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Community Cohesion

Lenses of Life: Bridging Communities
Through Photography (2025 Report)

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About Empowerment Charity

Empowerment is a Blackpool based charity with a long-term commitment to supporting our local communities and improving lives. At its heart, Empowerment is about making sure that people feel listened to, respected, and supported no matter who they are or where they come from.

We do not deliver services to people, we work alongside them. Our belief is simple: you empower yourself, with encouragement and support from us. Whether it's through advocacy, co-production, or tackling social challenges such as domestic abuse, isolation, or mental ill health, our mission is to stand with people so they can bring about real and positive change in their own lives and in their community.



Empowerment is more than an organisation, it's a community of people who believe that change is possible when we are united. We are local, rooted in Blackpool and the Fylde Coast, and proud of it. We welcome everyone, celebrate diversity, and believe in collaboration over competition. We take risks when needed, admit when we get things wrong, and always strive to do better.

Empowerment is about voices being heard, lives being changed, and communities being strengthened. We are small and local, but our impact is big because together, with the people of Blackpool and the Fylde Coast, we are creating a kinder, fairer, and more hopeful future.

Our values



Working with
Kindness



Working for
Justice



Working towards
Equality for **everyone**



We are
Human

Introduction

Although the 2024 riots impacted the entire Blackpool community, statistics from PREVENT suggest that the majority of referrals received in 2020 were for **White British males**, with 72% under the age of 30. The combination of unemployment, low educational attainment, and poor mental health outcomes increases **vulnerability to marginalisation**, and in some cases, susceptibility to **radicalisation**. These underlying issues highlight the importance of offering spaces for our **local community** to feel heard, understood, and connected.

Refugees and **asylum seekers** face their own unique **challenges** when integrating into Blackpool life. Nationally, the number of people claiming asylum has more than doubled since 2021 (HM Government, 2024), and **Blackpool** has become a key **settlement area** for individuals fleeing conflict. Many of these individuals experience **language barriers**, discrimination, and **social isolation**. Misinformation and lack of direct interaction between local residents and resettled communities, have at times, fuelled **misunderstanding** and **division**. Locally, there is a need to ensure this community has a voice, is understood, and given the opportunity to build and grow **local relationships**.

As a result, '**Lenses of Life: Bridging Communities through Photography**', was a community cohesion project led by **Empowerment Charity** and funded by Blackpool Council, designed to facilitate dialogue, **empathy**, and understanding between **diverse communities** in Blackpool. This responded directly to the social tensions and divisions that followed the 2024 public disorder, which had a significant impact on the town.



This project aimed to connect these two demographic groups through the use of **Photovoice**, a participatory engagement method that empowers individuals to express their experiences through **photography** and **storytelling**. By facilitating creative collaboration, the project supported **community cohesion** in Blackpool by promoting a shared understanding and appreciation of **different backgrounds**, working towards building **positive relationships** and stronger feelings of **belonging**.

Our Goals and Objectives

To provide participants with new creative skills, confidence, and a platform to express their perspectives.

To reduce stigma, misunderstanding, and social isolation within our local community.

To strengthen relationships between young White British males and asylum seekers/refugees through a shared creative activity.

To encourage dialogue and empathy between residents with differing backgrounds and experiences.

To contribute to long-term community cohesion in Blackpool by encouraging respect, inclusion, and belonging.



Methodology

Research Design

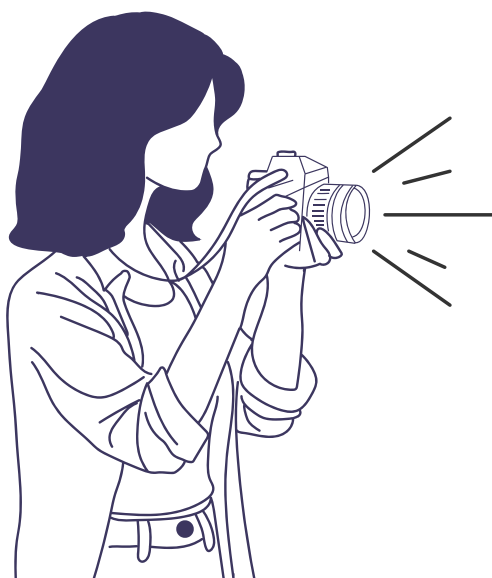
The 'Lenses of Life: Bridging Communities through Photography' project utilised Photovoice, a participatory research method. This method combines photography with storytelling, used to encourage community change and advocate for social justice. This approach emphasises collaboration, creativity, and empowerment, enabling participants to document their lived experiences visually and share personal narratives that reflect their own identities.

Participants and Sampling

Our aim was to recruit ten White British men and ten asylum seekers/refugees to take part in the project, offering their own valuable insights via Photovoice. For the White British male cohort, we worked closely with Elliot's Place and Engage 4 Change, with facilitation support from the Elliot's Place Project Officer. Through this partnership, we engaged individuals already involved in these initiatives, including local men residing in the Claremont, Talbot, Brunswick, and Bloomfield wards.

For the refugee and asylum seeker cohort, we conducted eight engagement visits to the Metropole Hotel, currently used to accommodate asylum seekers in Blackpool. These visits allowed us to speak directly with residents, promote the project, and gather expressions of interest, documenting any accessibility requirements and the preferred language choice. Engagement was further supported by Healthwatch Blackpool's Ukrainian Project Engagement Officer, who helped to facilitate connections and conversations with participants.

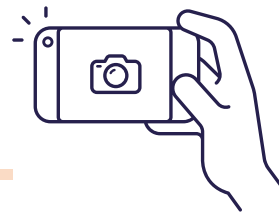
A total of twenty participants were initially recruited: ten White British males (aged 18 and over) and ten asylum seekers/refugees. Recruitment prioritised voluntary participation and informed consent, with translated materials and interpreters provided throughout the process.



A poster for 'Lenses of Life PHOTOGRAPHY SESSIONS'. At the top right is the logo for 'Empowerment Charity Blackpool Council'. The title 'Lenses of Life' is in large, bold letters, with 'PHOTOGRAPHY SESSIONS' below it. A small illustration of a camera is to the right. Below the title is the question: 'Are you passionate about storytelling, creativity, or simply curious to try something new?'. The text continues: 'We're inviting 20 individuals to take part in an exciting photography project that captures the real experiences, emotions, and everyday moments of life in Blackpool.' A list of bullet points follows: '• Beginner friendly', '• Workshops and guided sessions', '• Learn to tell your story through photos', '• Have your photos displayed at a public exhibition', and '• No equipment required'. Below the list is a small illustration of a camera. At the bottom, it says 'Join us at: Central Library, Queen Street, Blackpool FY1 1PX, 10:30am - 12:30pm, 10th June / 17th June / 24th June / 1st July. All are welcome.' To the right of this text is a QR code and a 'Sign up here' link. At the bottom left of the poster, it says 'All languages welcome with translations available on request.'



Limitations



Whilst the project provided valuable insights, several limitations should be noted. Firstly, participant retention proved to be a challenge. Some participants chose to no longer participate in the project due to personal commitments and changing circumstances, affecting the continuity of group discussions and the diversity of perspectives. Within the White British male cohort, those who expressed an interest sometimes opted not to take part in the project upon learning of the theme, demonstrating the some underlying tensions still present locally.

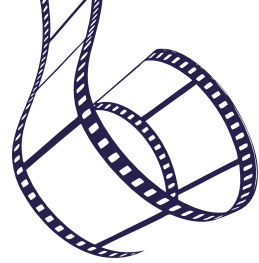
Additionally, the asylum seeker and refugee cohort was predominantly Ukrainian, which limited the generalisability of findings to other refugee or asylum seekers in Blackpool. Despite six visits to the Metropole Hotel and the employment of an Arabic translator, engagement among asylum seekers and refugees remained inconsistent. We noted there was a high turnover of participants due to relocation and the instability many faced within their personal lives. These factors made it difficult for some participants to sustain involvement or build ongoing relationships within the group.

Finally, as participation was self-selected, there may have been a bias towards individuals who were more confident, motivated, or interested in photography and storytelling. This may have influenced the types of experiences and insights shared.

Despite these limitations, the project successfully created meaningful engagement, promoting understanding between communities, and generating valuable insights to inform future participatory arts and social integration initiatives.



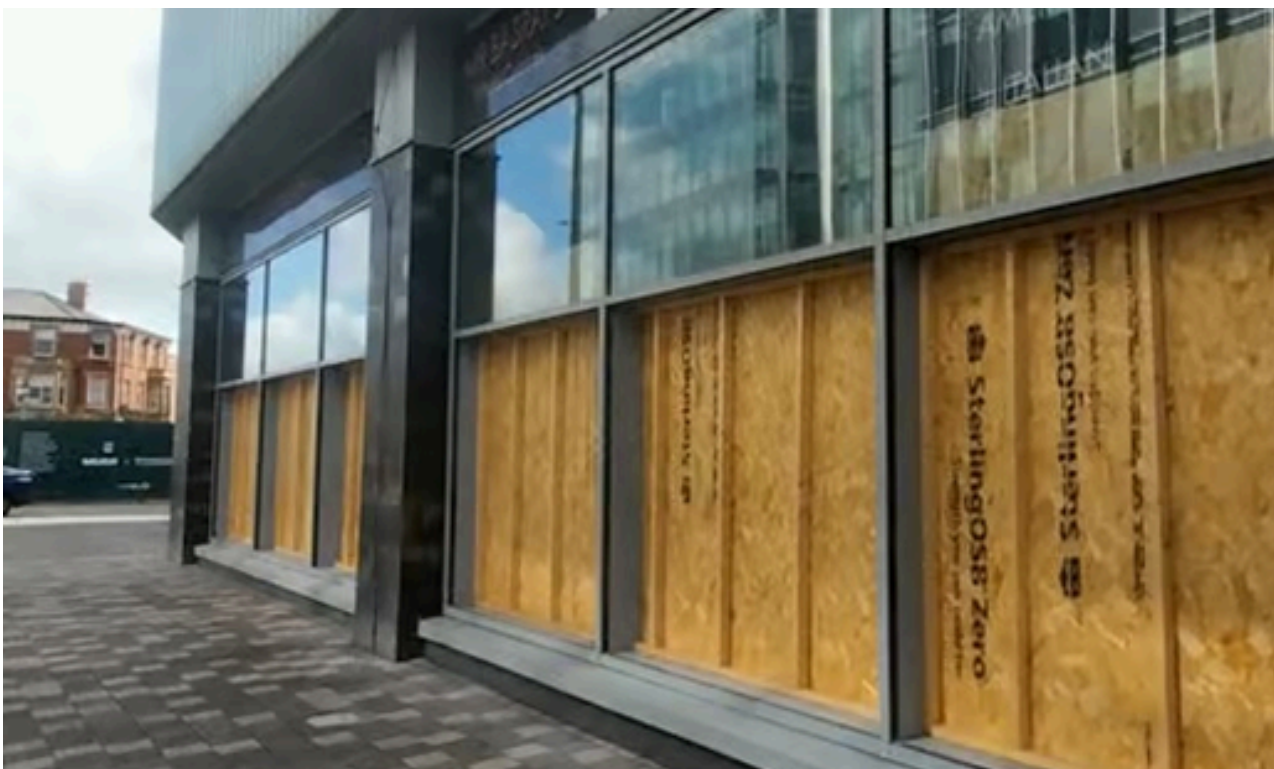
Photography Workshops



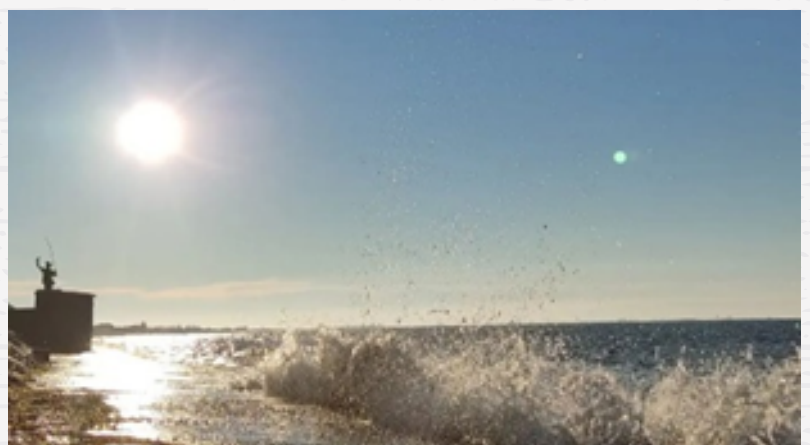
Through workshops, all participants received an introduction to the project, training regarding ethical photography practice, an insight into basic photography skills, and the expectations of their involvement. Throughout the project, facilitators created a safe space, with sessions designed to encourage mutual respect, open communication, and creativity. The photography workshops were broken down as follows –

Session 1: What we are doing and why

- We explored the context of 2024 and the riots, both locally and nationally, and discussed shared experiences.
- Facilitators shared their own experiences and photos that held meaning for them, helping to build connections and highlight lived experiences.
- Local protests were discussed, highlighting the impact this had on our town and the local community.
- Pictures of communities coming together to tidy up after the riots were then shared, demonstrating that there is still a strong community that cares passionately.
- At the end of each session, we set a task for each member: capture an image that represents a theme. The first theme was **'Happy'**.



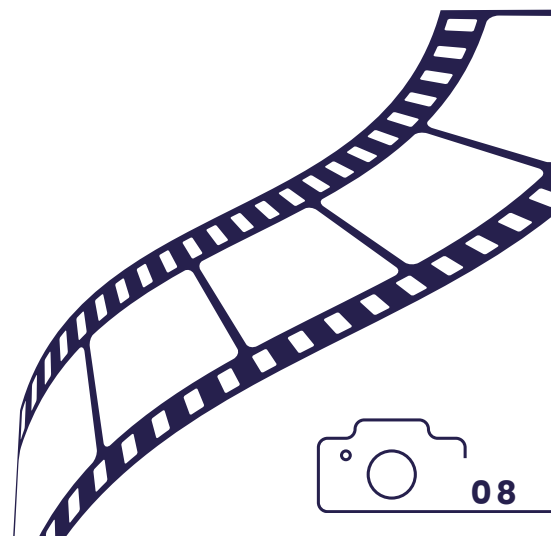
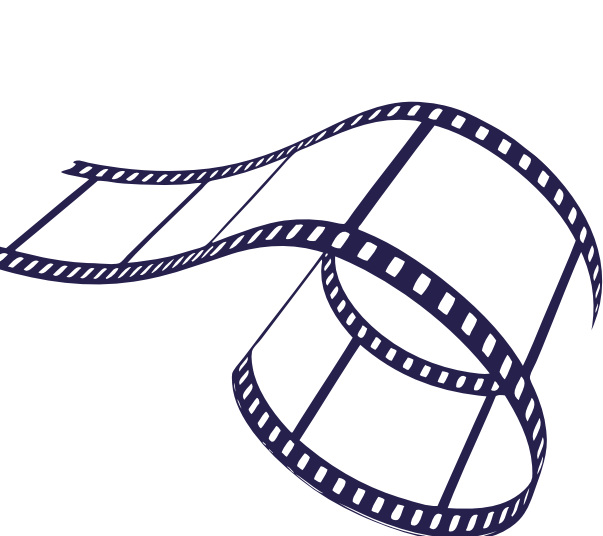
Theme 1: **HAPPY**



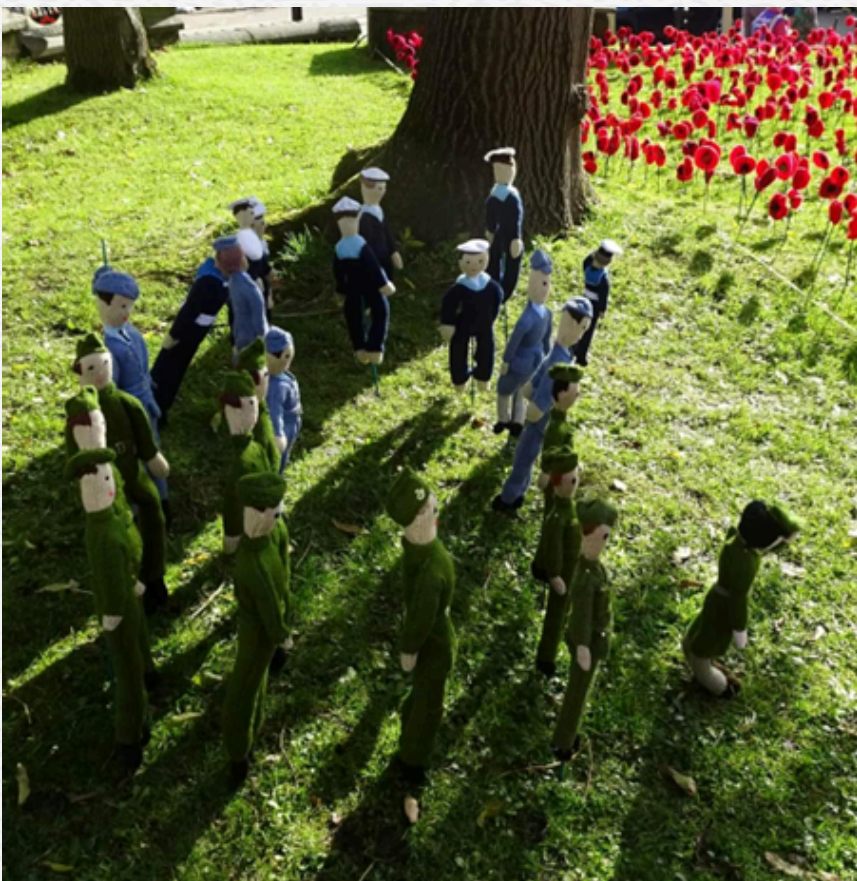
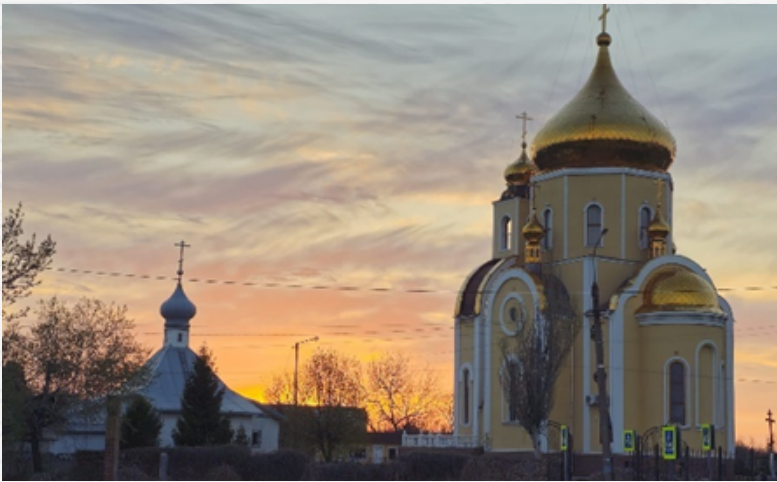
Photography Workshops

Session 2: Introduction to Photovoice Methodology

- We explained how Photovoice works: participants create messages through the images they take, reflecting their own viewpoints.
- We emphasised the importance of images having a personal meaning.
- Each week, we reviewed photos and discussed these messages as a group, then set the next theme.
- After reviewing the 'Happy' images, individuals were impressed with the creativity shown, and shared their thoughts behind their chosen photo.
- Some reflected on childhood, others on the beauty of nature.
- The next theme was **'Home'**.



Theme 2: HOME



Photography Workshops

Session 3: Ethical Considerations in Participatory Photography

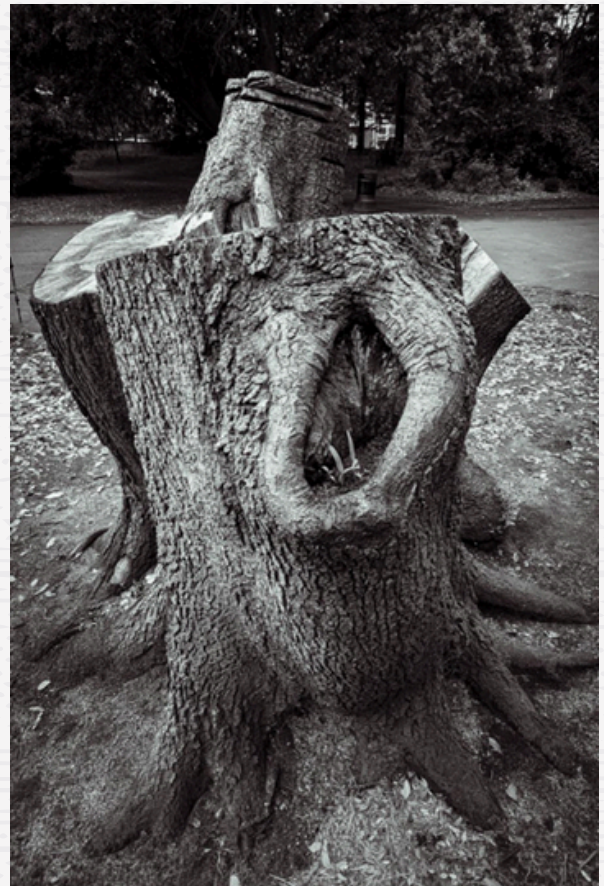
- We discussed that participatory photography is powerful but requires safety and respect.
- Participants were educated that informed consent is essential, including an information sheet, signed consent form, and clarity on photo use.
- We emphasised the need for ethical practice by respecting privacy, avoiding harm, and showing photos to the individual after taking them.
- We decided that a co-productive approach lets residents guide outcomes, choose themes, and share ownership.
- We recognised that ethical photography builds understanding and allows for honest dialogue.

Session 4: Basic Photography Skills

- Participants were taught how to use camera equipment, focusing on framing, guiding lines, and the rule of thirds.
- We explored how these techniques create visual stories and enhance photography skills.
- The final theme set was **'Sad'**.



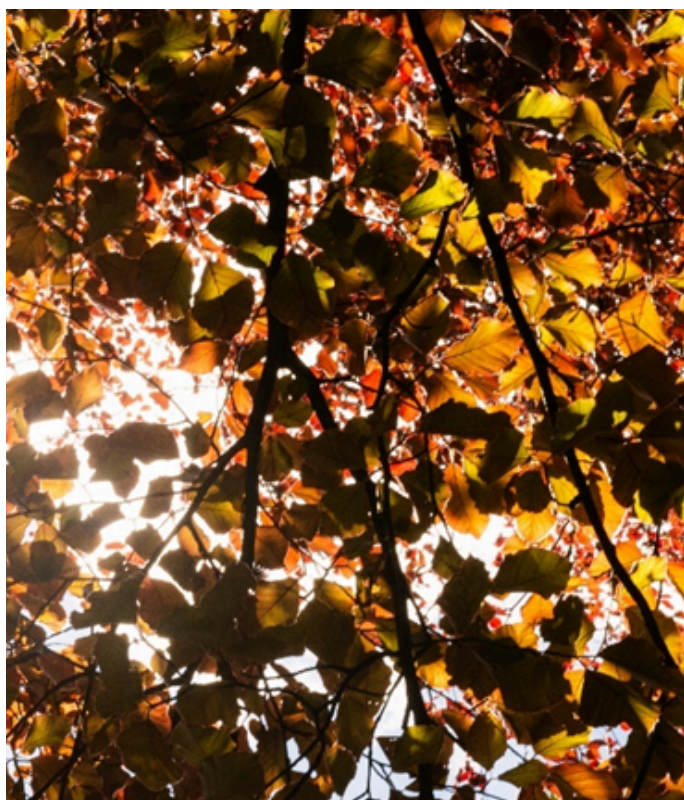
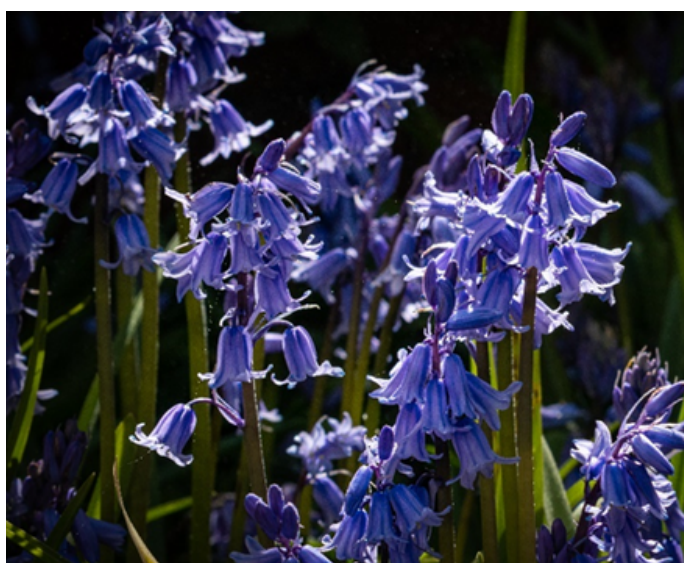
Theme 3: SAD



Guided Walks

Over a six month period, we organised nine guided photo walks around Blackpool. Participants captured images, discussed their views and wellbeing, and explored how they wanted to represent their experiences through photography. We also aimed to capture different seasons and weather conditions. We began each walk by discussing the previous images taken, then exploring different areas of our chosen location. Locations included:

Stanley Park



Guided Walks

Blackpool Promenade (three walks)

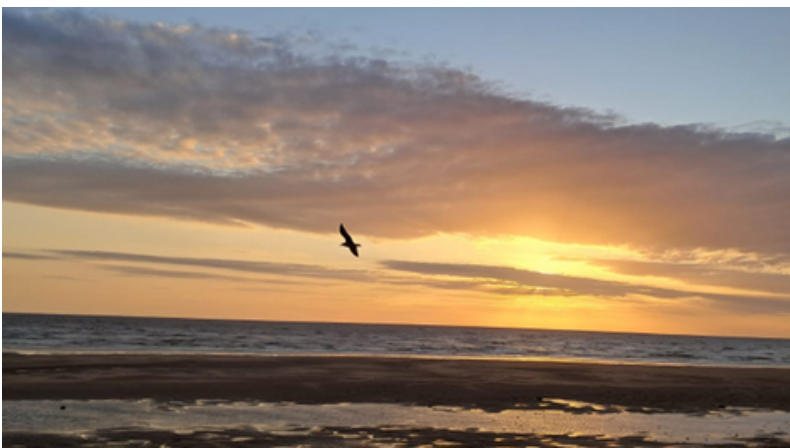
Including Bispham, Blackpool, and Anchorholme, capturing iconic sights and local perspectives.



Guided Walks

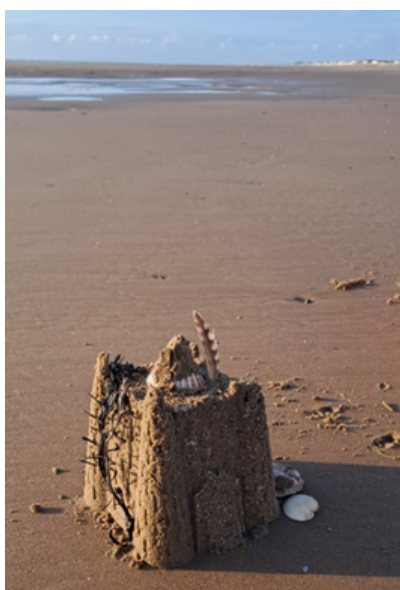
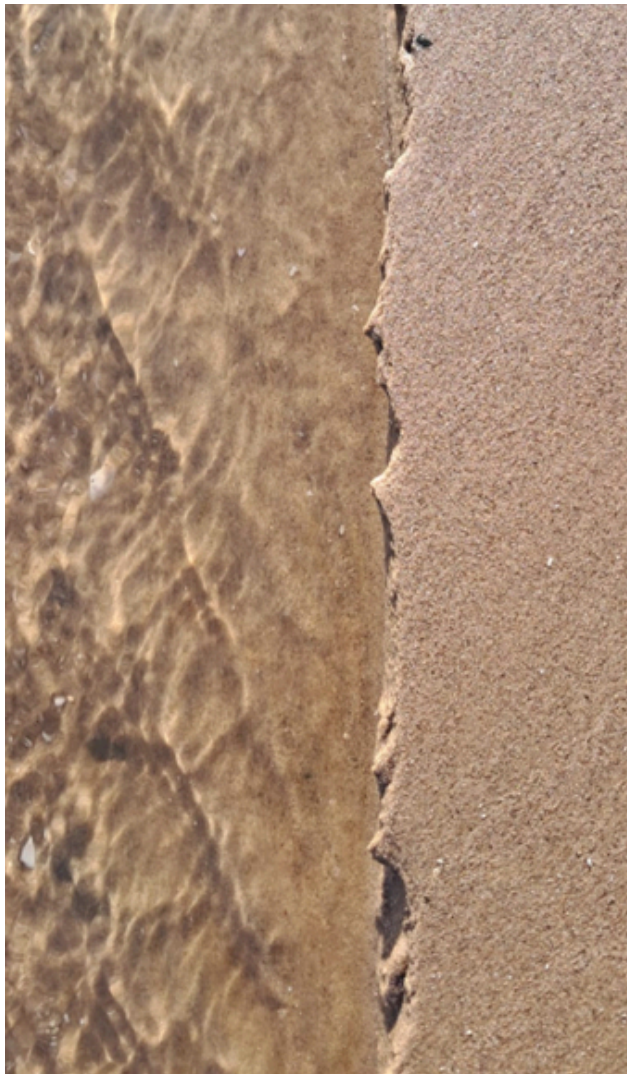
The beach (three walks)

This was a common favourite for participants. For refugees and asylum seekers, the sea reminded them of home towns, and for locals, this represented the cold wind and the feeling of being out in nature.



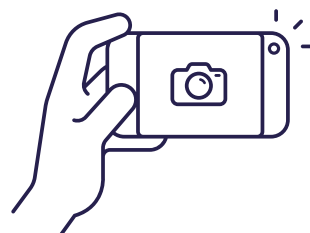
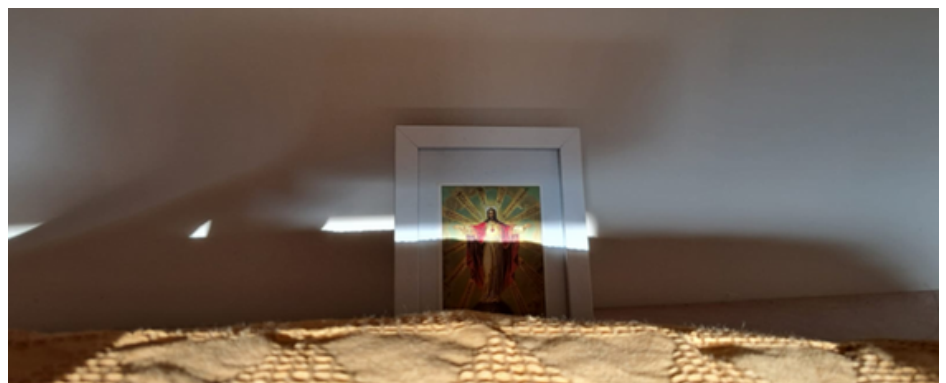
Guided Walks

The beach

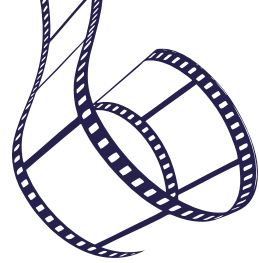


Free Time Photography

Alongside the formal photography workshops, we encouraged participants to share additional photos that held personal meaning, whether nostalgic pictures, images of home from another country, or photos that conveyed a message they wanted to share.



Discussion Forums & Image Curation



Throughout the project, we held open discussions about the photographs taken, sharing differing viewpoints and constructive feedback via various methods:

- Face to face sessions
- WhatsApp group discussions

Together, we explored emerging themes from the photos and narratives from each week, asking participants to identify common themes. Whilst the original intention was to examine the impact of the riots, discussions evolved into broader themes of connection, resilience, and belonging. Participants collaboratively selected themes in a co-productive way, ensuring the final outcomes reflected what mattered most to them and the group as a collective.

Participants selected their best images, adding quotes explaining their significance, and writing short biographies for display. All images were curated for the final exhibition.

- Common themes were identified across both groups.
- Selected images and quotes were selected to feature in a zine.



Final Exhibition

The final exhibition took place at the Empowerment Base in December 2025, showcasing the selection of photographs taken throughout the project. Participants selected their chosen images for public display, with each cohort working together to agree on common themes. Promotional materials were developed to raise awareness of the exhibition and invite attendees.

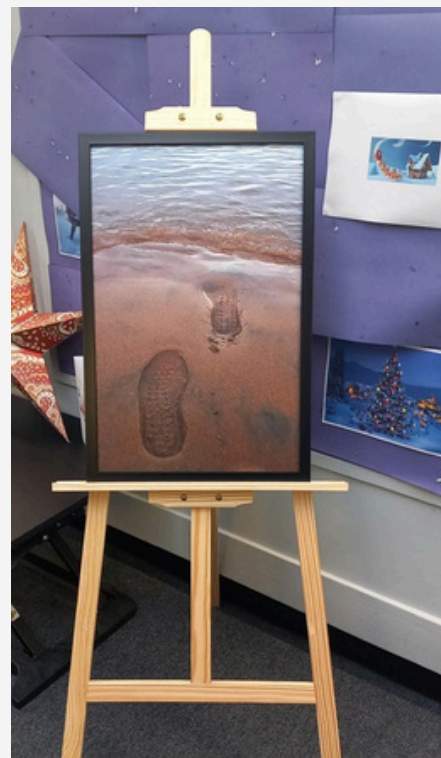
The exhibition provided an opportunity for participants to reflect on their creative journeys and celebrate their achievements in a public setting. Displaying the work within the Empowerment Base created a familiar and supportive environment, encouraging participants to confidently share their perspectives with a wider audience. The event was well attended by participants, partner organisations, and members of the local community.

To assess the impact of the project, feedback forms were created for both exhibition visitors and project participants, allowing for evaluation through surveys and personal reflections. Feedback collected from visitors indicated that the exhibition successfully challenged perceptions and prompted meaningful conversations. Participant feedback reflected increased self-confidence, creative skills development, and a strong sense of pride in contributing to a professional quality public exhibition. The evaluation findings will inform any future projects and support the continued development of participatory arts programmes in Blackpool.





OUR GALLERY





OUR GALLERY





OUR GALLERY





OUR GALLERY



Exhibition Feedback

Lenses Of Life Feedback  Empowerment Charity

Your name: _____

Please offer your feedback on the Artwork you have seen today whether this is your favorite picture or and overview. all comments are welcome

nice pictures, frames + stands.
Layout and nice food.

Lenses Of Life Feedback  Empowerment Charity

Your name: _____

Please offer your feedback on the Artwork you have seen today whether this is your favorite picture or and overview. all comments are welcome

Really good - Great to
See all this wonderful
work showcased

Lenses Of Life Feedback  Empowerment Charity

Your name: _____

Please offer your feedback on the Artwork you have seen today whether this is your favorite picture or and overview. all comments are welcome

I liked all the pictures,
very inspiring. I particularly
liked the black & white ones.
good display. Thank you!

Lenses Of Life Feedback  Empowerment Charity

Your name: _____

Please offer your feedback on the Artwork you have seen today whether this is your favorite picture or and overview. all comments are welcome

Thank-you for the invite. It's been
great to talk with other like-minded
people. It's a very supportive and friendly
environment. Thanks for the lunch.
😊

Lenses Of Life Feedback  Empowerment Charity

Your name: _____

Please offer your feedback on the Artwork you have seen today whether this is your favorite picture or and overview. all comments are welcome

LOVELY EVENT THAT BRINGS PEOPLE TOGETHER.
ART IS SO POWERFUL AND EVOKES MUCH
FEELING AND EMOTION. I WOULD LOVE TO SEE
MORE OF THESE EVENTS

Lenses Of Life Feedback  Empowerment Charity

Your name: _____

Please offer your feedback on the Artwork you have seen today whether this is your favorite picture or and overview. all comments are welcome

I love the footprints on the beach,
+ the seagulls on the beach.
All the photos inspire me to be
more creative, they capture the
feelings of everyone so well +
they were presented beautifully
round the building. Thank
you.

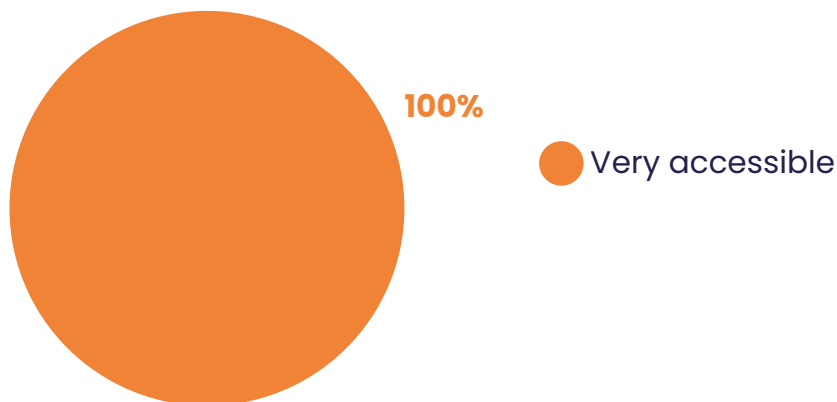


Participant Feedback

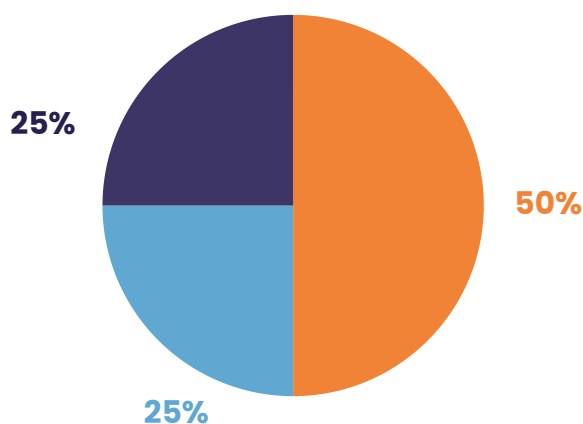
Upon completion of the project, participants were asked to complete a short feedback form to share their learning. This form aimed to gather insights in relation to the project's impact, skill development, accessibility, personal meaning for those who took part, community engagement, and whether this project helped to build stronger relationships amongst different communities.



How accessible did you find the project materials and communication, if English is not your first language?

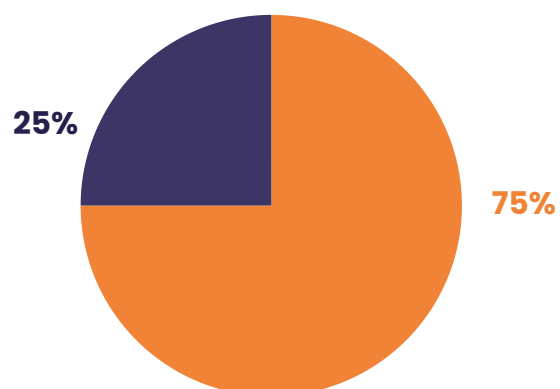


Before this project, how confident were you in using a camera or taking photos?



- Extremely confident
- Somewhat confident
- Somewhat not confident

After this project, how confident do you feel in using a camera or taking photos?

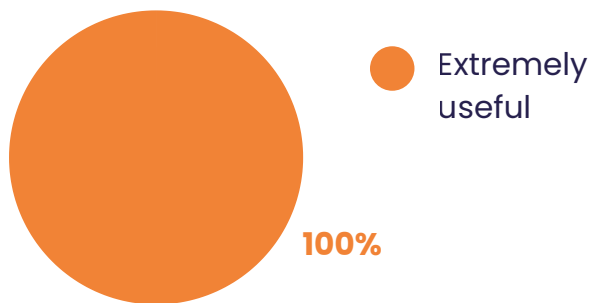


- Extremely confident
- Somewhat confident

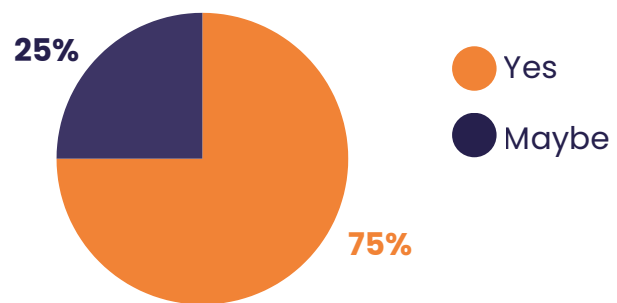


Participant Feedback

How useful did you find the workshops and guidance provided by facilitators?



Did the photovoice project help you express your experiences and perspectives of living in Blackpool?



What new photography or storytelling skills do you feel you have learnt during this project?

"Each detail is important. Sometimes it is better to focus on background. To see the beauty without perfection."

"I really enjoyed taking part in the Lenses of Life project. Our coach was amazing – he explained everything clearly and always supported us. I liked the tasks he gave us because they helped me understand photography better. Thanks to this project, I created my own photo portfolio and visited interesting places during the excursions. It was a great experience for me."

"Learnt more on how to take a picture, instead of just point and shooting."

"I really enjoyed being part of the Lenses of Life project. Our coach was friendly, clear, and supportive. I liked the creative tasks, using real cameras, and the inspiring excursions and meetings. I'm very happy I joined – it was a great experience."

What did taking part in this project mean to you personally?

"It helped me grow, learn new skills, and feel more confident with photography. I enjoyed working with others, trying new things, and discovering what I can do. It was a meaningful and inspiring experience for me."

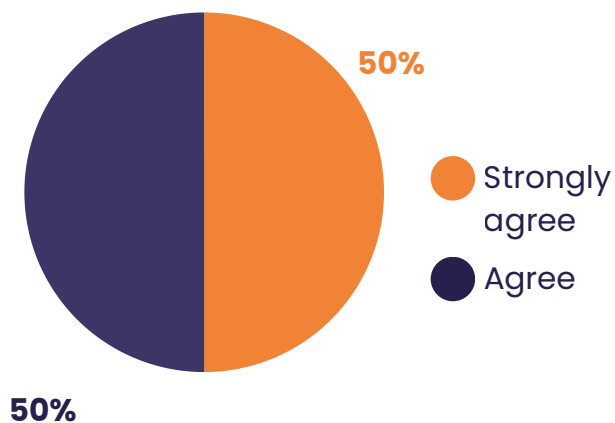
"Experience in photography. Sharing my precious experiences. To be more skilled in photography."

"Increase confidence."

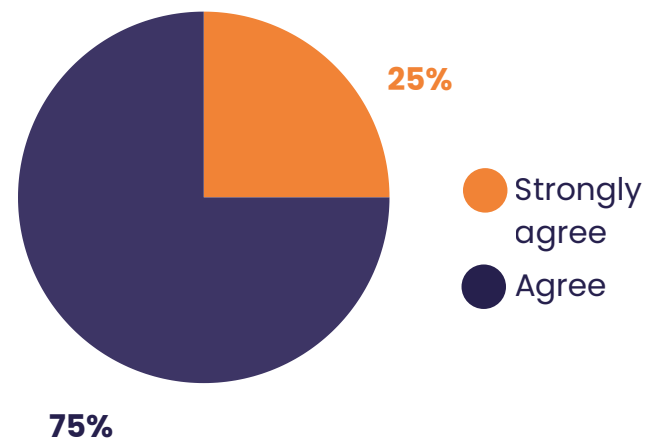
"This project helped me discover new interests and express myself through photography. I felt supported and motivated to keep learning, and it gave me confidence to try new things. It was a truly special experience for me."

Participant Feedback

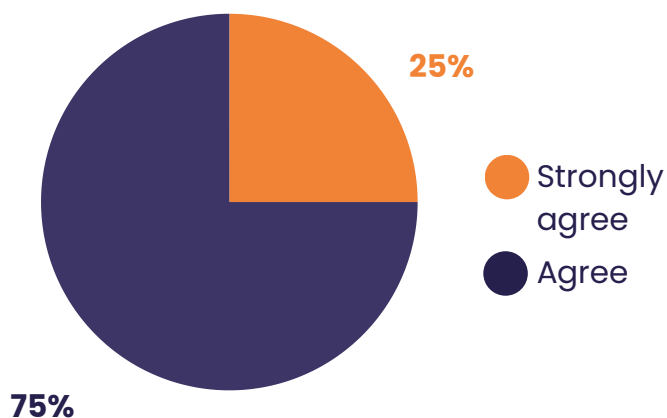
Did the group discussions and photo sharing sessions help you to understand the experiences of others from different backgrounds?



Do you feel this project helped to build empathy and understanding between different groups in Blackpool?



To what extent did the exhibition help you understand different perspectives and experiences within Blackpool's communities?



Please provide any further feedback:

"I really enjoyed the sessions and learned a lot. The coach made the experience fun, clear, and inspiring."

"Thank you so much for this opportunity to be part of this project."

"Everything was well organised, and I felt supported throughout the whole project. Thank you for this great opportunity."



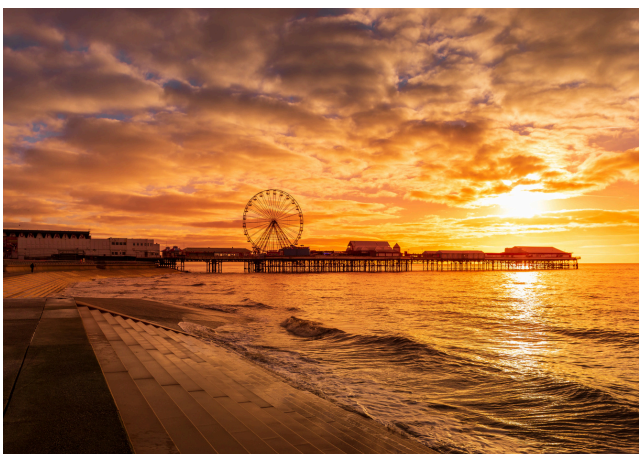
Our Learning

Areas to celebrate:

- The project offered an excellent opportunity to bring together different demographic groups. This helped challenge assumptions and break down negative stereotypes.
- The photo walks created a space whereby the project naturally shifted away from focusing on the riots, but rather participants were unified in exploring what matters most to them all.
- Throughout project, participants shared experiences and built connections, allowing new friendships to be created and a different perspective to be seen. There were common themes and challenges faced by both groups, such as social isolation, loneliness, economic pressures and lack of opportunity. This project created a shared understanding, allowing the two cohorts to learn together through their individual experiences.
- The overall quality of the photographs taken was exceptional, and participants demonstrated significant growth in technical skills and creativity, upskilling themselves in the process.

Areas for development:

- Engagement with asylum seekers at the Metropole Hotel was challenging. Many had recently arrived and wanted time to settle, learn English, and develop skills before participating. By the time they felt ready, some had been relocated to other parts of the country.
- Engagement of White British men was mixed. Some withdrew after learning the project's theme, while others embraced the opportunity to meet people from different cultures.

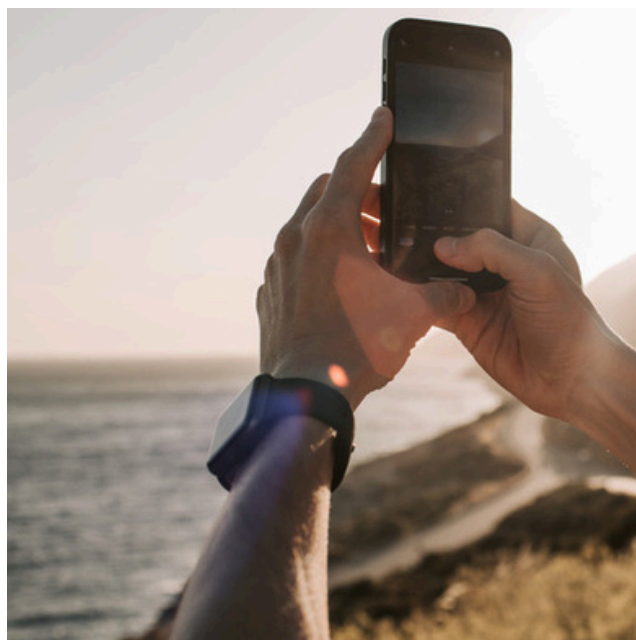




Thank You!

This project was built on the voices, experiences, and creativity of the people who took part. It reflects the real challenges and hopes of individuals living in Blackpool, and highlights the power of connection, empathy, and dialogue to bring communities together. Every image, story, and reflection shared through this project has shaped our collective understanding of belonging, challenged stigma, built connections, and created opportunities for different perspectives to be heard.

Empowerment Charity would like to express heartfelt thanks to all participants who shared their perspectives with honesty and courage. Your willingness to open up, listen, and learn from one another has given this project its meaning and strength.





Empowerment
Charity

Blackpool Council

Get in touch to find out more:

www.empowermentcharity.org.uk

0300 32 32 100 (Option 1)

