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Building Bridges: A Socioecological Approach to Inclusion and Community Cohesion in Post-Industrial Coastal Communities

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ABSTRACT

The project aimed to use arts-based participatory research methods to explore the barriers and enablers to inclusion in transitional spaces for sanctuary seekers. The study engaged 12 members of a predominantly white, low-income community and eight members of the sanctuary-seeking community. Each group engaged in creative, participatory workshops, where clothing and textiles were used to elicit conversations about home, belonging and inclusion. The research involved 10 individuals from the third sector and local government in coastal communities (North-west, UK) in order to understand their perspectives. Conventional content analysis revealed barriers to inclusion (e.g., language, stigma, mental health, systemic discrimination and misinformation). Creative methods were a powerful catalyst for building trust, reducing isolation and enhancing cohesion. Through a socioecological lens, the study proposed pathways for co-producing community engagement between local and refugee communities. The findings highlighted the enabling quality of co-created narratives in building trust, fostering empathy and challenging stereotypes amongst diverse communities. This paper contends that socioecological frameworks offer a compelling bridge between social and cultural divides by exploring the influence of individual, interpersonal, institutional and community-level dynamics of community cohesion.

1 | Introduction

Populist narratives are increasing amongst right-wing politicians and the media, and radical right parties have secured representation at various levels, from local governments to national parliaments and the European Parliament (Campo et al. 2024). Evidence suggests that communities considered 'left behind' are increasingly turning to right-wing parties as an alternative to mainstream politics, which they feel is a system that has failed to meet their needs (Schraff and Pontusson 2024). An increasing portion of children within these communities is also demonstrating right-wing and nationalist attitudes (Ciccolini 2025). This poses a potential threat to social and community cohesion (Schonert-Sieber 2025) and is considered a policy priority in the

United Kingdom, across the EU (Dotti et al. 2024) and in many global contexts (Strong Cities Network 2024).

Labelling, terms such as 'refugee', 'asylum seeker', or 'migrant', have often led to further isolation of marginalised community groups by reducing their sense of 'identity' to immigration status (Cariola 2025). Perpetuating deterministic stereotypes relating to personality and culture by imposing a fixed, one-dimensional identity on people can undermine their individuality, resilience and lived experience (Bates 2017; Goodman et al. 2017; Ray 2024). Terms such as 'refugee' or 'asylum seeker' significantly increase social distancing compared with more neutral terms such as 'migrant', suggesting that labelling affects how communities perceive and relate to

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individuals (Graf et al. 2023). Institutional use of such labels, particularly within higher education, but also across wider government, policy and service delivery contexts, can shape perceptions and influence access to mental health and social support (Vithana 2024). These studies collectively demonstrate how language functions as a mechanism of power, shaping social boundaries that can lead to unequal access to services and opportunities. This project therefore adopts the term ‘sanctuary seeker’/‘sanctuary seeking communities’ as a more inclusive and empowering alternative (Kirkwood 2017; Wilson et al. 2025).

Careful consideration must be given to the language used by communities hoping to provide inclusive spaces for the sanctuary-seeking individuals. The terms, host (Verme and Schuettler 2021), Indigenous (MacPherson 2023) and local (Herslund 2021) have been used to label communities in previous research. For the purpose of this project, the terms ‘local residents’ and ‘local community’ were adopted to refer to individuals with British citizenship, those born in Britain or with longstanding ties to their neighbourhood and a deep-rooted sense of belonging.

While the ‘integration’ of sanctuary seekers into local communities remains a central concern across policy, practice and academia, the existing literature often fails to reflect the complexity of this process (Grunow et al. 2023). In this paper, *integration* is defined as a structural and process-oriented concept relating to access to services, employment and participation in society (Ager and Strang 2008; Phillimore 2021), whereas *inclusion* refers to the relational and experiential dimension of belonging, recognition and meaningful participation within communities (Schiefer and van der Noll 2017). Thus, although intertwined in meaning, inclusion is treated herein as a lived social process that shapes and is shaped by integration. The concepts of social inclusion and social and community cohesion remain contentious, with a lack of theoretical or conceptual clarity (Schiefer and van der Noll 2017).

Applications of social-psychological approaches, such as social identity theory (e.g., Colic-Peisker and Walker 2003) and social contact theory (e.g., De Coninck et al. 2021), argue that shared spaces and identities can promote community cohesion. Intergroup contact between host and sanctuary-seeking communities is well understood to be a mechanism for building inclusive cultures between the groups, but is influenced by factors such as social identity, perceived discrimination and life satisfaction (Taylor and Glen 2020; Özkan et al. 2021). Social capital theory, as presented by Putnam (2000), proposed that building social networks can support the integration between diverse communities (e.g., Morrice 2007). Conversely, structural approaches emphasised the need for greater focus on governance (Phillimore 2021). Thus, this study aims to explore barriers and enablers to creating shared inclusive spaces for sanctuary-seeking and local communities.

1.1 | Inclusion and Community Cohesion in ‘Left Behind’ Communities

Despite a growing body of work on refugee and migrant settlement, there remains a lack of research exploring how inclusion

plays a key role in economically deprived, geographically isolated, coastal or predominantly white British communities (Balthazar 2021; Telford 2022a). Such areas are often described as ‘left behind’. Coastal areas are more likely to have higher levels of deprivation than non-coastal towns, attributed to factors including slower levels of growth and declining industries (Telford 2022b; Telford and Lloyd 2020). This paper focuses on predominantly white, low-income coastal communities in a post-industrial town, which displays characteristics similar to those known as ‘left behind’ communities or those that ‘suffer from significant levels of economic and social deprivation based on existing accepted definitions’ (Local Trust 2019, 11). The communities face significant social exclusion in terms of education (Ovenden-Hope and Passy 2019; Richards 2022), community development (Wenham 2020) and democratic participation (Rodríguez-Pose et al. 2024).

Such ‘left behind’ places have increasingly been designated as resettlement zones under the UK’s national dispersal policies, which often prioritise low-cost housing in economically deprived locations (Phillimore 2021). While metropolitan and multicultural cities generally offer more established networks, cultural infrastructure and service provision to support inclusion, coastal and rural areas frequently lack the resources, institutional capacity and intercultural experience necessary for cohesive settlement (Phillimore et al. 2021). Refugees in these areas face significant barriers to accessing healthcare, employment and social participation, exacerbated by language differences, limited public transport and a shortage of specialist services (Coumans et al. 2024). This situation risks leading to further marginalisation, with their sense of belonging in local communities being limited by a lack of services and community attitudes shaped by little experience of diversity, especially in predominantly white British community areas (Balthazar 2021). Recent UNHCR policy guidance reinforces these concerns, noting that smaller municipalities across Europe often struggle to sustain long-term inclusion due to resource constraints and fragmented coordination between local actors (UNHCR 2024).

Together, this evidence highlighted the need for place-sensitive, grassroots approaches to inclusion in geographically isolated towns, where participatory interventions can bridge structural and social divides. Research on refugee inclusion has often focused on urban areas or policy frameworks, without sufficiently addressing the lived, relational and affective experiences of host and migrant communities in deprived areas (Ager and Strang 2008; Coley et al. 2019; Phillimore 2021).

To address this limitation, this study adopted a socioecological framework (Bronfenbrenner 1994), which conceptualised the complex, interdependent nature of the individual, community and structural dimensions that impact inclusion. Inclusion has often been conceptualised as a unidirectional process of refugee adaptation, rather than a shared, negotiated experience shaped by everyday interactions, place-based identities and histories of exclusion (Charsley and Spencer 2019; Cheung and Phillimore 2014). The complexities and assumptions embroiled in the terms have been well documented concerning refugees and migrations as a policy construct (Bates 2017; Capdevila and Callaghan 2008; Goodman et al. 2017; Kirkwood et al. 2013; Kirkwood 2017;

Mahendran 2017; Nightingale et al. 2017; Parker 2018; Sakki and Pettersson 2018).

1.2 | Inclusive Creative Expression

The use of creative expression has been widely adopted in migration studies, both as a form of knowledge production and as a research theme. Mapping (McIlwaine and Ryburn 2024), theatre (Musca 2021) and murals (Jeffery et al. 2019) have been used in work with refugee and migrant communities to help understand their experiences. Art exhibitions displaying these artistic artefacts have added a curatorial dimension to this research approach, promoting dissemination and impact (McIlwaine and Ryburn 2024). Stories of Chilean political prisoners held in concentration camps during the dictatorship, crafting textiles during imprisonment, have been documented to be applied as a means of practical survival, income generation, skills sharing and solidarity (Gideon 2024). These crafts were later curated in the United Kingdom to provoke difficult conversations about oppression, demonstrating how creative expression can be utilised at different stages of the research process. The value of creative expression in promoting intercultural dialogue has been highlighted by the European Commission (2017), which has subsequently funded programmes to promote cohesion through creativity throughout Europe (European Commission 2023).

Within the United Kingdom, storytelling has been used to address health inequalities and promote inclusion. These approaches have advocated anti-oppressive practice grounded in critical, post- and decolonial, anti-racist and feminist beliefs (McIlwaine and Ryburn 2024), sentiments that are also central to the present project. Creative methods and participatory methods are argued to offer an inclusive alternative to traditional, extractive research approaches with marginalised groups (Davids et al. 2025; Martikainen et al. 2025). They offer opportunities to engage underserved communities including migrants, refugees and stateless people by fostering cultural expression which allow them to reclaim and reinterpret their identities in new settings (Morphew et al. 2024; Ripero-Muñiz et al. 2025). Such approaches challenge the notion that the underserved communities are 'hard to access' by allowing the inclusion of marginalised voices and civil society (Ripero-Muñiz et al. 2025). In doing so, they create accessible spaces for the co-creation of knowledge where the participants are empowered from being research subjects to active agents of knowledge co-production (Morphew et al. 2024; Ripero-Muñiz et al. 2025; Stavropoulou 2024). Aside from individual empowerment, creative and participatory methods have enhanced relational communication and meaning-making in community context supporting both individual wellbeing and wider community cohesion (Morphew et al. 2024). Despite the growing adoption of creative methods studies, a gap persists in critically evaluating how these methods are embedded within inclusive practice, particularly with respect to power dynamics, long-term engagement and the ethical co-ownership of creative approaches, especially in post-industrial or remote contexts (Davids et al. 2025; European Commission 2017; McIlwaine and Ryburn 2024). In this context, the present study made a distinct contribution by exploring how arts-based creative co-production can support the development

of shared, inclusive spaces between sanctuary-seeking individuals and local host communities within geographically isolated, post-industrial coastal towns in the United Kingdom. These settings remain underexplored for participatory research despite facing significant economic and social challenges that shape experiences of inclusion and belonging. In particular, this study examined how textile-based creative expression may foster diverse forms of knowledge production across groups, and how these can be leveraged through a creative pathway to achieve inclusive outcomes. The study facilitated creative exchange by providing an accessible, informal way to share stories and experiences via a range of hands-on activities including sewing, textile decoration, t-shirt printing and jewellery-making while fostering inclusion via shared meals and refreshments. Such practices offered trauma-sensitive, low-barrier spaces that transcended linguistic and cultural barriers, enabling safer self-expression and strengthening relational interaction. While building upon previous research in using creative and participatory methods for sanctuary seeking communities, this study differentiates itself by engaging not only sanctuary seeking communities, but also local host communities and stakeholder organisation representatives.

1.3 | Research Context: Building Refugee Integration and Development Through Group Engagement (BRIDGE)

Based in the post-industrial, predominantly white towns of Barrow-in-Furness and Cumbria, in Northwest (NW) of England, this project explored the under-researched area of coastal integration, where both refugee and local communities experience profound social, economic and cultural marginalisation. The towns are geographically isolated, located approximately 40 miles from the nearest motorway and with limited public infrastructure. From a socio-economic perspective, the area is predominantly populated by white, low-income communities, characterised by low-skilled, low-wage employment in a post-industrial context (Office for National Statistics 2022). The area has a strong class identity and cultural heritage, deeply rooted in shipbuilding and its decline, which has impacted not only the material circumstances of many but also the social fabric, underscoring an amplified sense of identity, belonging and purpose (Fryer 2025). This context makes it a critical site for examining inclusion and community cohesion in areas where both local and sanctuary-seeking communities face marginalisation.

BRIDGE explored how arts-based creative co-production and shared storytelling could serve as enablers to overcome fear, stigma and misunderstanding. The BRIDGE project represents a broader scope/programme of work; however, this paper only reports on a specific empirical component focused on participatory workshops conducted with sanctuary-seeking individuals, local residents and stakeholders. The project recognised that sanctuary-seeking individuals brought not only their needs, but also skills, knowledge and cultural resources that could enrich communities. It also recognised that local communities need to be part of this process, as their own experiences of marginalisation or insecurity can influence how they see and respond to sanctuary seekers. By sharing the research experience, this paper responds to McIlwaine

TABLE 1 | Participant details and recruitment strategy.

	Participants (<i>n</i> =)	Participant gender	Workshops (<i>n</i> =)	Recruitment strategy
Sanctuary-seeking participants	8	Male: 0 Female: 8	2	Face to face via gatekeeper
Local participants	12	Male: Female:	2	Face to face via gatekeeper
Stakeholder participants	10	Male: 2 Female: 8	1	Direct via email

and Ryburn's (2024) call for further creative research practice on migration violence. In particular, we examine how textile-based creative expression can foster diverse forms of knowledge production across groups and how these can be leveraged through a creative pathway to achieve inclusive outcomes. Within BRIDGE, inclusion and community cohesion were seen as a counter to migration violence exercised by local communities (e.g., racism, xenophobia and ethnocentrism), and the project sought to understand the experience of violence and the views of communities enacting this violence, working relationally across groups rather than treating them in isolation. Finally, this paper contributes to the limited literature on art-based research and inclusion in coastal settings in the global North by offering a case-based application of these methods with an under-researched group.

The project aims to use arts-based participatory research methods to explore the barriers and enablers to inclusion and community cohesion for sanctuary seekers. The unique methods employed in this study forge critical links between arts-based migration research and the socioecological approach (Bronfenbrenner 1994) to influence inclusive community cohesion. The paper concludes with a set of policy and practice recommendations, along with a critical reflection on how creative spaces can foster trust, recognition and cohesion. Considering the arguments above, this paper sought to address the following research questions:

1. What are the barriers and enablers to creating shared inclusive spaces for sanctuary-seeking and local communities?
2. How can creative expression support a shared, inclusive space for sanctuary-seeking and local communities?

2 | Methodology

Given the project's emphasis on inclusion and community cohesion in a post-industrial setting, a traditional, extractive research design would have been insufficient. Instead, a participatory, arts-based methodology was adopted for several reasons. First, community-based and participatory approaches have consistently been associated with stronger trust, relevance, and outcomes for migrant communities, precisely because they shift power towards co-production of knowledge rather than data extraction, achieved through dialogue of sharing of stories (Tran et al. 2025). Second, creative and arts-based practices (including

textiles, music and image-making) generate rich qualitative data while also functioning as trauma-sensitive, low-barrier spaces that reduce language demands, enable safer self-expression and build social connection, which are key to inclusion (Di Fabrizio et al. 2025). Finally, the importance of place must be acknowledged: Isolated resettlement contexts present access, stigma and service navigation barriers that are poorly captured by conventional methods. Participatory and creative methods help surface these frictions and broker practical connections between groups and services (Stevenson and Alzyood 2025). The specific use of visual/participatory methods for the BRIDGE project was supported as an empowering, ethically robust route to voice for migrants and refugees, aligning with the commitment to emotional safety and cultural sensitivity (McGannon et al. 2024). Furthermore, the participatory approach enabled the co-production of knowledge with participants, prioritising emotional safety, cultural sensitivity and the use of creative practices as both data generation and community-building tools.

2.1 | Participants and Recruitment Process

A purposive sampling strategy was employed, drawing on the BRIDGE team's existing networks, to capture a diverse range of experiences. The study involved three main participant groups as follows: (1) sanctuary-seeking individuals (*n* = 8; from Albania, Pakistan, Eritrea and Ethiopia), with no exclusion criteria for country of origin or time in the United Kingdom; (2) British citizens living in Barrow-in-Furness (*n* = 12); and (3) stakeholder organisation representatives (*n* = 10) from public and third sector organisations. In total, 30 adult participants were involved (see Table 1 for a summary). The complex and multifaceted nature of identity and place was recognised in this recruitment strategy. Authors recognised the need to differentiate the deeply personal and individual nature of all lived experience and appreciate the danger of generalising the experiences of all groups (including the stakeholders, who themselves are members of other communities). The purposeful sampling strategy adopted identified pre-existing groups, which were already identified as one cohesive group. In the case of the sanctuary-seeking community, it was a pre-existing women's group, offered through an organisation which worked with the sanctuary-seeking community. In the case of the local community, it was a pre-existing arts group offered by a grassroots community organisation situated within that local community. Within this small feasibility study (Bowen et al. 2009), the authors sought to

TABLE 2 | Creative tools used in each workshop.

	Creative tools	Creative activity
Sanctuary-seeking workshop	Sewing machine, plain dresses, needle and thread, beads, string	Embroidery Bracelet making
Local workshop	Fabric Paints, printing tiles, T-shirts	T-shirt printing
Stakeholder workshop	Needle and thread, fabric paint, cloth	

answer specific questions about whether an intervention can and should be tested further and generate individual general themes that could inform further research, thereby allowing greater scope for the analysis of experience across different groups.

Recruitment approaches varied by group. Sanctuary-seeking and local communities were approached face-to-face within existing community activities by stakeholder organisations. Stakeholders were invited via email by the research team, targeting organisations active in sanctuary-seeking support and integration work across the Northwest. All participants were provided with a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) that explained the purpose and process of the research, and informed consent was obtained prior to their participation. Interpreters were available as needed, which were used to support participants from Albania. Efforts were made to include participants at different stages of settlement and with varied migration trajectories, which was considered a methodological strength, as it enabled exploration of a wide range of inclusion experiences.

2.2 | Research Process

Each group participated in one to two creative participatory workshops, held either in a community-based venue or at the University of Lancashire, Preston. Site visits preceded the participatory workshops to familiarise the research team with the space and to build relationships with participants. The arts-based participatory workshops were designed to foster inclusion via shared meals and refreshments and to facilitate creative exchange through a range of hands-on activities including sewing, textile decoration, t-shirt printing and jewellery-making by providing an accessible, informal way to share stories and experiences. Each session lasted approximately 3–4 h.

2.2.1 | Location, Timing and Frequency of Workshops

Workshops took place between April and May 2025. In keeping with an approach that recognised the need to build trust with participants, two sessions were held with both sanctuary-seeking and local community groups, offered as an optional additional activity as part of an existing project. The rationale for this strategy rested on centering the activity in a physical place and time that participants were familiar with and may have felt some sense of ownership. By essentially asking for permission to enter their space, it was hoped that this would demonstrate

respect for the participants, support their comfort and build trust in the research and the researchers.

One stakeholder workshop was held as the authors felt there was less need to build trust with individuals representing an organisation. It was also appreciated that these participants were actively taking time out of their working day to attend the session, whereas the local and sanctuary-seeking participants were participating through a group they would be attending irrespective of the research. Participants represented organisations throughout the NW, so it felt that holding the session in a central accessible location, that is, Preston, would be the most accessible venue. Considering the participants were attending in a professional capacity, it was felt that the institutional setting of a university would not be a barrier to building trust or encouraging participation.

2.3 | Materials

2.3.1 | Creative Tools

Different creative tools and creative expression focuses were used as prompts to facilitate conversation in the sanctuary-seeking and local community workshops (see Table 2). Through a series of meetings with the stakeholder organisations acting as gatekeepers within the research project and researchers, clothing and textiles were identified as a theme that both groups could relate to. Further discussion with the gatekeeping organisations identified that the local participants would likely identify with t-shirt making as resonating with their culture, whereas embroidery and dress decorating were felt to resonate with the diverse culture of those attending the women's sanctuary seeking group. The expertise of the gatekeepers was given precedence over any other preferences for creative activities. The stakeholder workshop took place after all other workshops had been completed, and a selection of creative activities from the previous sessions was used in this workshop (see Table 2).

2.3.2 | Workshop Plans

Conversations with gatekeepers informed the development of the workshop plans and discussion topics, which were refined and embedded into a workshop plan by the wider research team. These workshops were then shared with the gatekeepers, and revisions were made based on their recommendations. A summary of the main findings was presented to the wider research team after completion of the sanctuary-seeking and local workshops, which informed the development of

the workshop plan and discussion topics for the stakeholder workshop.

2.4 | Workshop Structure

All workshops were facilitated by a researcher who was also a creative practitioner and were accompanied by an additional researcher to engage in discussion with participants. The wider research team attended the stakeholder workshop. Every workshop followed the same loose structure: group introductions, co-production of ground rules of the session, background and context, creative activity with discussion, reflection on the session, next steps and opportunity to debrief.

Sanctuary-seeking and local community workshops: The first session focused on relationship-building and creative practice, with the rationale of building trust with participants. The sanctuary-seeking community decorated traditional clothing using sewing techniques and local communities created T-shirt prints that conveyed what home meant to them, while holding informal discussions about inclusion and exclusion. Participants completed their creative projects in the second session, with an additional researcher present to explore the themes that emerged in the first session. During the second session, the additional researcher approached all participants on a one-to-one or group basis, encouraging them to share the materials they were working on and what had inspired them. Engaging in creative activity themselves, the additional researcher then raised the discussion topics in Table 3, being sensitive to participants' right to withdraw at any time and to only share what they feel comfortable sharing.

Stakeholder workshops: The session provided an overview of the findings from the sanctuary-seeking and local community workshops. This was followed by a discussion on the principal barriers and enablers to inclusion and community cohesion, as well as the role of creative expression. Creative activities were also offered within the stakeholder workshop to facilitate discussion. The discussion topics are presented in Table 3.

Data was captured through photo documentation, artistic artefacts, written reflections from participants and fieldnotes taken by the BRIDGE team immediately after each session.

2.5 | Data Analysis

Data were analysed using conventional qualitative content analysis as described by Hsieh and Shannon (2005). This inductive approach was selected because little is known about experiences of inclusion and community cohesion within post-industrial resettlement contexts, allowing categories to emerge directly from participants' accounts rather than being guided by pre-existing theoretical frameworks. The approach was also well suited to the participatory, arts-based design, enabling analysis of multiple forms of qualitative data while preserving the contextual meaning of participants' experiences. The dataset comprised researcher field notes, participants' written reflections, photographs of creative artefacts, observations recorded during workshops and documented

conversations generated throughout the creative activities. Verbal discussions were interpreted alongside participants' creative outputs and the explanations they provided during the workshops, recognising that the artistic artefacts formed part of the communicative data rather than being analysed independently.

Analysis began with repeated reading of the complete dataset to achieve immersion and develop a holistic understanding of participants' experiences. Researchers reviewed each workshop chronologically, considering the interactions, creative processes and contextual observations alongside participants' reflections. Initial notes captured key words, recurring ideas and concepts that appeared significant across the different data sources. During open coding, meaningful words, phrases, observations and descriptions relating to experiences of inclusion, belonging, barriers, facilitators, relationships, identity and place were highlighted and labelled using participants' own language wherever possible. Codes were generated inductively without imposing predetermined categories. As coding progressed, labels were continually compared across participant groups, including sanctuary-seeking individuals, local community members and stakeholders, to identify similarities, differences and contextual influences.

Related codes were subsequently grouped into broader categories that represented shared concepts within the data. These categories were refined through an iterative process of comparison, discussion and constant reference back to the original dataset to ensure that they accurately reflected participants' intended meanings. Particular attention was paid to preserving the context in which experiences were described, recognising that perceptions of inclusion and exclusion were shaped by participants' social positions, migration experiences and the unique characteristics of Barrow-in-Furness as a post-industrial community. The multidisciplinary research team met throughout the analytical process to discuss coding decisions, review developing categories and resolve differences in interpretation through consensus. Reflexive field notes recorded immediately after each workshop were revisited during analysis to support transparency and acknowledge how researcher perspectives and interactions may have influenced interpretation. Credibility was further strengthened through data triangulation across field notes, creative artefacts, written reflections, photographs and participant discussions, allowing categories to be supported by multiple sources of qualitative evidence. The final categories provided a contextual understanding of the factors influencing inclusion and community cohesion while remaining grounded in participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attributed to their creative work and workshop discussions.

2.6 | Ethical Considerations

All research activities were carried out in accordance with the ethical standards approved by the University of Lancashire's Ethics Committee. As outlined in the methods section, gatekeepers were instrumental in shaping the methodology, entrusting their expertise to ensure a non-threatening, inclusive environment for all participants. The methodologies developed were deliberately non-interrogative in their delivery, using creative

TABLE 3 | Workshop discussion topics.

	Discussion topics
Sanctuary-seeking workshop	1. What were your biggest challenges when you first arrived in the United Kingdom? 2. How have you felt welcomed (or not welcomed) by the local/host community? 3. Can you share some experiences where you felt part of the community? 4. What kinds of activities/transitional spaces make you feel connected to the community or feel as part of the new/adapted community? 5. How can some of these activities/spaces help you feel more at home? 6. Are there cultural or creative activities (e.g., music, dance, art or cooking) that you find particularly meaningful? 7. What barriers prevent you from participating in some of these community activities? 8. How do you currently manage feelings of isolation (if any)? 9. In what ways do you think creative activities (e.g., music, dance, art or cooking) could help with emotional healing from being away from your home country? Anything else you would like to mention about host communities and inclusive spaces/transitional spaces that we haven't discussed?
Local workshop	1. What do you know about the refugee community in your area? 2. What challenges do you think refugees face when settling in the United Kingdom? 3. What are the challenges in your view to connecting with refugee families or individuals? 4. Have you participated in any events or activities with refugee communities? If yes, what are these? 5. And what was your experience with regard to the activities mentioned above? 6. What types of creative or cultural activities do you think could bring refugee communities and host communities together? 7. Are there any shared community spaces or events that you think could involve both refugees and host communities? 8. What would a more connected and inclusive community look like to you? 9. How do you think both communities can work together to make communities more inclusive? 10. Anything else you would like to mention about refugee communities and inclusive spaces that we haven't discussed?
Stakeholder workshop	1. From your perspective, what are the most significant challenges in integrating refugees into host communities? 2. What existing policies are there in supporting refugee integration? 3. What are the existing activities/programmes (that you have initiated or supported) are there in supporting refugee integration? 4. Of the above, are there examples of creative programmes/activities/initiatives that have successfully promoted community cohesion? 5. What barriers (e.g., economic, social, cultural) hinder refugee participation in community activities? 6. How can these barriers be addressed through community-driven solutions? 7. What role do you think creative activities (e.g., art, music, dance and cooking) can play in integration efforts? 8. What factors (e.g., funding, resources, location) need to be considered when creating transitional spaces? 9. How can key stakeholders support the development and sustainability of such spaces? 10. How can we ensure that the voices of both refugees and host communities are heard in the design and implementation of these spaces? 11. What outcomes would you like to see from such initiatives, and how would you measure success? 10. Anything else that we haven't covered above?

methods to encourage participants to engage in conversations if they chose to. Choice and avoidance of extrinsic practices were identified as essential in how researchers engaged in conversations with participants, using professional judgement to decide when to probe further and when to be entirely led by the participants. Researcher reflexivity and positionality were also key ethical considerations. The research team comprised women from diverse ethnic backgrounds and nationalities, who openly discussed how respective positionalities and identities may produce bias. Positionalities regarding how researchers may be perceived by diverse research participants were also discussed.

3 | Results

This paper seeks to answer two research questions 'What are the barriers and enablers to creating shared inclusive spaces for sanctuary-seeking and local communities?' and 'How can creative expression support a shared, inclusive space for sanctuary-seeking and local communities?' Language emerged as one of the most significant barriers to connecting with others in the community, understanding available services and accessing them. Unlike the other themes, language functioned as a meta-theme, cutting across the individual, community and public

policy dimensions of the findings. Rather than representing a discrete issue, language shaped experiences and outcomes within each of the three core themes identified, influencing participants' ability to participate, access support and develop a sense of belonging. The conventional content analysis revealed four overarching themes that impact inclusion and community cohesion, summarised in Table 4.

3.1 | Meta-Theme: Language Barriers

Language emerged as one of the most significant barriers to connecting with others in the community, understanding services and accessing them. Language has been identified as a challenge across individual, community and public policy dimensions and has therefore been categorised as a meta-theme, reaching across the three core themes in response to the research question 1. Members of the sanctuary seeking community shared that language barriers limited contact with institutions they sought to access, for example, one refugee reported that 'the church doesn't speak my language' (*Jamila, sanctuary-seeking community*). Local community members reported that language barriers prevented communication at the neighbourhood level, with Steve sharing that 'they lived next door, but we couldn't talk as only the son could speak English' (*Steve, local community*). Within all groups, examples of children acting as interpreters for the wider sanctuary-seeking family units were provided.

Third-sector organisations acting as gatekeepers shared that English lessons were not provided while individuals were accommodated in hotels, and that this system 'sets asylum seekers up to fail' (*Jane, stakeholder*). Services were described where organisations have proactively designed, self-funded and delivered to bridge this gap. Examples include producing multi-lingual leaflets for hotel residents, peer-led language tutorials on YouTube and an 'Everyday English' programme, teaching key phrases to support inclusion in daily civic life. These findings emphasise the central role of language in shaping participation/belonging and underscore that current government provision is

insufficient and places disproportionate responsibility on under-resourced local organisations, highlighting the central role of grassroots initiatives in sustaining integration.

3.2 | Theme One: Individual Factors

Conventional content analysis identified a range of individual factors that affect the experiences of inclusion and community cohesion across both local and sanctuary-seeking communities. These included compromised health and wellbeing due to experiencing trauma and social isolation and challenges associated with accessing mental health support. These findings highlight the interconnectedness of health, wellbeing, and social inclusion, demonstrating how individual circumstances can shape people's capacity to access services and actively participate in community life.

3.2.1 | Compromised Health and Wellbeing

Accounts of *poor physical and mental health* were shared within local and sanctuary-seeking communities, often experienced by multiple generations within the same household, as exemplified in the passage below:

I don't leave the house very much, only to come here and do the shopping. My daughter has gained six stone in weight since moving back home. I have serious back trouble, and it's difficult to get anything done when you are in so much pain

(Brenda, local community)

Sanctuary seeking participants reported that many within their community experience mental health challenges, including trauma, loneliness and isolation. Gatekeepers expressed concern that young male asylum seekers experienced significant mental health difficulties but felt that their needs were not prioritised. Such concerns highlight the unmet needs of the sanctuary-seeking community, which impact their capacity to participate and integrate.

Numerous complex challenges associated with sanctuary seekers accessing mental health support were identified. Systemic challenges included Western approaches to mental health practice, where information was perceived as insufficiently culturally attuned and a lack of continuity in cross-country referrals, where sanctuary seekers must start a fresh referral route if resettled in a different location. Cultural challenges included different cultural attitudes towards mental health, where stakeholders reported that families often want to 'shield their loved ones from judgment and stigma' (*Amy, stakeholder*). Collectively, these findings reveal that access to mental health services is constrained by overlapping structural, systemic and cultural barriers, underscoring the need for culturally responsive and trauma-informed provision.

3.3 | Theme Two: Community and Organisational Factors

Conventional content analysis identified a range of community and organisational factors that shaped the experiences of

TABLE 4 | Summary table of themes and topics.

Theme	Topics
Individual factors	Compromised health and wellbeing; social marginalisation and economic hardship
Community and organisational factors	Lack of inter-community engagement; stigma and discrimination
Public policy factors	Systemic barriers, media and misinformation
Creative spaces	Shared language; trauma-informed spaces for storytelling; build skills and capacities that could support social and economic participation; preserving and sharing cultural heritage

inclusion and community cohesion. These included (1) inter-community engagement and (2) stigma and discrimination. Participants explained how relationships between local and sanctuary-seeking communities were influenced by trust and mutual understanding while highlighting the importance of community and organisational environments in either enabling or hindering social connections and participation.

3.3.1 | Inter-Community Engagement

When reflecting on *inter-community engagement*, local communities reported limited contact with sanctuary-seeking communities, although some interaction occurred at a local community centre, such as through the use of the local community fridge. However, community leaders felt that sanctuary-seeking communities did not engage beyond this, despite being invited to participate. On an individual level, local residents offered differing accounts of their efforts to engage with the sanctuary-seeking community. For example, while Brenda said, 'there are quite a few refugees near me, but I just like to keep myself to myself', Dave shared, 'my neighbours are refugees, I don't have a problem with them, I always say hello'. Such conflicting accounts illustrate the diversity of intra-community attitudes, emphasising the need to avoid a generalised view when interpreting local experiences.

Workshops with sanctuary seekers revealed that many participated in various activities in an attempt to integrate with the local community. These included social activities, such as attending specific services for sanctuary seekers, going to the gym and attending church. Additionally, there was civic engagement, including volunteering with local charities and educational engagement, primarily attending English lessons. The sanctuary-seeking community expressed a strong desire to gain paid employment as a means to generate income and contribute to the wider society, as summarised by Hana, 'I was a hairdresser at home and would like to do that here' (*Hana, sanctuary-seeking community*). Such accounts demonstrate both motivation and capacity for social and civic participation, but these efforts are often constrained by limited opportunities and mistrust.

Members of local, sanctuary-seeking and stakeholder communities alike felt that many in the sanctuary-seeking community were fearful of engagement beyond their immediate peer groups. Trisha, from the local community, reflected, 'people from other countries are probably scared to talk to us'. Those from the sanctuary-seeking community reported that they are more likely to engage in new activities when supported by a trusted person, such as a family member or peer from their immediate community. Stakeholders reflected on cultural differences that affect inter-community engagement, particularly regarding women's entry into male-dominated spaces and into the family unit, which is perceived as more private in Western cultures. These reflections highlight the individual, cultural, and social factors to consider when sanctuary-seekers begin to engage with other communities.

Workshops with local residents revealed a lack of knowledge and understanding concerning the sanctuary-seeking community,

as summarised by one participant, 'We don't know anything about them' (*Trevor, local community*). This is especially regarding cultural background and heritage; different processing and resettlement systems; and the unique skills sanctuary seekers bring. However, a stakeholder reflected that 'local communities need to take more responsibility. They may say, 'we don't know who you are,' but how do you inclusion people when you don't make them feel welcome?' (*Janet, stakeholder*). Cumulatively, these accounts speak to the need for consensus on the responsibility of local residents to participate in inclusion and community cohesion.

Despite this apparent limited knowledge, the local community expressed empathy concerning the circumstances that brought people to the United Kingdom, illustrated through unsolicited statements such as 'refugees come from a place of hate to a place of hate' (*Stacey, local community*), 'they don't choose to leave- they don't choose to come to Barrow' (*Margaret, local community*) and 'it's not their fault, is it. I mean, who would choose to go across the sea in a tiny boat with their children?' (*Dave, local community*). We appreciate that these views reflect only a subset of the community, and that there may be certain demand characteristics within the research setting, in the local community seeking to be viewed favourably by the researchers. However, given that numerous comments occurred unprompted, it suggests the potential for empathy and relationality within local communities.

3.3.2 | Stigma and Discrimination

Although there were limited accounts of *stigma and discrimination* expressed within the local community groups, stigma and discrimination were noted as a persistent challenge in all participant groups. For example, one stakeholder reflected how male sanctuary seekers are subject to prejudice and discrimination, 'we perceive men as a threat, we keep them away from many places' (*Erin, stakeholder*). The workshops with the sanctuary-seeking community provided contrasting accounts concerning experiences of racism; members of the group gave limited examples of experiencing racism, stating that they have found the area welcoming on the whole. However, a facilitator privately shared that many participants had experienced racism, but were reluctant to disclose. This suggests racism often remains hidden, unspoken and difficult to evidence, highlighting the insidious nature of racism.

Likewise, contradictions were found in the local community workshops, with no explicit accounts of racism being provided by participants, but with accounts being shared of family members being racist. For example, Brenda, from the local community, explained that, after moving to a city to study at university, her daughter had more contact with the sanctuary-seeking community. Brenda said, 'she hates them, can't stand them'. When asked for more detail, Brenda said her daughter, who suffered from social anxiety, felt that 'they were always on their phones, laughing at her, talking in a language she didn't understand. They have all designer clothes and are always happy, she just doesn't like them'. Such an account demonstrates the interconnecting nature of relative deprivation and poor mental health. In this case, an individual's anxiety and social isolation appear to

influence negative perceptions of sanctuary seekers, illustrating how personal vulnerability can manifest as prejudice.

3.4 | Theme Three: Public Policy Factors

Conventional content analysis identified a range of public policy factors that influenced inclusion and community cohesion across local and sanctuary-seeking communities. These included (1) media and misinformation, (2) social marginalisation and economic hardship, and (3) systemic barriers associated with education, housing, and access to services. Across all participant groups, there was concern that misinformation, economic insecurity and unequal access to resources led to misunderstanding, mistrust and feelings of exclusion. This demonstrates how broader political and structural contexts can reinforce existing inequalities, shape community relations and influence the development of inclusive and cohesive communities.

3.4.1 | Media and Misinformation

There was universal concern about the propagation of fake news shared via social media and the circulation of misinformation about the resources that sanctuary seekers receive (relating to economic restrictions). The sanctuary-seeking community were aware of 'negative projection' (*Fatima, sanctuary-seeking community*) of their communities in the UK media. Reflecting on the motivation of the seemingly divisive position of the press, Shannon, from the local community, said, 'The media stir up a lot of hate to sell papers' (*Shannon, local community*). While a critical discussion of the drivers promoting such a narrative is beyond the scope of this paper, participants suggested that the most significant contributor was a neoliberal culture that prioritises profit over the wellbeing of individuals and communities.

Stakeholder and local communities felt that single men from the sanctuary seeking community are often portrayed as dangerous. Trish from the local community provided an example of an alleged sexual assault by a 'black man who didn't speak English' (*Trish, local community*) on Facebook. A mother had filmed the incident and posted it on her social media as a warning to others in the community. Trish expressed her dissonance between understanding the motivation of a mother to protect her child and her anger about sharing the incident on social media, which exacerbated anti-immigrant sentiment and misinformation.

3.4.2 | Social Marginalisation and Economic Hardship

Both local and sanctuary-seeking groups experienced *social marginalisation and economic hardship*. However, misinformation perpetuated a widely accepted narrative that members of the sanctuary-seeking community receive more support than other individuals, resulting in feelings of *relative deprivation*. Trish, from the local community, explained she 'never had a problem with refugees' until her young niece was made homeless with a baby:

They get the best housing and support over local people it's totally unfair. My niece was offered a filthy one bedroomed flat with rising damp and inadequate kitchen or bathroom facilities, she was born here, and my great niece deserves adequate housing. It's just not right that they are offered stuff for free and are housed in front of local people.

Emma, another member of the local community, provided an example related to resource allocation, recalling a conversation she had with a kitchen fitter. The local kitchen fitter agreed to give a cupboard at no cost. The fitter said, 'I will do it because you're not one of those refugees', claiming that sanctuary-seekers would receive a fully fitted kitchen, with appliances. In contrast, local families would apparently not receive the appliances. Emma expressed feeling outraged at the attitude of the kitchen fitter but also feeling that everybody should be entitled to equal resources, concluding that, 'we should all be entitled to the same things, in all parts of life' (*Emma, local community*). These accounts illustrate the complexity of public perceptions and highlight how economic insecurity and austerity politics feed into anti-immigrant narratives.

The sanctuary-seeking community were aware of this narrative, with Sana explaining, 'We can't go back; it doesn't mean we don't want to. We're not here for benefits' and when asked later in the workshop what one thing would make her life better, Sana replied, 'let us work'. Sana's account suggests both frustration and helplessness with her status and the interpretation of others, adding an additional mental health stressor to the trauma experienced in her native country while attempting to settle in a new country.

3.4.3 | Systemic Barriers

As already noted, concerning access to mental health services, *systemic barriers* impede integration and community cohesion between local and sanctuary-seeking communities. These include access to Adult Education, where stakeholders felt that the Home Office operates on a 'target-driven' approach, where 'there is a hierarchy in how we treat people, based on where people are from' (*Erin, stakeholder*). Moreover, Janet, a third sector stakeholder, shared that those seeking asylum could not access education for the first 6 months in the United Kingdom, reflecting that 'we set asylum seekers up for failure the moment they arrive'. These accounts highlight the inequality evident at the central government level in terms of access to resources necessary for promoting inclusion and community cohesion.

Systemic challenges in the education system were also identified regarding children's education. For example, varying rules on Free School Meals for asylum-seeker children, depending on status, where it was felt that little advice was provided to schools or local authorities. Issues related to transport, language barriers, racism and relocation stress were also felt to impact the ability of the sanctuary-seeking community to access education. Moreover, significant concerns were raised by stakeholders concerning asylum processes and housing, with inequalities within sanctuary-seeking groups being highlighted ('asylum seekers

are more secure in housing compared to refugees', Emma, stakeholder). It was also noted that, upon gaining refugee status, individuals face 'increased vulnerability due to the sudden loss of support and secure accommodation' (Jane, stakeholder). These findings demonstrate how systemic barriers intersect with community-level challenges, producing layered inequalities that perpetuate exclusion and undermine long-term integration.

3.4.4 | Theme Four: Creative Spaces

In addition to the barriers outlined above, conventional content analysis highlighted how creative spaces and practices can actively support inclusion and community cohesion. Creative expression was found to (1) provide a shared language; (2) open trauma-informed spaces for storytelling; (3) build skills and capacities that could support social and economic participation; and (4) preserve and share cultural heritage. These show how creativity is not merely a recreational activity but a social process that fosters connection and transformation within and across different communities.

3.4.5 | Shared Language

Along with understanding the perceived barriers to inclusion and community cohesion, BRIDGE sought to explore the role, if any, that creative spaces play in overcoming these challenges. We employed creative methods centred on textiles to engage participants in conversation and capture their perspectives on how culture and creative expression may facilitate inclusion. In these workshops, creative practice itself became a shared language, enabling dialogue that would otherwise have been restricted by linguistic and cultural barriers. In summary, the process of engaging in a shared, focused and creative activity was perceived as offering a mutual language and a means to humanise marginalised groups, promote community cohesion and reduce stigma. Moreover, the unique skills associated with creative expression were perceived as having the potential to build the capacity of both communities while also celebrating diverse heritages.

It was universally felt that community-based creative expression could offer a space where people could communicate with a *shared language*—the language of the arts. This was perceived as offering a strategy to overcome what was overwhelmingly identified as the primary barrier to diverse communities connecting: language. Moreover, when reflecting on this, Dave from the local community felt that there needed to be a space where both sanctuary-seeking and local communities could come together, perhaps over food or music. For Dave, such creative spaces could help educate local communities about the experiences of sanctuary-seeking communities and their reasons for coming to the United Kingdom, thereby humanising marginalised groups, promoting community cohesion and reducing stigma.

3.4.6 | Trauma-Informed Spaces for Storytelling

The creative sessions with the sanctuary-seeking community provided unexpected insights into trauma, as exemplified in the following passage from the research field notes:

A young lady and her mother, who had limited English, shared that they were traumatised by water. Her journey to the UK was made by boat, and she did not want to discuss it. The piece she produced on a scrap piece of cyanotype included water on the fabric. She told me she did not like the water pattern on the fabric, and the flower symbolised land.

This account illustrated how creative practices may provide indirect, symbolic means of communicating trauma that might otherwise remain unspoken. Rather than extracting narratives, creative expression allowed participants to choose what to share, and in what form. We suggest that this provided a safer and more dignified mode of engagement, in terms of psychological safety, with the trauma being expressed in a form in which the storyteller had complete authority (rather than through a language she did not fully understand). We argue that this is potentially a more dignified way to allow trauma to emerge, unstructured, with the storyteller holding all agency and control over what is shared (rather than feeling obligated to respond to specific questions).

This activity provided an alternative means to bring trauma to the surface, while ensuring the psychological well-being of storytellers throughout this process was paramount at every stage. The setting in which this activity took place was purposefully within a physical and psychological space the participants were accustomed to and currently used for support. The participants were repeatedly asked if they were happy to continue sharing, and reassured that they did not have to share any more than they wished to. The participants controlled the conversation, and the topic changed when they wanted. Moreover, a verbal brief was provided to all participants at the end of the session in the languages they used.

3.4.7 | Building Skills for Economic Activity

The creative research process revealed a wealth of *artistic skills and talent* existing within both groups, as summarised by one of the researchers' fieldnotes, 'with limited resources and learning English, she creates her own clothing by hand. The intricate panels on the sleeves demonstrate her sewing skills...the craftsmanship was astounding'. Between sessions, a member of the local community had taken a piece of fabric on which she had printed her design and used it to bind her personal journal. This suggests that creative outputs hold personal and cultural significance, extending their value beyond the workshops into participants' everyday lives. These also highlight how creativity not only generates symbolic meaning but also reveals transferable skills and capacities that could be harnessed for both social and economic participation.

The sanctuary-seeking community expressed a strong desire to contribute to the local economy and felt these skills could be used to do so. Stakeholders echoed this sentiment but expressed concern about how this form of agency could be enacted under current employment legislation (UK Parliament 2024). This is a critical point that shows that, although creative skills have potential pathways for inclusion, structural barriers such as

work restrictions in the United Kingdom might limit their realisation.

3.4.8 | Preserving and Sharing Cultural Heritage

In addition to enabling the expression of skills, creative approaches facilitate the *sharing, celebration and preservation of diverse heritage*. Within the local community, participants created prints that represented what home meant to them. Some prints spoke powerfully to the town's industrial past, which prompted discussion of identity, belonging and the decline of shipbuilding as a source of community pride. Within the sanctuary-seeking community, textile designs were used to symbolise cultural traditions, journeys and family ties. These findings were discussed at the stakeholder workshop, where it was noted that skills and knowledge from traditional industries were perceived as meaningful to communities but were not being preserved. It was suggested that sharing traditional skills related to cultural heritage could be an example of 'something of value to pass on' (*Yasim, stakeholder*), and that 'sharing is the tapestry of life' (*Andy, stakeholder*). Simply, Dave felt that creative expression could be used for 'people from communities helping and learning from each other' (*local community*).

4 | Discussion

The BRIDGE project highlights how creative, participatory and marginalised methodologies can support inclusion and community cohesion. Grounded in a socioecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner 1994), the project created safe spaces that enabled trust, dialogue and creative expression, particularly in coastal areas often overlooked in migration research. These methods allowed marginalised voices to be heard while fostering new forms of relational engagement.

Within the specific context of a 'left behind' coastal community, the research revealed the ways in which both sanctuary seeking and local communities experienced exclusion, particularly relating to economic hardship and mental health. While not suggesting that the experiences of both groups are the same, or even that the experiences of exclusion within the groups are shared, the research adds to the understanding of local communities within such 'left behind' places. This has occurred within a socio-historical context in which structural inequalities have worsened, and class identities have been threatened by deindustrialisation (Warren et al. 2021).

The antipathy towards sanctuary-seeking communities, based on a perceived unequal resource allocation discussed in this paper, echoes previous studies, which have suggested that such experiences are often associated with a preference for right-wing populist parties, perceived as offering an alternative political approach (Wilterdink 2017). Within these contexts, many in marginalised communities face two possibilities as follows: The assumption of subordination and acceptance of powerlessness in one's weakened social position (Atkinson 2025) or identifying with an alternative political field that is felt to reflect one's values. In Western democratic societies, this is often illustrated

in the support of populist parties, which further pose a threat to community cohesion (Wilterdink 2017).

4.1 | A Social Ecological Model of Inclusion and Community Cohesion

Central to these findings is the socioecological interpretation of inclusion and community cohesion (Figure 1), developed inductively from aforementioned findings (i.e., barriers; and creative space to foster integration). The model demonstrates that inclusion is not solely an individual responsibility but is shaped by interconnected levels of influence as follows: individual, community/organisational and policy. The individual barriers listed below were influenced by community and wider policy factors. However, within the context of this report, we have referred to how these were felt to impact on the individual: Language and health challenges emerged as barriers; stigma and discrimination and misinformation were located at the community level; while systemic issues such as asylum policy, access to education and poverty reflected structural barriers.

Through conventional content analysis, a social-ecological model of inclusion and community cohesion was developed, mapping the societal levels to which each barrier corresponded (see image). This diagram illustrates how integration is shaped not only by the actions of sanctuary-seeking individuals but also by wider relational, institutional and policy contexts. For example, language and health challenges emerged as individual-level barriers; stigma, discrimination and misinformation were located at the community level, while systemic issues such as asylum policy and access to education reflected wider systemic barriers.

This multi-level approach aligns with the recommendations of the BELONG Network in the United Kingdom (Belong 2025), which emphasised the need for greater efforts to build community strength and cohesion across contexts. Applying this socioecological model suggests that interventions must extend beyond the individual level and address the structural causes of these crises, including inequalities in access to housing, education, healthcare and employment. A social ecological approach has been previously applied to understand women's health (Hawkins et al. 2021), child and adolescent mental health (Scharpf et al. 2021), and barriers to mental health care (Dumke et al. 2024), as well as economic integration (Linjeau et al. 2025). This study was one of the first explicit applications of this framework to sanctuary seeker inclusion and community cohesion, extending its relevance into migration and inclusion research. The presentation of a multi-dimensional approach to inclusion and community cohesion acknowledges the individual, community and structural levels on which it operates. The novel contribution of this theory was data-driven and focused on inclusion rather than integration. This original multifaceted contribution to the academic literature influencing community cohesion, building on approaches using intergroup contact and social identity in sanctuary-seeking communities (Ballentyne et al. 2021; Destro et al. 2024; Firat and Ataca 2022; Ünver et al. 2022).

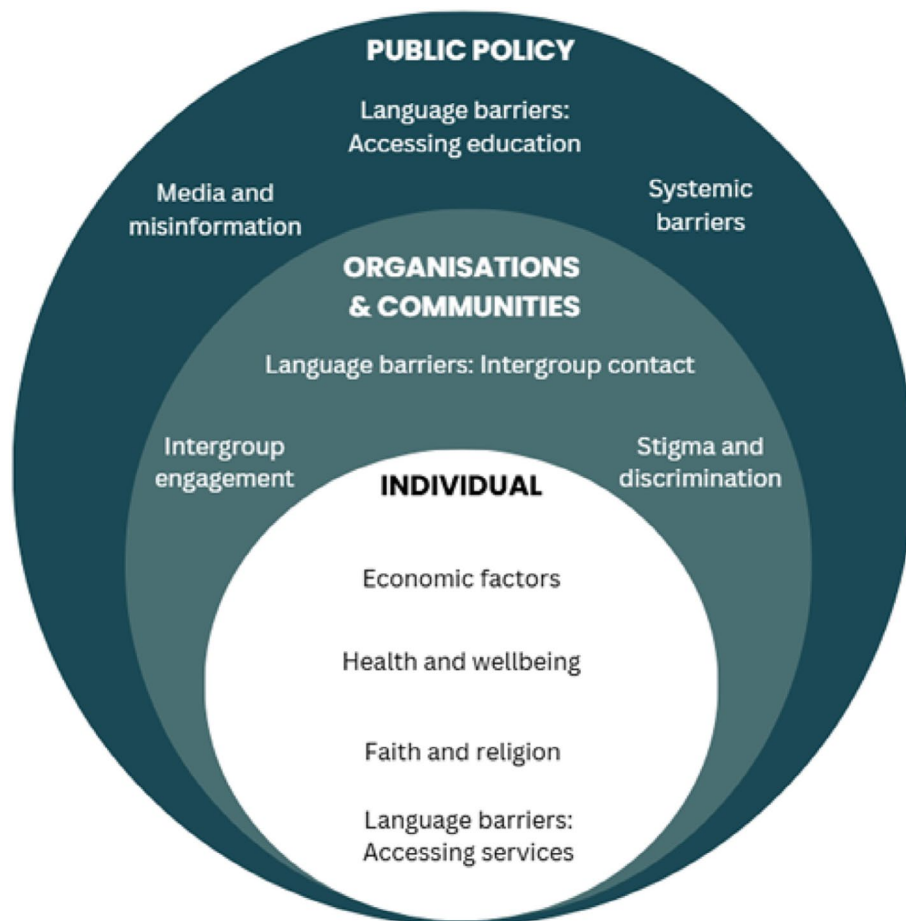


FIGURE 1 | A social ecological model of inclusion and community cohesion.

4.2 | Recommendations

Drawing on participants' insights, we offer several recommendations for creating inclusive, creative spaces that foster community cohesion. These findings are primarily situated within the United Kingdom 'left behind' communities' content, but we argue that a multiple-level approach, appreciating the lived experiences (and perceived inclusion and exclusion) of all community members, can be applied across diverse contexts. Recognising the experience of economic hardship and the anger and discontent of left-behind communities can help those who feel angry and unheard feel valued and heard.

In practice, we recommend ensuring the focus is on a shared purpose that brings diverse communities together to work on a project. While doing so, understand that trust needs to be built over time, both with the creative practitioners and institutions involved, and also between the communities. This includes a person-centred approach that avoids assumptions and generalisations about communities and appreciates intra-cultural dynamics that may impact participation. Secondly, alongside professional networks, collaboration and partnerships, the development of any inclusive creative space should be co-produced by the communities it seeks to benefit.

Finally, any intervention must incorporate a trauma-informed approach to sharing lived experiences. Such an approach must appreciate the diversity of trauma within the different

communities and the differing cultural beliefs and values concerning mental health and emotional wellbeing. Using non-directive creative expressions, trauma may be expressed through a medium that promotes autonomy and agency. These findings support previous studies highlighting the wellbeing benefit of art-based psychological interventions when supporting those with experience of trauma (Heijman et al. 2024). These activities can be woven into existing provision, allowing trauma to be shared when and if any individual wishes to share. What must be consistent across any implementation is a culturally sensitive approach which provides psychological support to those sharing stories of trauma.

Our research highlighted the multidimensional narrative of inclusive spaces, underscoring the need for policy and practice interventions at multiple levels (individual, community and systemic). Our recommendations advocate for moving beyond an approach that focuses solely on intergroup contact. Authors have previously highlighted the critical need to adopt a policy stance that recognises the importance of intersecting identities and the lived experiences of all community members, and that appreciates the social realities of both local and sanctuary-seeking communities (Wilson et al. 2025). Given the magnitude of the issue of community cohesion in the United Kingdom, with a body of policy literature (Khan 2024) along with independent (The Independent Commission on Community and Cohesion, n.d.; Together Coalition, n.d.) and government bodies (Community Cohesion Unit—Ministry of

Housing, Communities and Local Government) seeking to promote integration, the following recommendations pertain specifically to the application of creative approaches in response to the multifaceted nature of inclusion and community cohesion.

Inclusive governance is understood as a means of providing all stakeholders with opportunities to participate in policy development on issues which impact on their lives (Andrew-Amofah et al. 2022) and creative methods have been applied within the field of participatory governance (Chanteloup et al. 2025; Hinrichs and Johnston 2020). In the United Kingdom, the Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill (UK Parliament 2025a) proposed to provide communities with tools to shape their local areas. At present, the Bill focuses on the role of Devolution and the position of the Mayor in challenging the traditional power structure. This leaves a gap concerning community empowerment, particularly for those who feel most distant from decision-making at the local government level.

Creative methods can enable inclusive governance, where participatory democratic methods facilitate the development of systems that impact the lives of both local and sanctuary-seeking communities, contributing to the literature advocating for inclusive governance practice (Holbrook 2020; Milner et al. 2022). Welfare systems, housing and education are particularly contentious policy areas, where inclusive strategies would be particularly beneficial in creating space for all individual voices to be heard. Creative methods can minimise language barriers and provide alternative means of expression.

Local authorities have a critical role in facilitating such an approach, which involves partnering with grassroots community organisations, local authorities, central government, statutory services and members of local and sanctuary-seeking communities. By providing an accessible, co-productive space, traditional power structures may be challenged, offering an alternative, inclusive platform that allows voices from both communities to be heard. This promotes not only positive emotional wellbeing and a sense of purpose, but also a sense of belonging and community cohesion.

The 'Community Cohesion and Resilience Programme' (CCRP), which is part of the UK Government Resilience Action Plan (UK Parliament 2025b), offer funding to VCFS organisations in local areas to deliver projects that build community relationships and work to prevent and combat harmful narratives, building on the literature on the value of shared spaces (Mateo-Babiano and Fong 2024; Qi et al. 2024). Our findings demonstrate that creative expression can serve as a powerful tool for bringing diverse groups together around a shared purpose, a component currently lacking in this policy approach. This contributes to an understanding of how textiles can serve as a vehicle for communicating memory and lived experience (Hunt 2014).

BRIDGE also demonstrated the value of these shared creative spaces in capacity building. These findings resonate with the United Nations' mission in 'promoting the inclusion of migrants and refugees that recognises their contribution to development' (UNITAR, n.d.). It is recommended that funding be allocated to third-sector organisations that work with local and

sanctuary-seeking communities to co-produce inclusive spaces that bring diverse communities together to engage in creative, capacity-building activities.

4.3 | Limitations and Future Research

While the findings offer valuable insights, they are primarily descriptive with limited critical engagement with the wider structural and oppressive factors that shape the lived experiences of both local and sanctuary-seeking communities. This is due to the short-term nature of data collection. A more nuanced understanding of these intersecting social identities could further inform interventions that promote inclusion and community cohesion amongst diverse communities.

Researcher positionality was reflexively discussed within research team meetings throughout the research, and the authors acknowledge the potential influence of unconscious bias on the research process, analysis and interpretation of data. We seek to highlight the importance of reflexive practice within community research, particularly with reference to positionality and the distribution of power within participatory research (Baz 2023; Crean 2020; Dew et al. 2019; Wilson et al. 2025).

The creative methods and findings around creative expression indicate the potential for creativity to promote inclusion and community cohesion. Further research is needed to explore the application of various techniques for creating shared spaces that foster connection, build capacity and preserve cultural heritage. These are not mutually exclusive; they are interrelated and co-dependent. However, all have the potential to mitigate language barriers, reduce anxiety and stigma in both groups, and foster empathy and understanding.

5 | Conclusions

Increased community tension between marginalised and diverse groups has been widely documented, and the research described in this paper indicates the potential for creative approaches to promote inclusion and community cohesion. Bringing both communities together to develop capacity through creative expression has the potential to benefit the three dimensions presented through a socioecological lens. This shift requires moving beyond individualised interventions towards a multi-dimensional approach grounded in social and economic justice and regenerative practice.

Ethics Statement

The research cited in this paper has received approval from the University of Lancashire Ethics Committee (BAHSS2 01284).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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