



Executive Summary Evaluation Report: “Together We Heal and Recover”

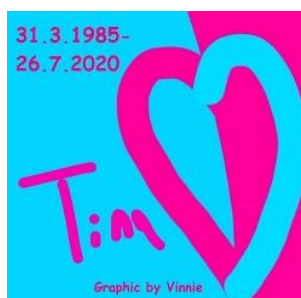
A story of hope for change

Abstract

Impacts, outcomes, and learning from a project funded by the first round of The Mayor’s Opportunity Fund to creatively address the invisibility of Black and minoritised women in female recovery settings.

Dr Sue Robson with Shinasa Shahid

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Foreword

There is a particular kind of invisibility that is hard to name. It is the invisibility of being present in a community, in a system and still not being seen. I have spent several years in research trying to name it. Specifically trying to understand why women from African, Caribbean, and South Asian backgrounds, women who are already carrying the weight of addiction, trauma, patriarchy, abuse, and violence, so often cannot find themselves reflected in the spaces that are supposed to help and support them.

The literature gives you frameworks such as intersectionality, structural racism, cultural barriers, feminism, etc. The words are very useful but words on a page do not prepare you for what it feels like to sit with a woman who tells you she did not seek help because she was afraid of what people would say. It's because of her community, her family, her faith, her and the family's reputation? And the shame was built around her long before she needed support.

As a South Asian scholar, I know something about the architecture of that shame. That is why this project is so important and goes beyond academic interest or professional contribution. When Dr Robson and I began talking about what was needed in the Northeast of England, I recognised it as an instinct. The instinct that recovery cannot be separated from belonging. That you cannot heal or treat what you cannot name. That bringing women together across race, culture, and lived experience, around food, around art, around the land, is serious work.

I want to be honest about something before you read it. Three months into the project and a violent racist attack shattered the lives of Nigerian families in Horden. Children who had been playing in a park were traumatised, parents who came to this country with hope were afraid to step out, and the institutions that should have responded quickly did not always do so.

The project's response to that moment held the community and stayed with them and this is woven through this report. It should not have to be. The fact that it is tells you something about who fills the gaps when systems fail. And it tells you something about what community-led, feminist, arts-and-nature-based practice can do when it is trusted and funded.

We must read this report carefully. Read it as evidence and more importantly read it as testimony. These women's experiences, their healing, fear, joy, ongoing waiting for justice deserve to be taken seriously by everyone who holds any power over recovery systems in this country. This project began, in part, from conversations with me about what my research was finding. I want to be clear that the work that followed belongs to the women and organisations who built it together. Although I was a starting point, these women are the story.

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PhD Scholar,
University of Derby May 2026

Acknowledgements

The Barn at Easington is the accountable body for the Together we Heal and Recover project.¹ Key partners are Sangini – a friend; a Black and minoritised women-led community arts organisation² and The North East of England African & Caribbean Association (NEEA&CA).³Shinasa Shahid’s research on addiction and culturally tailored recovery services inspired this project.

Point North awarded a grant of £8,276 from the Mayor’s Opportunities Fund for the project, and the total project cost is £16,346. The following agencies also supported and contributed funding to the project: Network for Social Action, No More Nowt⁴, The Hope Box and The WiRE Project (National Lottery Community Fund), and The National Trust.

An immeasurable amount of pro bono work has also been conducted by the Chair and Vice-Chair of NEEA&CA, artists, and practitioners from The Barn at Easington, and an expert in policing, racism and hate crime, in response to racist violence that Nigerian families from Horden were subjected to on 30th August 2025.

The project has collaborated with:

- Coalfield Regeneration Trust.⁵
- Durham City of Sanctuary.⁶
- Ensemble ‘84 makes theatre based on local stories and experiences.⁷
- Heather Wood, an artist collaborating with Syrian refugees in Easington Colliery, was also involved in the Ken Russell film “The Old Oak” (2023), set in Horden.⁸
- A local partnership led by Durham County Council that aims to create a plan for inclusive, efficient place-based working across public, private, and voluntary sectors, empowering communities, individuals, and organizations.⁹
- The National Trust¹⁰ and key partners in the development of Tina’s Haven Nature Reserve on the East Durham Coast at Horden, including Durham Wildlife Trust,¹¹ North East Community Forest,¹² and Species Survival Fund.¹³



Figure 1: Community Nature Festival at Tina’s Haven Nature Reserve, 26 July 2025 (photo by Steve Brock).

Executive summary: Together We Heal and Recover

1. Introduction

This is an evaluation report of Together We Heal and Recover, a creative, community-led project funded by the first round of the North East Mayor's Opportunity Fund. Led by The Barn at Easington in partnership with Sangini – a friend, the North East of England African and Caribbean Association (NEEA&CA), and advisory collaborator Shinasa Shahid, the project set out to address the invisibility of Black and minoritised women within female recovery and well-being settings.

Drawing on Black feminist theory and trauma-responsive community development practice, the project built bridges through nature, art, and sisterhood. It promoted recovery and cultural connection for women in East Durham, an area of natural beauty on the stunning coastline that is also marked by post-industrial decline and poverty.

The evaluation, conducted by Dr Sue Robson, reflects upon the implementation and practices, and examines outcomes across the four interconnected levels of power and empowerment defined by Patricia Hill Collins (2000): interpersonal, community, organisational, and institutional.

2. Context and Purpose

Horden and the wider East Durham coast have significant social and economic deprivation and, increasingly, diverse migrant and refugee populations. Building upon the art-based Sanctuary Project and Shinasa's research, highlighting that recovery and well-being infrastructures often fail to reflect the experiences of Black and minoritised women (Shahid 2023; Shahid & Best, 2024), the project aimed to:

- Create safe, inclusive spaces for women's recovery through nature-based and arts-led work.
- Foster solidarity and intercultural understanding.
- Strengthen organisational and community capacity around trauma and racism.
- Influence systemic awareness and practice in public institutions.

Whilst the intention is to support Black and minoritised with other marginalised women by promoting personal growth, self-empowerment, and recovery; the initial approach has been to build connection and trust with families and communities

Three months into delivery, a violent racist attack on approximately thirty-five Nigerian adults and children in Eden Park, Peterlee (30.8.2025) reframed the project. Alongside its networks, the project collaborated in mobilising an emergency community response, exposing flaws in statutory safeguarding and catalysing regional anti-racist action.

3. Evaluation Approach

The evaluation integrated qualitative and quantitative methods within a reflexive Black feminist framework (Collins 2000; Kellogg Foundation 2004):

- Reflection sheets completed after each session (“what I say, take-away/dream/bin”).
- Thematic analysis of eighty-four participant narratives (66% response).
- Focus groups and reflective conversations with artists and partners.
- Review of survey data, correspondence, and meeting minutes from the response to the racist attack.

This participatory approach embedded reflexivity and recognised the positionality of both evaluator and participants, merging research and lived experience into action learning.

4. Key findings

4.1 Interpersonal outcomes – healing, empowerment and belonging

Nature-based, creative gatherings had powerful restorative and transformational effects. Participants reported personal growth, reduced anxiety, new friendships, and a sense of belonging. Participants described reconnecting with hope and confidence:

“After joining hands with so many people, I now feel confident to start a new initiative for local families.” (Tree of Hope event)

“It was a revelation to try classical Indian dance... the deeper we went, the more I realised what we were experiencing was universally human.” (Dance Workshop participant)

The combination of landscape, creativity, food, and shared conversation created emotionally safe spaces where women could process trauma and rediscover agency. Acts of solidarity, such as the planting of the Tree of Hope, symbolised collective renewal after violence and loss.

More recent evidence (May 2026) also indicates that these interpersonal outcomes are translating into action. Participants described increased awareness and growing confidence to challenge racism and apply anti-racist practice in their everyday lives. This reflects a shift from reflection to active engagement.

“Not being racist is not enough... this challenges my inner self and what I can do better” (Sharing learning and conversation event)

4.2 Community outcomes – solidarity, joy, and transformation

Community-level change was marked by unity across cultural, religious, and social divides. Events such as The Old Oak film night, the Diwali in Nature celebration, and the Community Nature Festival generated trust, friendship, and collective pride:

“Strangers became friends, friends became family.” (Festive celebration participant)

“We can unite our diverse community against the forces of hate and racism through collective endeavour and trust.” (Community response meeting, 4 September 2025)

Participants consistently expressed feeling seen, valued, and safe experiences often absent in their daily lives; bringing hope that attitudes within the wider community could begin to change, noting greater empathy and curiosity about difference. For one woman, The Old Oak event was:

“The first time I have felt completely safe at an event since coming to England” (Participant, The Old Oak event) “

Joy, often missing from discussions of trauma and racism, emerged as a transformative force. Food, music, and celebration became acts of resistance, renewal and recovery:

“Joy, warmth and inspiration... the spirit of new beginnings from tough times.” (Festive event)

These collective experiences began to shift social imagination in Horden, from deficit narratives of decline toward stories of resilience, creativity, and hope. However, evidence gathered in March 2026 in the aftermath of the Eden Park attack also demonstrates that, while community solidarity and care were strong within project-led spaces, many affected families continued to experience fear, withdrawal from public space, and loss of trust in statutory protection, highlighting the fragility of community level gains in the absence of consistent institutional safeguarding.

Evidence from May 2026, further highlights that these community spaces are generating a shared sense of purpose and momentum for change, with participants expressing a strong desire for this work to continue, expand, and be adopted more widely by other organisations and communities.

“We were all there together for a shared purpose of healing, connection, and recovery.”

“For other organisations... to follow suit.” (Sharing learning and conversation event)

4.3 Organisational outcomes – partnership, practice and capacity

The project demonstrated exceptional growth in collaboration between grassroots recovery organisations, arts groups, faith networks, and statutory partners. Events were described as:

“A great example of working in partnership to deliver an event” (Tina’s Haven Nature Festival).

Through the crisis following the racist attack, the partnership rapidly developed emergency mobilisation capacity, coordinating multi-agency response meetings and building relationships of trust with the Nigerian community. Organisations integrated

trauma-informed and culturally grounded arts practice into service delivery. Partners began designing new joint projects, including arts-and-nature programmes for mothers and children, and adopting shared approaches to safeguarding and inclusion.

Unexpected organisational outcomes included enhanced strategic advocacy, capacity for policy engagement, and development of new data-monitoring systems within East Durham schools to record and analyse racist incidents.

Recent evidence (March 2026) demonstrates that organisational outcomes extended beyond partnership working into sustained advocacy and system-navigation roles, with project partners supporting victims to engage with statutory processes, challenging inconsistencies, and translating lived experience into formal accountability mechanisms. These changes represent significant movement within the “disciplinary” domain of power (Collins 2000), where every day organisational routines become sites of transformation.

The evidence (May 2026) also demonstrates that these organisational changes are leading to concrete action, including shifts in governance, recruitment priorities, and service delivery approaches, indicating that learning from the project is being actively applied within participating organisations.

“We are going to recruit someone of colour [sic] on our board... as a matter of priority” (Sharing learning and conversation event)

4.4 Institutional outcomes – recognition, accountability, and fragility

At the institutional level, early but meaningful changes were noted. Statutory bodies: including local government, police, the National Trust, funders, and schools, acknowledged the cultural, social and health value of the project’s holistic methods. Institutional representatives described events as “uplifting, inclusive and powerful.”

The project’s forums became credible spaces for strategic dialogue and advocacy. Multi-agency discussions with the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC), the North East Mayor’s office, and the local MP led to tangible outcomes: the criminal trial for the Eden Park attack was brought forward by nineteen months following ministerial correspondence (Morris & Lammy MPs, 2025–26).

Schools established a fifteen-school anti-racist taskforce, implemented shared digital reporting of racist incidents, diversified curricula, and began positive-action recruitment to governing bodies. The National Trust offered free Community Passes to affected Nigerian families, recognising nature as a protective and therapeutic space for recovery (9.2.1 of Narrative account).

However, the withdrawal of one statutory partner midway through the response process highlighted ongoing institutional fragility. As one community member noted, “The warmth... had now reversed,” revealing the precariousness of trust between marginalised communities and formal systems of power. More recent victim testimony

indicates that institutional recognition has not yet consistently translated into reliable safeguarding, communication, or care, reinforcing the uneven and fragile nature of institutional change.

The recent evidence (May 2026) also indicates rising expectations among participants that institutional recognition should translate into sustained commitment, consistent delivery, and wider adoption of these approaches, highlighting the growing gap between acknowledgement and lived experience of support.

“Would love for this to be a regular thing” (Sharing learning and conversation event)

5. Assessment of progress across the four domains

Using Collins’s four-domain framework; interpersonal, community, organisational, and structural—the project achieved the following trajectory of movement:

- **Interpersonal:** Significant transformation in confidence, well-being, and self-worth; a shift from isolation to belonging.
- **Community:** Substantial solidarity and intercultural connection; shared purpose and joy as vehicles for healing.
- **Organisational:** Strong new collaborations, improved reflexive and trauma-aware practice, and growth in strategic advocacy and data systems.
- **Institutional:** Emerging recognition of arts and nature practice and some tangible reforms, though institutional commitment and delivery remain uneven.

These cumulative outcomes illustrate how community-rooted, feminist, and creative practice can generate movement outward, from personal healing to organisational and structural engagement, challenging the “matrix of domination” (Collins 2000) through lived experience, relationship-building, and collective action.

The most recent evidence (May 2026) also demonstrates a clear progression from personal reflection to collective and organisational action, strengthening the case for sustained and scalable impact.

6. Learning and significance

Partners reflected that anti-racist practice must be “central from the start, not an add-on” and must be properly resourced and embedded. Deep partnership and sisterhood between grassroots organisations supporting marginalised women were described as essential to progress: “We are stronger together.”

The evaluation emphasises that trust takes time. Engagement with communities facing trauma requires slower, more relational approaches and consistent investment from funders. Practitioners also recognised the transformative role of nature and creative expression in levelling hierarchies and enabling healing: “Nature levels hierarchies and softens boundaries.”

Emotional warmth, food, music, and creative ritual emerged as powerful tools of inclusion and solidarity. Shared creative practice succeeded where formal engagement sometimes fails, building cohesion, dignity, and hope

7. Conclusion

Together We Heal and Recover offers a compelling model for transformative community development practice built on intersectional feminism, arts, and nature. The project has generated measurable impacts: enhanced personal well-being, strengthened community cohesion, greater organisational capacity, and incremental institutional change. The most recent evidence (March/ April 2026) also shows that the project now operates as a critical civic bridge: sustaining spaces of joy, healing, and belonging while simultaneously responding to ongoing trauma generated by structural and institutional shortcomings.

Its response to violence and racism demonstrated how creativity, care and partnership can repair trust and mobilise hope. Structural progress remains emerging, yet the foundations laid are profound, showing that healing itself can be a form of social change.

“That hope can come out of the worst of tragedies.” (Tree of Hope participant)



Figure 2: The Hope Box, the evening before the screening of “The Old Oak”, 30 July 2025.

8. Key Recommendations

Drawing on the evaluation findings, the following priority actions are recommended to embed anti-racist practice in East Durham. These reflect consistent themes across participant experiences and align with a four-domain model of change.

8.1 Strengthen interpersonal anti-racist practice through reflection and action

- Establish regular safe, facilitated spaces for reflection and dialogue within organisations and communities
- Support individuals to move from awareness to confident, everyday anti-racist action.

8.2 Build inclusive, culturally grounded community spaces that foster belonging

- Deliver sustained programmes of multi-cultural events, creative activity, and shared experiences, particularly centred on food, storytelling, and nature.
- Expand opportunities for young people’s anti-racist learning and peer education.

8.3 Embed anti-racism into organisational practice and accountability

- Introduce practical measures such as:
 - anti-racist “first aiders.”
 - anti-racism as a standing governance agenda item.
- Ensure services, training, and policies are co-produced with communities and grounded in lived experience.
- Develop stronger organisational capacity for advocacy, system navigation, and trauma-informed support.

8.4 Drive structural and institutional change through accountability and investment

- Require public services and funders to embed anti-racist practice into policies, funding criteria, and performance frameworks.
- Improve data systems for recording and understanding racism, including patterns and impact.
- Ensure institutions move beyond recognition of issues to consistent delivery of safeguarding, communication, and care.

8.5 Sustain and scale effective community-led models

- Continue and expand the Together We Heal and Recover model, which has demonstrated strong outcomes across all levels.
- Support replication across organisations and localities, with long-term resourcing and partnership commitment.

Embedding anti-racist practice in East Durham requires coordinated action across interpersonal, community, organisational, and structural levels, sustained through long-term investment, accountability, and community-led leadership.

9. Summary of project outcomes across four levels

Table 1: Project outcomes at four levels of empowerment and domination (Collins 2000)

<p>Individual and interpersonal level</p> <p>Personal growth and confidence: Participants tried new things, expanded self-awareness, and stepped outside comfort zones (“I tried new things”).</p> <p>Emotional restoration and well-being: Nature-based activities reduced anxiety and supported healing (“Less anxiety, connectedness”).</p> <p>Cross-cultural connection: Deeper understanding and meaningful relationships across cultures (“A genuine communication across cultures”).</p> <p>New possibilities and leadership: Participants identified new opportunities, began taking leadership roles, and described increased confidence to act on anti-racist practice in everyday life.</p> <p>Strengthened self-worth and belonging: Increased confidence, love, and solidarity (“Strangers became friends, friends became family”).</p>	<p>Community level</p> <p>Stronger trust and unity across difference: Friendships and bonds formed between women from diverse backgrounds (“A true celebration of community and diversity”).</p> <p>Feeling supported and not alone: Gatherings created warmth, care, and emotional safety (“Welcoming supportive inclusive... delivered with love and hope”).</p> <p>Shifts in community attitudes: Increased hope for safer, kinder, more inclusive communities (“We can unite our diverse community against the forces of hate”), alongside continued fear and insecurity where institutional protection is experienced as unreliable.</p> <p>Unexpected community pride and collaboration: New partnerships, renewed local pride, and strength-based narratives (“How amazing our community is”).</p>
<p>Organisational level</p> <p>Strengthened cross-sector collaboration: Deeper partnerships, joint programming, and multi-agency working (“A great example of working in partnership”).</p> <p>Expanded practice horizons: Organisations embraced integrated arts, nature-based and trauma-informed approaches (“The power of connection and healing using arts and nature”).</p> <p>Creation of safe, culturally meaningful spaces: Trusted environments for marginalised women (“The first time I have felt completely safe at an event since coming to England”).</p> <p>New strategic capacities: Growth in advocacy, crisis response, data systems, and system-navigation and protective support for communities engaging with statutory processes. (e.g., letters to PCC, MP, Mayor and meetings). Including evidence of concrete organisational changes in governance, representation, and practice.</p>	<p>Institutional level</p> <p>Recognition of holistic arts-and-nature practice: Institutions valued its role in cohesion, well-being, and recovery (“Uplifting,” “inclusive,” “powerful”).</p> <p>Cross-sector institutional participation: Police, schools, funders, and civic leaders actively engaged across events.</p> <p>Anti-racist institutional reforms: Schools created a fifteen-school taskforce, new reporting systems, curriculum diversification.</p> <p>High-level strategic engagement : MP, PCC, Mayor’s office used project-anchored meetings to address systemic issues.</p> <p>Ongoing institutional fragility: Despite more recognition and engagement, affected communities noted inconsistent protection, communication, and care, and trust declined after a statutory partner withdrew.</p>

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