



Building Resilience Co-design

Project Summary: Insight to Action

An Insight to Action Project – Delivered by Shift Up for
Refugee Action | October 2025 – March 2026

Supporting grassroots organisations

THE FOUR OUTCOMES

Kent Refugee Action Network *Safe Communication & Media Engagement Policy: A three-part policy supporting young people and staff to engage safely with media*

Reviving Links CIC – *Brent & Harrow Brent Welcome Toolkit for New Asylum Seekers A plain-language guide covering local services, a first-month timeline, myth-busting, and practical next steps.*

Minority Inclusion Front *UK Safe Disclosure & Support Framework A staff guidance framework using a three-pack system for safe, trauma-informed interactions with residents in asylum accommodation.*

Congolese Association of Merseyside (CAM) *CAM Communications Guide A practical 'capture once, use many times' communications system helping small community organisations communicate their work*

WHAT WAS THIS PROJECT?

A co-design and action research project supporting four grassroots and lived experience-led organisations in the migration sector to define their challenges precisely, develop practical solutions, and produce open-source resources for the wider sector.

HOW WAS IT DELIVERED?



NUMBERS



4
organisations



27
Participants



4
Resources

KEY LEARNING

- Problem-framing is the intervention, not the preparation for it
- Lived experience must lead, not just be consulted, and must be properly paid
- Co-design requires clear roles, adequate time, and honest reporting
- Scope change is normal in co-design – design for it with structured check-ins

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An Insight to Action Project

[Project Summary Report](#) | [Delivered by Shift Up for Refugee Action](#) | October 2025 – March 2026

Commissioned by	Refugee Action – Insight to Action Programme
Delivered by	Shift Up (lead consultant)
Project period	October 2025 – March 2026
Partner organisations	Reviving Links CIC (Brent/Harrow) Minority Inclusion Front UK Kent Refugee Action Network (KRAN) Congolese Association of Merseyside (CAM)
Group workshops	2 half-day sessions (4 & 7 November 2025)
Outputs	4 open-source resources co-designed with grassroots and lived experience-led organisations
Dissemination	Sharing with Insight Hub members forthcoming

1. Overview

The Building Resilience Co-design project was commissioned by Refugee Action as part of its Insight to Action programme, in direct response to findings from Insight Hub Bulletin 28 (June 2025). The bulletin identified persistent sector challenges, including racism, rising hostility, limited staff capacity, and funding pressures, and highlighted an unmet need for accessible, co-designed support around safety, resilience, and anti-racist practice.

Shift Up was appointed as lead consultant in October 2025 and worked with four grassroots and lived experience-led organisations. Each was supported through a structured action research and co-design process to move from an initial broad challenge to a clearly defined problem statement, and ultimately to a practical, open-source resource grounded in their specific context.

The four outputs produced are:

- KRAN (Kent Refugee Action Network): Safe Communication & Media Engagement Policy
- Reviving Links CIC: Brent Welcome Toolkit for New Asylum Seekers
- Minority Inclusion Front UK (MIF): Safe Disclosure & Support Framework
- CAM (Congolese Association of Merseyside): CAM Communications Guide (complete; co-design testing phase not fully delivered – see Section 3.4)

2. Approach

Shift Up adopted an action research and co-design methodology throughout. The goal was not to deliver pre-designed solutions, but to support each organisation in defining its own challenge precisely and developing a response that was realistic, testable, and grounded in lived experience.

2.1 The Action Research Cycle

The work followed a four-stage cycle with each organisation:

#	Stage	What this involved
1	Define the challenge	Mapping symptoms, causes, and consequences; distinguishing internal from external factors through structured group and individual analysis
2	Frame the problem	Writing a challenge statement using a structured template, who is affected, what is happening, why it matters, evidence, opportunities, and constraints
3	Turn problem into experiment	Surfacing key assumptions via triple whys; reframing the challenge into a testable approach and imagining what a practical outcome would look like
4	Develop and refine	Co-designing tools, policies, or frameworks through one-to-one sessions tailored to each organisation's context, with ongoing review and reflection

2.2 Group Workshops

The project began with two half-day group workshops on 4 and 7 November 2025, bringing all four organisations together. Each organisation analysed its initial challenge by identifying symptoms, causes, and consequences, and organised these as internal or external factors. Through this process, more precisely defined challenges emerged – and each organisation prioritised one area to take forward.



Key Insight

Defining the problem is itself a critical intervention. The use of 'triple whys', identifying the three core reasons underpinning each challenge, enabled organisations to move beyond surface-level concerns and design more targeted, effective responses.

2.3 Underpinning Principles

- Trauma-informed and psychologically safe facilitation throughout
- Power-sharing, organisations shaped direction, Shift Up provided structure and expertise
- Lived experience at the centre of all design decisions
- Accessibility and plain language in all outputs
- Flexibility to adapt to each organisation's capacity, context, and pace

3. Organisational Journeys and Outputs

Across all four organisations, the project demonstrated a consistent pattern: from broad initial concerns to clearly defined structural challenges, and from general ideas to practical, testable solutions.

3.1 Kent Refugee Action Network (KRAN) - Canterbury, Kent	
Original challenge focus	Refined challenge statement
How to mobilise community supporters – who already outnumber protestors 3:1 – from passive attendance to constructive action, following protests around the asylum barge.	Staff and young people in public-facing roles are exposed to safety and well-being risks due to rising hostility and frequent media engagement, without sufficient internal safeguarding, policies, or a culture of consent.
<p>Output: Safe Communication & Media Engagement Policy (Feeling Safe, Being Heard) and a video about informing young people.</p> <p>Participation: 10 young people involved at every stage of co-production, including shaping language and content. Young people suggested the video as an addition to the document.</p>	

3.2 Minority Inclusion Front UK (MIF) - Croydon, London	
Original challenge focus	Refined challenge statement
How to gather data on marginalised groups, such as LGBTQ+ refugees, for advocacy – when many are afraid to self-identify.	LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in hotel accommodation face harm due to the absence of intersectional safeguarding policies. Focus shifted through 1:1 sessions toward how staff can collect data safely and support residents ethically.
<p>Output: Safe Disclosure & Support Framework</p> <p>Participation: 5 hotel residents with lived experience contributed feedback. Refugee Council contributed to the research phase and feedback.</p>	
<p>Note: <i>MIF's focus shifted significantly following reconsideration in 1:1 sessions – from LGBTQ+ advocacy data collection to a broader framework for safe and ethical staff-resident interactions.</i></p>	

3.3 Reviving Links CIC - Brent and Harrow, London

Original challenge focus	Refined challenge statement
How to create spaces for local community and heritage connections for second-generation migrants who feel disconnected from their heritage and community life.	Newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers in Brent and Harrow face barriers accessing essential services because information is fragmented, inaccessible, and rarely available in relevant languages.
Output: Brent Welcome Toolkit for New Asylum Seekers	
Participation: ~12 current and previous service users contributed through the co-production process.	

3.4 Congolese Association of Merseyside (CAM) - Liverpool

Original challenge focus	Refined challenge statement
How to highlight and celebrate refugees' positive contributions to UK society – shifting the public narrative from crisis and need toward pride, success, and contribution.	Refugee and diaspora community contributions go unrecognised, reinforcing isolation and negative public perceptions. CAM lacks the capacity to communicate its work consistently to funders and the wider community.
Output: CAM Communications Guide (complete – co-design testing phase not delivered)	
Participation: Developed through consultation with CAM and specialist media charity IMIX	
Note: <i>The Communications Guide resource is complete. However, the co-design testing and refinement phase was not delivered as intended due to capacity challenges within the organisation and difficulties securing commitment from an external professional. This is an honest limitation of the process and a learning point for future projects (see Section 6).</i>	

4. How the Project Built Resilience

The project strengthened resilience at multiple levels across participating organisations:

Level	How resilience was built
Organisational	Development of practical tools, policies, and internal systems that embed safe and sustainable practice
Individual	Improved safety, well-being, and confidence, particularly for young people at KRAN and residents at MIF
Community	Better access to services, reduced barriers, and stronger connections to local support networks (Reviving Links)
Narrative	Stronger visibility and capacity to influence public perception, particularly for CAM and KRAN

Resilience is built through practical systems and structures, not only through support, but through strengthening agency, capacity, and self-determination within organisations and communities.

5. Participation and Engagement

Indicator	Detail
Group workshops	2 half-day sessions (Nov 4 & 7, 2025) with all 4 organisations
Partner organisations	4 grassroots / lived experience-led organisations
Young people (KRAN)	10 young people at every co-production stage, including video creation
Service users (Reviving Links)	12 current and previous service users
Residents with lived experience (MIF)	5 hotel residents; Refugee Council contributed to research and feedback
Open-source outputs	4 resources freely available for sector use
Sector dissemination	Sharing with 700+ Insight Hub members forthcoming

6. Learning and Recommendations

This section draws on Shift Up's reflections and direct feedback from participating organisations. Each learning point is paired with a recommendation for Refugee Action, future commissioners, and the sector.

PROBLEM-FRAMING AND SCOPE

What we learned	Recommendation
Defining the problem precisely is itself the intervention, not the preparation for it. Organisations often begin with broad symptoms rather than root causes. The structured problem-framing process enabled more targeted, effective solutions.	Build sufficient time for problem-framing into all co-design projects and protect it if timelines are compressed. Do not treat it as preparation; it is the work.
Scope change can and does happen in co-design; this is normal. What makes it challenging is the absence of a structured check-in to recognise and accommodate the shift in a planned way.	Expect and design for scope change. After key decisions, build in a structured check-in to assess whether anything has shifted and adjust the plan accordingly before development continues.
Organisations may assume their original suggested challenge will be the one they work on. When it changes through the process, they need more preparation time, which can push deadlines.	Be explicit in the brief and onboarding that the initial challenge may shift. Frame this as a feature of good co-design, not a problem, and build preparation time into the schedule.

ROLES AND EXPECTATIONS

What we learned	Recommendation
The role of the facilitator, to support and structure, not to deliver, was not always understood. In some cases, the lead consultant carried out work that should have been owned by the organisation.	Clarify the facilitator's role explicitly in the brief, onboarding, and participation agreement. Be clear that organisations are doing the work, with the facilitator supporting them.
It is good practice to share, clearly and upfront, the level of commitment required from participating organisations. This needs to be explicit, not assumed.	Include a commitment summary in the participation brief, specifying sessions, preparation time, and responsibilities, and ask organisations to confirm their capacity before the project begins.
Some organisations lacked clarity on what co-design principles require in practice including the expectation that participants with lived experience are involved in meaningful, compensated ways.	Provide a short co-design orientation at the start of the project for all participating organisations, covering principles, roles, and expectations, including participant remuneration.

PARTICIPATION AND POWER

What we learned	Recommendation
<p>Participants with lived experience were not paid immediately sometimes, because no budget had been allocated for this.</p>	<p>Proposals and briefs must explicitly name and ring-fence a budget for paying people with lived experience. Small organisations must be given a dedicated, accessible fund to pay participants directly, separate from delivery costs. This is non-negotiable in ethical co-design practice.</p>
<p>The most powerful outputs came from moments when lived experience was genuinely leading, rather than being consulted. Creating a structured space for unexpected contributions from participants produced results beyond the original scope.</p>	<p>Build in formal mid-point and end-point check-ins to review emerging outputs. Leave intentional space for participant-led ideas; these often produce the strongest results.</p>
<p>Even with strong safeguards in place, participants may find it difficult to challenge existing organisational practices without feeling ungrateful. This is a real tension in co-production.</p>	<p>Name this tension explicitly at the start of the process. Create structured, and where possible anonymous, ways for participants to raise concerns, separate from their relationship with the organisation.</p>

CAPACITY AND CONTINUITY

What we learned	Recommendation
Staff changeover between sessions, particularly across the early workshops, disrupted continuity and disconnected the work from its foundations.	Confirm at the outset that the same person will attend all sessions. Include this as a condition in the participation agreement.
Having multiple leaders as points of contact in some organisations slowed communication.	Require one named point of contact to be identified at the start and maintained throughout the project.
Capacity challenges, including key staff leaving mid-project, had a significant impact on delivery. There was no agreed contingency plan.	Agree on an emergency continuity plan with all participating organisations at the outset. Include a clear protocol for what happens, including when work may be paused or cancelled, if the named lead becomes unavailable.
The 3–4 one-to-one sessions specified in the brief were not sufficient for the depth of work required.	Increase the number of supported sessions in future project specifications. Advocate for adequate resourcing in the design phase, not as an afterthought.
Working across four organisations simultaneously placed significant strain on the facilitation process and limited the depth of support available to each.	Consider reducing the number of partner organisations in future projects of this scope. Three organisations would allow for more meaningful engagement, stronger continuity, and better outcomes.

TOOLS AND PUBLISHING

What we learned	Recommendation
AI tools were used to support analysis, structuring, and drafting. However, AI-generated language was disempowering in places, framing participants as people in need of guidance rather than as agents of change. Significant rewriting was required.	When using AI in co-design work, actively teach the AI the voice and values of the work before drafting, and rewrite where necessary, not just edit. Always audit AI-generated content for disempowering language, particularly when working with marginalised communities.
A resource was completed but not tested or reviewed by the organisation through the co-design process. Publishing untested outputs risks misrepresenting the community's experience.	Nothing should be published or shared publicly as a co-designed resource unless it has been reviewed and ideally tested by the participating organisation. Build this as a formal sign-off step in every project.

7. Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the learning and challenges documented in Section 6. They are intended for four audiences: organisations participating in future co-design projects, funders and commissioners, and the wider sector:

For Organisations

- Invest time upfront in defining your challenge, as the problem-framing process is itself a transformative intervention rather than just preparation
- Use structured tools such as symptoms/causes/consequences analysis and triple whys to move from broad concerns to root causes (The triple whys method is a thinking tool that pushes thinking deeper.)
- Be clear about your capacity before the project begins, and be transparent if circumstances change – including asking for more time if needed. Organisations should feel genuinely empowered to influence the project, not pressured to accept constraints.
- Embed lived experience in governance and decision-making, not only as consultation, and ensure participants are properly paid for their time
- Designate one named point of contact for the project and ensure the same person attends all sessions to maintain continuity
- Publishing a resource that has not been reviewed or tested by the organisation risks undermining the co-design principle itself – and can result in outputs that do not reflect the community's voice, needs, or reality

For Funders and Commissioners

- Fund capacity building alongside delivery, organisations need time and supported space to define their problems well before they can design solutions
- Explicitly name and budget for participation roles in all co-design projects; people with lived experience must be paid for their contributions
- Support iterative, co-designed approaches that allow for scope adjustment, and build in formal review points rather than expecting linear delivery
- Assume that staff changes and capacity disruptions will happen; this is the reality of working with small organisations in this sector, not an exception. Agree on a continuity plan with all participating organisations at the outset, and ensure funders and the facilitator have a clear protocol for what happens when key people leave
- Include more one-to-one supported sessions in future project specifications; 3 to 4 sessions are not sufficient for the depth of work required
- Recognise lived experience, both in leadership and meaningful engagement, as essential to effective practice. All four organisations in this project were lived experience-led, and this was central to the quality and relevance of the outputs.
- Consider reducing the number of partner organisations in future projects of this scope and timeframe. Working with four organisations simultaneously placed significant strain on the facilitation process and limited the depth of support available to each. Three organisations would allow for more meaningful engagement, stronger continuity, and better outcomes.
- Provide small grassroots organisations with a dedicated, accessible fund to pay participants with lived experience directly, separate from delivery costs. Many small organisations want to remunerate participants but cannot do so without ring-fenced budget. This is not optional in ethical co-design practice.

For the Sector

- Sharing the results with the sector is important so organisations can adapt the resources and build on them.
- When using AI tools in co-design work, actively train these tools to reflect your organisation's voice and values, and always audit AI-generated content for disempowering language, particularly when working with marginalised communities
- Prioritise safety, anti-racist practice, and trauma-informed approaches as structural commitments, not one-off training events
- Strengthen collaboration between grassroots and larger organisations, and ensure power-sharing is genuine, not performative

For Consultants

- Clarify your role explicitly at the start. The facilitator is there to support, not deliver. Set this expectation in writing with both the commissioning body and the participating organisations before work begins.
- Agree on a clear scope, timeline, and communication protocol with any external professionals you bring in. Responsibilities must be written down and signed off before the project starts.

- Treat problem-framing as the core of your work, not the preamble to it. Build sufficient time for this in your project design and protect it if timelines are compressed.
- When using AI tools in co-design work, actively teach the AI the voice and values of the work before drafting and, where necessary, rewriting, not just editing. Always audit AI-generated content for disempowering language and power dynamics, particularly when working with marginalised communities.
- Be transparent with commissioners when the number of supported sessions is insufficient for the depth of work required. Say so early and in writing, advocate for adequate resourcing before the project starts, not after.
- Build in a structured mid-point review to catch scope shifts early and adjust before they compound.
- Calibrate your support to the size and capacity of each organisation. Larger organisations tend to have a clearer understanding of their own capacity and can engage more confidently with a structured process. Smaller organisations may need more scaffolding, clearer expectations, and explicit permission to push back on scope or timelines. A uniform approach will not serve all organisations equally.
- Create structured space for unexpected contributions from participants – and resist the instinct to keep people within a predefined scope. The most powerful outputs in this project came from moments where lived experience was genuinely leading, not being consulted. The video produced by KRAN's young people is the clearest example of what becomes possible when that space is protected.
- Confirm at the outset that the same person from each organisation will attend all sessions. Staff changeover – particularly across the early workshops – disrupts continuity and disconnects the work. Include this as a condition in the participation agreement.
- Document honestly what went wrong and why. The sector learns more from honest accounts of difficulty than from polished reports of success. The consultant's role is not to smooth over complexity in reporting but to name it clearly and draw out the learning.

8. Opportunities and Scalability

The project has shown that the co-design model used by Shift Up combining structured problem-framing, action research, and lived experience leadership, has strong potential for replication and scaling across the migration sector.

Several concrete opportunities have already emerged from the work:

Interest has been expressed from partners and contacts in Glasgow in adapting and using one of the resources produced through this project. This suggests the outputs have relevance beyond the original four partner organisations and their immediate geographies.

The four open-source resources, the Safe Communication & Media Engagement Policy, the Brent Welcome Toolkit, the Safe Disclosure & Support Framework, and the CAM Communications Guide, are designed to be freely adapted by other organisations working in similar contexts. Refugee Action's Insight Hub network of 700+ organisations provides an immediate and ready channel for dissemination.

The partnerships developed through the project also present longer-term opportunities. Organisations that engaged with this process have built relationships with each other and with Refugee Action that can be built upon in future collaborative work.

9. Conclusion

A recurring pattern across the migration sector is that resilience interventions fail not because of a lack of tools, but because organisations are not supported to define the right problems. This project demonstrates the alternative: when problem-framing is treated as an intervention in itself, organisations can develop meaningful, sustainable solutions even within tight timescales and limited resources.

By combining action research, co-design, and lived-experience leadership, Shift Up has supported four organisations in strengthening their internal systems, improving safety and wellbeing, and producing practical resources with value well beyond the participating organisations.

The learning and recommendations documented in Sections 6 and 7 reflect the honest realities of working with small, grassroots organisations in a complex sector. These insights – from both Shift Up and the organisations themselves – are offered in the spirit of improving future co-design commissioning and practice across the migration sector.

The four open-source outputs are ready to be shared with the organisation's members in the Refugee Action Insight Hub network – offering accessible, adaptable tools to build resilience and embed anti-racist practice across the field.

About Shift Up

Shift Up is a consultancy specialising in co-design, organisational resilience, and anti-racism work with the migration, asylum, and social justice sectors. This project was delivered by Shift Up's lead consultant, commissioned through Refugee Action's Insight to Action programme.

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