



Friends of Scottish Settlers

Annual Report

2023

Vision

Integration from day one. We envision a Falkirk District that is multicultural, multilingual, and welcoming, where local people, organisations, and services are equipped, supported, and willing to cultivate wellbeing, solidarity, community, curiosity and friendship among newcomers and longtime residents.

Mission

We enable newcomers to the Falkirk District to make use of the knowledge, networks and services they need to live full, self-determined lives.

Values

- Empowerment
- Solidarity
- Respect
- Integrity
- Welcome

Summary

2023 has seen FOSS work hard towards balancing a refresh of policy and processes, while responding to Volunteers, opportunities, and the deepening need of Clients we support. Abrupt changes in Home Office policy such as room sharing in Falkirk's ex-hotel asylum facility, a sudden acceleration in asylum decisions, and truncated grace periods before asylum accommodation support is withdrawn have added to organisational strains and we continue to fundraise and devise improved processes to navigate these new and harrowing situations. All this alongside running our regular matching and befriending for resettled families, many of whom also face significant barriers. These challenges have been considerable, and our Volunteers, Clients and Staff have responded with tremendous patience, care and solidarity. The support we have been able to provide and the partnerships nurtured, have given us the learnings and foundations we need to build a resilient organisation into the future.

Volunteers

FOSS exists to coordinate and enable Volunteers to leverage and build their skills and knowledge to help and learn from newcomers to their communities.

Some exciting developments in 2023

With the support of CVS Falkirk, we have been working towards a Volunteer Friendly Award. This involves creating and updating policies, procedures, and communications, so that our Volunteers are supported and involved throughout their Volunteering journey with us.

We onboarded our first former asylum seeking Volunteer, who also spoke at our AGM.

The monthly newsletter is now a feature of regular Volunteer communications.

We also registered FOSS with Volunteer Scotland Disclosure Services in order to be able to receive PVGs for Volunteers who may, then, volunteer with unaccompanied children, for instance.

We continued to compile our Volunteer Handbook and some finalised sections are already in use, though the form it takes may change as we create sign-posting resources for new arrivals and befrienders.

All FOSS volunteers got a certificate for Volunteer Appreciation Week and FOSS organised three volunteer gatherings to share experiences and developments, recognise Volunteer efforts, and collect feedback from Volunteers on current projects and activities. Volunteers expressed enormous appreciation for the recognition, and it has been moving to hear how rightly proud Volunteers are of their efforts.

Material Needs

FOSS supporters and grant funding have enabled FOSS to address asylum seekers' basic material needs efficiently and in a dignified way. We have ensured that the men in Falkirk's asylum facility:

- have adequate clothing, shoes, and coats suitable for Scottish weather. Where possible, we have also provided sports equipment and gym gear, so the men can access gym facilities provided by the Council and sports groups.
- Are digitally connected: we have been able to distribute free SIM cards as part of Vodafone's charity scheme, as well as repair and replace broken and lost mobile phones
- Have dignified and effective ways to carry their belongings: We have been able to supply luggage for those leaving the accommodation, as well as backpacks that the men use to carry essentials (like food and important paperwork) when they are out and about.

While not strictly a befriending activity, this support is essential to accessing wider wrap-around support and activities (in 2023, the men have only been receiving £9.58 per week to cover all their needs beyond three meals and a bed). Without shoes, they cannot leave the accommodation, without appropriate clothing they cannot socialise outside the facility, without basic sports equipment they are unable to go to the gym and join sports and well-being activities; without SIM cards they are cut off from their solicitors, local services, friends, and family; without functioning mobile phones people are isolated and cannot access FOSS's transport support, referrals to support organisations further afield, activities, social connections and volunteering opportunities that FOSS and others seek to facilitate. Core funding has permitted FOSS to continue to fundraise [for these needs and handle the considerable admin and logistics associated with this provision, including:

- Plugging gaps in SIM card provision while awaiting the (ultimately successful) outcome of reapplication to Vodafone's Charities Connected Scheme (FOSS reached out to Barnardos for an in-kind donation of 15 SIM cards)
- Handling the logistics attached to a generous donation of winter coats by local sustainable clothing company Earth Wardrobe to support the provision of winter appropriate clothing for asylum seekers
- organising a clothing give-away for the asylum seekers to choose clothing from donations when our small storage space abruptly closed down and we needed to slim down operations
- Applying and re-applying to fund FOSS's material needs provision, to continue current staff roles, as well as for the position of a part-time administrator; and SIM cards with data (Vodafone)
- We inducted our first Team Leader Volunteer to organise the Material Donations Team, coordinating clothing stocks, sourcing items and managing a small team of Volunteers.

Paths for All Public Transport project

FOSS administered a £50,000 grant from Paths for All that provided regular train travel across the Central Belt (and occasionally beyond) to every asylum seeking person accommodated in the Falkirk facility. This project began in February 2023

with a trial and then registration of 43 asylum seekers who would receive a £25 weekly e-voucher code to purchase train tickets for the duration of their stay at the Falkirk facility or until the end of the project. Participants would be added and removed from the list of recipients as they arrived and departed from the facility with select exceptions that we negotiated with the funder (e.g. a Client regularly returning to Falkirk to access ESOL classes). Living in a medium-sized town in Scotland's Central Belt without a history of accommodating people in the asylum system, people's ability to travel to bigger cities like Glasgow, allowed them to:

- Participate in sports, community/cultural and faith activities, as well as communities of interest in the cities (the closest Eritrean church is in Glasgow, for instance).
- Visit and maintain connections with friends and family accommodated in other parts of the country.
- Become familiar with how the British rail system works.
- Attend appointments with Legal Aid solicitors face-to-face.
- In at least one case, begin work in the place they planned to live once they had their right to work but as yet were unable to leave the asylum accommodation in Falkirk.
- Attend English classes available in the cities.
- Access more robust and targeted ecosystems of support for asylum seekers with offerings such as Refuweegee and Maslows in Glasgow, which provide material support.

This programme also helped us build relationships with asylum seeking organisers within the facility, who we could count on to help others understand the scheme and provide thorough feedback. This comprehensive programme demanded a lot of hands-on and administrative work: signing up individuals for the scheme, helping them set up the app on their phone, sometimes setting up email addresses; explaining the step-by-step instructions on using the vouchers to purchase public transport tickets; monitoring if people need help using their vouchers and providing suggestions verbally and through a simple leaflet informing them of opportunities they could now access across the Central Belt; distributing vouchers regularly; ensuring the list of recipients is up to date on a weekly basis and those who have left the accommodation are removed; submitting interim reports, and preparing for (ultimately successful) re-application for continued funding into a second project year in 2024.

ESOL

Access to English language learning is a challenge in our communities. With FOSS's help, the asylum facility went from one person receiving regular formal English instruction to regular enrolments in Forth Valley College courses. Now all newcomers are also language-assessed by Falkirk Council and placed in classes or on waiting lists. FOSS has been a key player in facilitating these improvements. When there was no provision, FOSS volunteers even rallied for a time to deliver a beginner's class once a week. FOSS is now in talks with Falkirk Council's ESOL team to work out how best we might collaborate to enhance the current ESOL offering while respecting the commitments, policies and aims of our respective organisations.

New Scots - an ESOL activities project

New Scots was an ESOL activities project chiefly funded by the Supporting New Scots Fund from the Scottish Refugee Council. FOSS was a partner in Central Scotland Regional Equality Council's application for the project, which ran from May through November. FOSS coordinated small groups usually including a few native-English-speaking Volunteers with a small group of Clients, a befriender with the family they support, and occasionally bigger group trips. The emphasis for these activities was on getting people out into the community and speaking English in everyday, casual contexts, improving local volunteer literacy in the cultures and food of people who they were helping to settle into Falkirk, as well as enjoying a bit of normalcy, hospitality and fun in difficult times. In this project, people:

- Went to shows together at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival
- Enjoyed Afghan, Syrian, Eritrean, Sudanese, Somali, Turkish, and Iranian food
- Engaged Somali, Sudanese and Syrian refugee families resettled in Falkirk in trips and activities they would not access otherwise.
- Fostered relationships with a large group of displaced Ukrainians living in Falkirk and developed ideas with them for future projects (for example, a local history group that one of our volunteers is now helping to set up with Falkirk Council)
- Watched fireworks together and learned about Guy Fawkes Night from a local Falkirk Historian.
- Went to the cinema and talked together about the film they saw.
- Explored new locations in Falkirk and across the Central Belt including, Blair Drummond Safari Park, Stirling Castle, Edinburgh Castle, the National Museum of Scotland, Glasgow Cathedral and St Mungo's Museum, the Glasgow Science Centre, Surgeons Hall Museum, Glasgow's Riverside Museum, Linlithgow, and the Edinburgh Christmas Markets.
- Cultivated relationships through food (and sometimes also music and dance) at the Stirling Boys Club in partnership with Forth Environment Link, with a Sudanese community centre in Edinburgh, as well as a Somali community centre in Glasgow, and the Falkirk Baptist Church.

Several of the events were attended by members of Falkirk Council, and the project served to strengthen our relationship and collaboration with the Council's Resettlement Team, as well as other local organisations like Forth Environment Link, Historic Environment Scotland, Scottish Wildlife Trust, Forth Valley Welcome, and, of course, CSREC. Inspired by the events produced in partnership with FOSS, Forth Environment Link, continued a regular supper club of community meals for local people with a focus on refugees and people in the asylum system.

These activities have given FOSS more experience of organising events that people find fun, educational and humanising. They have also now formed the basis of future funding applications to continue the most successful activities and try new ones, as well as informed new processes that enable greater autonomy and responsiveness for our Clients and Volunteers.

Raising Falkirk Voices

As befriending volunteering and activities have brought people together at FOSS, so has the desire and ability of Clients and Volunteers to have their voices heard on issues that affect their lives and communities. Supporters and grant funding have enabled FOSS to ensure the voices of those who are not living in major cities are taken into account:

- On 2 May, FOSS's Volunteer and Partnership Manager gave evidence at the Scottish Parliament Equalities, Human Rights and Civic Justice Committee's Inquiry into the situation of asylum seekers in Scotland.
- FOSS worked closely with the Scottish Parliament Equalities, Human Rights, and Civil Justice Committee, facilitating a session on 13 June where eight individuals accommodated in the ex-hotel facility in Falkirk gave evidence in the Scottish Parliament of their lived experience in the UK asylum system. FOSS worked with the Committee to allow the men we support to input directly into the Committee's evidence-gathering process, assembling statements from those who could not attend and submitting them as written evidence. See the report and additional information [here](#).
- FOSS Volunteers, Staff and Clients attended all sessions of the Cross Party Group on Migration at the Scottish Parliament.
- The above efforts (as well as evidence via the provision of the transport scheme for asylum seekers in Falkirk, sharing the insights from a medium-sized town) have contributed to the success of the national campaign for free bus travel for asylum seekers in Scotland. FOSS are now part of the Scottish Government's working group to inform the development of a national pilot.
- FOSS Volunteers have written to their elected representatives about issues affecting the people they come into contact with through FOSS, and FOSS has facilitated Clients being in touch with their representatives as well as CSREC to address issues they are facing.

- FOSS has contributed to the upcoming iteration of the Scottish Government's New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy via consultation events in person and online
- We also held our first school session at a local primary school and have made connections with Denny High School to facilitate a similar session in 2024
- FOSS maintains communication with advocacy organisations like JustRight Scotland, the Scottish Refugee Council, and CSREC as well as networks like the Roof Coalition, sharing local insight, and experience of refugees and asylum seekers in Falkirk to inform inclusive strategies to improve access to food, transport, medical treatment, work, etc. We are also a key contributor to the Falkirk Asylum Seeker Partnership Working group that brings together statutory partners and local third sector organisations involved in asylum seeker care. We are a trusted organisation for Migrant Help and others to facilitate and inform material needs distribution and activities in Falkirk's asylum accommodation.

Supporting people in the asylum system

FOSS is a regular presence at Falkirk's ex-hotel asylum facility, and over the past two years, we have explored different ways to apply a befriending model to men who are accommodated there temporarily, but who do not know how long their stay will be. In 2023, we coordinated many mini-befriending activities from individualised help with CVs to regular mentoring, Park Run buddies, getting people to weekly trainings at Galaxy Football in Grangemouth, language exchanges, and introducing men to local clubs that can help them pursue interests in martial arts, cricket and music. FOSS Staff and Volunteers have helped people with individual requests such as support with a university and humanitarian scholarship application and options for deferment; writing to local representatives about interminable stays in the ex-hotel and referring the men to local organisations who offer support on training/education and applying for jobs (for those who have recently received their refugee status). FOSS has also provided support for those moving on: supplying luggage, support with Universal Credit applications, referring them to CSREC and the Scottish Refugee Council for advice, and helping them to register as homeless.

We organised sundry trips and events through the New Scots project (see New Scots - an ESOL activities project), as well as other activities like enabling people to take advantage of donated Bo'ness Hippodrome tickets and an Arts and ESOL community meal with funding from the Scottish Refugee Council. FOSS Befrienders helped men get started volunteering, connecting a farmer to the Sensory Centre for food growing and supporting others to volunteer at the local food bank, for instance.

Though attendance can be unpredictable for many reasons, Clients have said that volunteering gives them a routine and something to occupy their minds. With Volunteer support, another individual, who recently received his refugee status, has begun engaging with different companies for work opportunities as an engineer. Our Volunteers have helped under 23s at the facility apply for the Young Person Bus Scheme, referred people to mental health support organisations, supported people to get bank accounts, to compose formal complaints in English, and to retain their mobile numbers when switching SIM cards; a FOSS volunteer even hemmed one man's trousers.

These many, many instances of hospitable contact between the men sent to Falkirk and the established local community is fostering a sense of welcome, but also educating the local community more broadly on the situation that asylum seekers in their area face and how we might help each other. We have also been happy to see how positively funded activities like going to the cinema or enjoying a community meal impact established local Volunteers who also face hardship during a cost of living crisis. FOSS also informally points out things that the housing provider may have forgotten or can easily ameliorate (like providing non-caffeinated drink options) so these issues can be resolved without fuss or identification of those highlighting the omission.

Supporting refugees

FOSS began as a befriending project for resettled refugee families. Supporters and grant funding have enabled us to continue this work, supporting Volunteers to deliver ongoing befriending for 10 local families from Syria, Sudan, Somalia and Ukraine.

Befrienders support the families through regular (often weekly) visits. Apart from the social aspect, Volunteers help with making community connections for the families, sports opportunities, helping families with babies register for Home Start, or sourcing needed items like children's bikes. At the behest of Clients, FOSS also actively cultivates relationships with ethnic hubs like Sudanese Community organisations in Edinburgh and Glasgow-based Somali Community organisations. In this way, Somali and Sudanese asylum seekers as well as refugee families in Falkirk and the those who volunteer with them can build their networks of support, hospitality and education.

FOSS supports Volunteers with activity funds, as well as regular guidance, check ins and training. We also help Volunteers introduce families to helpful people and organisations and give advice to organisations beyond FOSS. FOSS attended the UK government reception commemorating the anniversary of the war in Ukraine. This event was organised to recognise third-sector organisations' contribution to supporting Ukrainian families in Scotland.

2023 has been a year of tremendous growth and learning for the organisation. For their dedication, patience, compassion, trust and feedback, FOSS would like to thank all Volunteers, Clients, Staff, Partners and Supporters - local people reaching out to each other for a community that serves us all.

Thank you to our funders



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