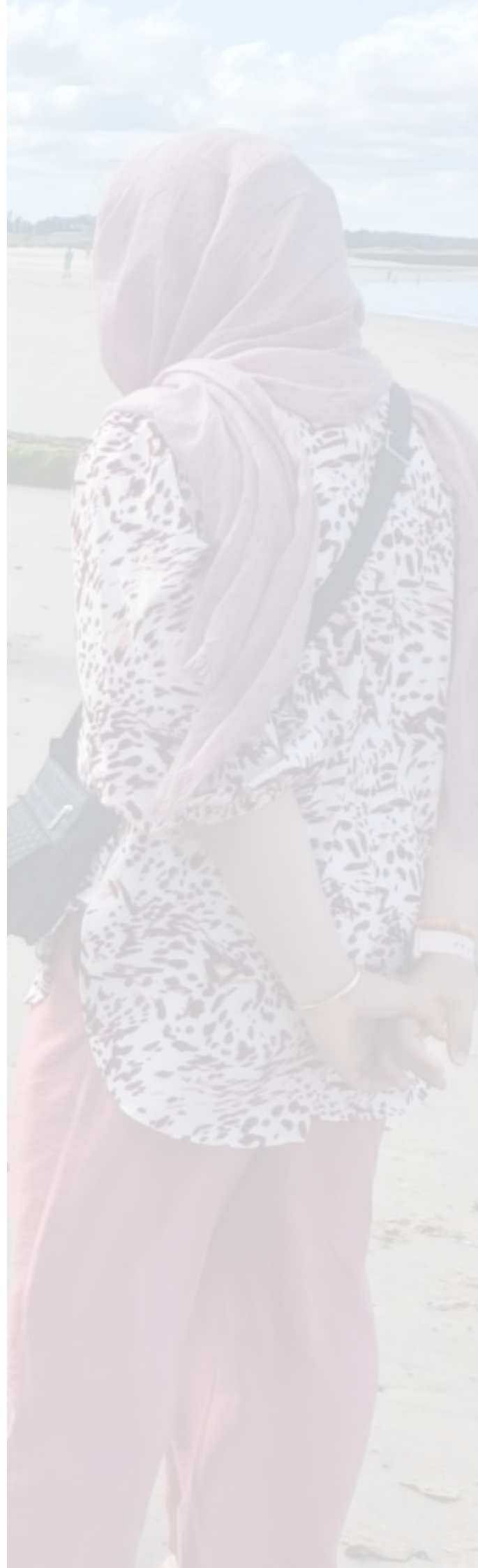
# Women's Wellbeing and Confidence Building

The Women's group (8-12 walkers in each walk) participated in six walks. Participants demonstrated increased confidence and engagement.

The women-only hillwalking group created a safe and supportive environment where participants could focus on their own wellbeing, often for the first time since arriving in the UK. Many of the women involved are responsible for large households and have limited opportunities for independent activity. Through regular participation, women reported feeling calmer, more confident, and more socially connected. The consistent group structure helped build trust and friendships, while the physical challenge of hillwalking supported both mental and physical resilience.

This case study highlights how culturally sensitive, women-only provision supported empowerment, confidence, and recovery from trauma. The sessions also contributed to longer-term independence, with several participants expressing interest in returning to the hills with their families.

**Outcome link: Reduced anxiety and isolation, alongside improved confidence and wellbeing for women participants.**



## Case Study 2

# Men's Hillwalking – Achievement and Connection

The Men's group ( up to 9 walkers in each walk) attended two walks. Although attendance at the men's walking group was lower than anticipated, those who participated reported meaningful benefits. The sessions provided an opportunity to engage in physically challenging activity, connect with others, and experience the Highland environment in a structured and supportive way.

Participants valued the sense of achievement gained through completing walks and the opportunity to learn about the natural environment through guided interpretation from the ranger service.

The feedback highlighted that while men valued the activity, their preference shifted towards shared family experiences, which influenced the evolution of the project.

This case study demonstrates the benefits of physical challenge and shared experience in supporting mental wellbeing.

**Outcome link: Improved mental wellbeing and reduced stress through physical activity and peer connection.**





## Case Study 3

# Family Connection Through Green/Blue Spaces

This case study highlights the importance of inclusive, family-based activity in reducing barriers and strengthening community cohesion.

The eight family picnic events were among the most impactful elements of the project, enabling large groups of up to 75, men, women and children to participate together in a relaxed and inclusive setting.

These trips removed key barriers such as childcare and transport, allowing whole families and communities to benefit. Participants described these days as joyful and memorable, with children and adults alike engaging in play, relaxation, and exploration.

These shared experiences strengthened family relationships, built positive memories, and helped participants feel more connected to their new environment.

**Outcome link: Reduced social isolation and improved family wellbeing through shared outdoor experiences.**



# Learning and Future Development

The project provided valuable learning that will shape future delivery. It became clear that family-based models of engagement are particularly effective for this group, enabling participation while reducing practical barriers such as childcare.

Participants consistently expressed a preference for quiet, natural environments, highlighting the importance of selecting locations that feel safe and culturally appropriate. The need to consider religious practices, including access to prayer space, is now recognised as an essential element of planning.

There is also strong potential to expand water-based activity, provided that appropriate safety measures, such as qualified lifeguards, are in place.

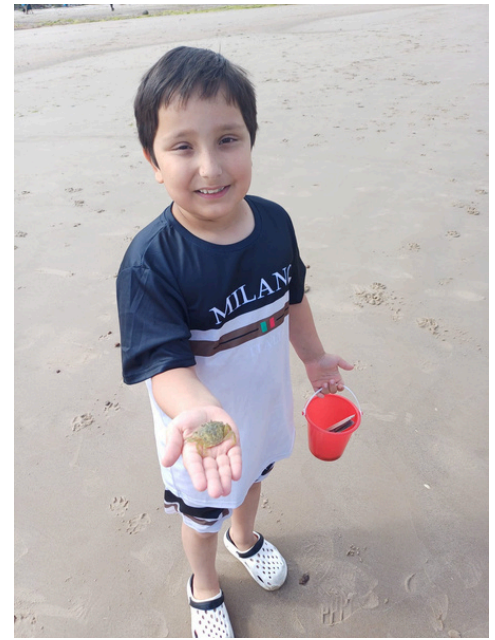
Future programmes will build on these insights, with an increased emphasis on inclusive design, larger-scale transport solutions, and trauma-informed outdoor practice.



# Project Costs

The project received £9,900 in funding from the Communities Mental Health & Wellbeing Fund, administered by Highland Third Sector Interface (HTSI) on behalf of the Scottish Government, all of which was fully utilised in delivering the programme.

Expenditure covered staffing, transport, equipment, and facilitation, in line with the approved budget. This represents effective and accountable use of funding to achieve clear and measurable outcomes.



## Expenditure

## Amount

Staffing

£3,017

Equipment

£3,005

Transport

£3,378

Other Costs

£500

**Total**

**£9,900**

# Harnessing the power of nature, the project improved lives by rebuilding confidence, connection, and wellbeing for refugee families.



## CONCLUSION

The Highland Refugees Green/Blue Health Project demonstrates the significant value of nature-based interventions in supporting mental health and wellbeing, particularly for individuals and families experiencing trauma and displacement.

By providing accessible, inclusive, and culturally sensitive opportunities to engage with the outdoors, the project has helped participants to build confidence, reduce isolation, and develop a stronger sense of belonging within their new environment. The positive outcomes achieved provide a strong foundation for future work in this area.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our sincere thanks to all those who contributed to the success of the Highland Refugees Green/Blue Health Project:



- Highland Third Sector Interface (HTSI) and the Scottish Government for funding and support through the Communities Mental Health & Wellbeing Fund
- Highland Council Adult Learning team’s Anna Holda, Adult Learning Coordinator for the Afghan families on the ARAP Scheme., for organisational delivery, family engagement and expertise
- Adult Learning ESOL Resettlement tutors; Zoe MacKenzie and Sara Macleod, and volunteer tutor, Catherine Sclater, for supporting engagement during the family blue picnics.
- High Life Highland Ranger John Orr for leading hill walking activities and shoreline activities
- Freelance provider Lizzie Wood for leading and facilitating hill and beach days
- Nairn Community Transport and D&E Coaches for providing essential transport
- HLH Leisure Services (Nairn) for enabling access to swimming facilities
- Participants and families who engaged with the programme and shared their experiences
- All partner organisations and community contacts who supported delivery and participant engagement



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**ANNA HOLDA**

[Anna.Holda@highland.gov.uk](mailto:Anna.Holda@highland.gov.uk)



**IMOGEN FURLONG**

[imogen.furlong@highlifehighland.com](mailto:imogen.furlong@highlifehighland.com)