

# Improving Trust and Wellbeing: Addressing Inequalities and Improving Accessibility for Refugees via Mindful Nature Connection

## Green Social Prescribing Process Journey



## 1. Background

This case study outlines a series of nature-based wellbeing projects delivered by ParkBathe Mindful Walks CIC for refugees living in temporary accommodation across Croydon between 2024-2026. The work aimed to address health inequalities, social isolation, trauma, and barriers to accessing green space through culturally sensitive, trauma-informed nature connection sessions.

ParkBathe's model is a one-hour, accessible adaptation of Shinrin-yoku (forest bathing), a Japanese preventative health practice utilised by up to five million people annually. Sessions use slow walking, sensory exercises and simple nature-based creative activities to support relaxation, confidence and emotional regulation. All activities are secular, non-clinical and designed for mixed-ability groups.

## Funding and partnerships evolved across phases:

- Initial support came from a Croydon Loves You (CLY) small grant in 2024 and volunteers from a refugee charity
- Later phases were funded by Friends of the Earth via Croydon Climate Action, Croydon Voluntary Action / Unibail-Westfield, and a further CLY grant in 2025
- Delivery partners included a local chaplaincy team, hotel management, a local refugee charity, volunteers and ParkBathe volunteers

Together, these projects formed a learning journey, with each phase adapting in response to lived experience, feedback and trust built over time.



## 2. The Challenge

From ParkBathe's organisational perspective, the core challenge was how to create a nature-based wellbeing offer that felt genuinely accessible, safe and relevant for refugees living in temporary accommodation, many of whom are unlikely to engage with formal wellbeing or mental health services. Croydon has a growing refugee population experiencing high levels of isolation, anxiety and trauma, with limited access to safe outdoor spaces. Home Office immigration figures (Aug 2025) recorded 577 asylum seekers living in Croydon.

For many refugees, engaging in nature-based wellbeing did not initially feel safe, accessible or culturally familiar.

### Barriers included:

- Lack of trust in new people and unfamiliar organisations, heightened by recent media coverage, asylum processes and prior experiences of authority
- Fear of leaving the hotel or visiting unfamiliar outdoor spaces
- Temporary accommodation hotels are not publicly listed and so difficult to identify and are often under-resourced
- Strict hotel security procedures (e.g., signing in and out) and safeguarding protocols limit movement and spontaneity
- Language barriers and low confidence limit verbal self-expression
- Limited access to outdoor clothing or suitable footwear
- Hotel wellbeing teams are under significant pressure, with limited time or capacity to support external projects
- High turnover of residents, means that relationships are constantly disrupted or lost

Trust took time. In some cases, it took months of consistent presence before participants felt safe enough to attend regularly, speak, or engage emotionally. This shaped the programme's pace, scale and delivery model.



## 3. Approach

### Phase 1: Refugee Hotel Walks (September 2024 - April 2025)

Following the training of four new ParkBathe walk leaders in August 2024, monthly one-hour sessions were delivered for individuals and families living in a Croydon refugee hotel.

Early attendance was small and inconsistent. Rather than seeing this as failure, ParkBathe treated it as a trust-building phase. Sessions were delivered consistently, calmly and without pressure to participate or speak.

Barriers in practice included strict hotel security, limited communication with hotel wellbeing staff, cultural hesitancy around mindfulness and outdoor activities, and participants' low confidence in sharing how they felt.

#### These were navigated by:

- Keeping group sizes small and predictable
- Using the same short route each time
- Relying more on demonstration, body language and modelling than verbal explanation
- Avoiding clinical or therapeutic language
- Allowing people to join late, leave early or simply observe

Safeguarding was managed through clear boundaries, visible consent and close coordination with hotel safeguarding leads. Sessions avoided emotional disclosure, focusing instead on grounding, sensory awareness and choice. All facilitators and volunteers were required to hold enhanced DBS checks, follow hotel safeguarding procedures, sign in and out for each session, provide photo ID and wear ID badges. ParkBathe's safeguarding policies for vulnerable adults and children were shared with all volunteers.

Sessions included simple sensory noticing, playful activities, gentle breath awareness and nature crafts such as leaf bracelets or stick initials. A non-verbal thumbs-up / thumbs-down evaluation tool proved culturally inclusive and quickly became a shared point of humour and connection.

Trust gradually grew. One participant from Pakistan shared, "In the hotel it is depression and stress, but here in the woods I feel relaxed."

#### OUR TOP TIP:

When working with complex communities, remain aware of the continual nuances involved, including legal, cultural and other barriers to engagement. Remain trauma-informed and build in the time & flexibility needed to respond appropriately



## Phase 2: Local Green Space - Refugee Week Project (June-July 2025)

To mark Refugee Day, ParkBathe delivered a short series of sessions in a local park in an area of social deprivation. This phase focused explicitly on addressing earlier barriers by supporting refugees to feel confident visiting local green spaces independently.

The approach prioritised familiarity, reassurance and repetition. Sessions were clearly framed as local, safe and optional. The same facilitation style was used, maintaining continuity with earlier hotel sessions.

The group was small: a family of three and one additional woman. While small in number, the impact was significant. Participants described surprise at discovering a nearby green space that “smelled like home.” Two teenage boys returned daily to check on mandalas they had made, demonstrating independent engagement beyond the sessions.

This phase showed that small group size does not limit impact. Effects can be replicated at scale, but the ratio of facilitators to participants is critical in early stages. Trust develops faster when people feel seen and supported. Scaling is achieved not by increasing numbers too quickly, but by recruiting and training “refugee ambassadors” who support delivery through peer trust and cultural understanding - and by promoting the sessions “behind the scenes”, removing some of the burden from hotel staff to promote sessions. Over time, less ratio of facilitators to refugees is required as trust builds and refugees become more confident with the activities.

### OUR TOP TIP:

Prioritise relationships over scale





### Phase 3: Croydon Garden (September-October 2025)

The third phase moved to a contained garden space in Croydon. This felt safer, quieter and more accessible, including for a wheelchair user. It also did not require an extensive litter-pick prior, which was a barrier to the other green space.

By this stage, collaboration with hotel staff had improved. This followed months of “low-ask” engagement: emails, short, less formal conversations, flexibility around staff schedules and demonstrating value without adding burden.

#### Sessions integrated creative elements that had previously built trust:

- Mandala making
- Writing “how we feel” on leaves
- Stick initials
- Scent-based activities using lavender and rosemary
- Translation cards with simple nature vocabulary
- Goody bags for collecting natural items, including mirrors for visual exercises

Participants took items back to the hotel to show others, reinforcing continuity. Hotel staff began to notice tangible benefits: calmer mornings, fewer conflicts, residents discussing the walks and improved atmosphere. One staff member said, “at breakfast after a session the next day, we see less anger in the hotel. We can tell when you have been!” Friendly ParkBathe volunteers supported staff engagement by speaking with them personally.

Communication continued primarily via WhatsApp, recognising that relationships with under-resourced teams take time and consistency.

#### OUR TOP TIP:

Allow time and repetition



## Phase 4: Indoor Nature Sessions (Autumn/Winter 2025-26)

Recognising that many refugees lacked winter clothing, feared leaving the hotel or avoided wet weather entirely, ParkBathe piloted indoor nature-inspired sessions funded by a second Croydon Loves You grant.

### These included:

- Nature bookmark making
- Nature bracelets using tape
- Leaf pressing for cards
- Making tea bags
- Aromatherapy room spray making

Indoor sessions allowed for longer engagement, deeper conversation and cultural exchange. They also addressed seasonal barriers while maintaining the same principles of choice, safety and sensory grounding.

### OUR TOP TIP:

Adapt sessions to culture, context and season



## 4. Outcomes and Impact

### Across all phases:

73 refugees engaged, many attending repeatedly. 11 volunteers supported delivery (the second project is on-going until March 2026, with attendance increasing with each session. Currently we see 8-12 attendees which we believe is a combination of increased trust, familiarity, word of mouth by attendees and the “refugee ambassador” within the hotel.)

### Participants demonstrated:

- Reduced anxiety and visible relaxation
- Increased confidence using local green spaces
- Growing trust in facilitators and partners
- Improved social connection across nationalities
- Increased autonomy and initiative

One refugee who asked to become a ParkBathe Ambassador, has helped engage others. This peer-led role offered confidence, agency, unpaid community experience and will result in a reference letter at project completion, which is highly valued within refugee communities.

### OUR TOP TIP:

Use peer leadership to scale sustainably



## Qualitative feedback included:

*“I feel like I am in a different place. I forgot about being at the hotel.”*

*“With no money, we have got a lot of profit.”*

Language became a bridge rather than a barrier. Participants enjoyed learning and sharing nature-related words, writing in their own languages on leaves and using Google Translate. ParkBathe used ChatGPT to prepare translation cards in advance and live Google Translate during sessions to support communication.

Observational evidence showed clear physical shifts from tense, withdrawn postures at the start to open, smiling and communicative interactions by the end.

## OUR TOP TIP:

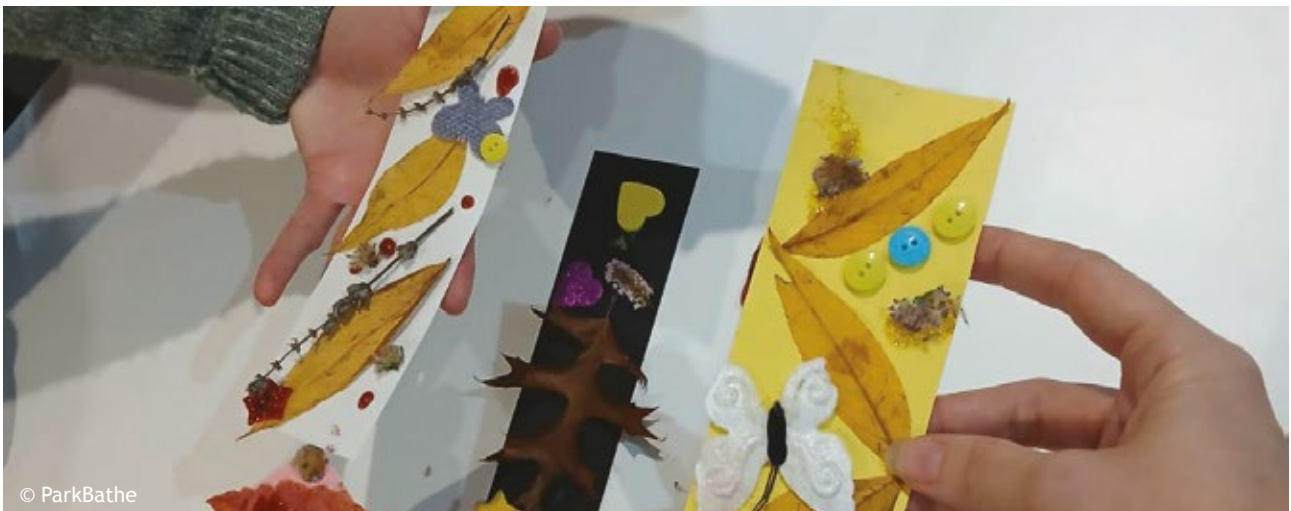
Observe body language as a primary indicator of impact



## Volunteers and partners also benefited:

- Volunteers and hotel staff requested their own sessions
- One volunteer now supports delivery regularly because she benefits personally, builds trust with residents and creates bridges for the legal and practical support her organisation offers
- Hotel staff strengthened their wellbeing engagement model and reported calmer environments on session days. They have requested that the sessions continue and expand into a sister hotel

No negative or harmful outcomes were recorded.



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## 5. Lessons Learned

Staff and volunteers came from mixed backgrounds. Some were from global majority backgrounds, others were not. Shared ethnicity was not essential to trust. Trust was built through consistency, kindness, returning regularly, listening, and delivering reliably. Many volunteers had lived experience of low mood or strong empathy for refugee communities, which supported engagement.

### What worked well:

- Slow trust-building through repeated presence
- Creativity and play as gateways to regulation
- Non-verbal communication tools
- Peer ambassadors and refugee leadership
- Low-ask collaboration with overstretched staff
- Visible benefits that supported staff roles

### What could have helped:

- Earlier, consistent staff support and engagement from hotel management
- Dedicated interpreters for larger groups
- Clearer winter clothing provision pathways (ParkBathe is investigating a campaign to request more winter clothing donations through their network)



## 6. Next Steps

ParkBathe will continue developing indoor and outdoor refugee wellbeing provision, including:

- Expanding indoor sessions across additional hotels
- Formalising refugee Ambassador training
- Strengthening partnerships with refugee organisations
- Refining multilingual visual evaluation tools
- Seeking multi-year funding to scale across Croydon and beyond

### Links:

Join our free weekly Parkbathe walks & explore our partnership opportunities! We also offer training for Peer Leaders to help grow your impact.

Discover all of ParkBathe's activities & opportunities here:

<https://linktr.ee/ParkBathe>

Get in touch with us at [parkbathe@gmail.com](mailto:parkbathe@gmail.com)

