



## Ukrainian youth drop-in September 2025 – January 2026

### Impact Report

January 2026



Rural Refugee Network (RRN) has run monthly drop-in sessions for local Ukrainian teenagers aged 12-15 since April 2025 in partnership with East Hampshire District Council (EHDC). This evaluation aimed to assess the impact for young people and to capture learning to inform decisions about future provision.

#### **Context**

The Ukrainian conflict triggered the worst refugee crisis in Europe since the Second World War. In response, many Ukrainian families have found refuge in communities across East Hampshire and Havant, where the Rural Refugee Network (RRN) has been supporting refugees since 2016.

Building on this experience and its long-standing inclusive and participatory approach, RRN was well placed to develop bespoke provision for Ukrainian young people. The provision was cocreated by a pilot group of young Ukrainians during a pilot workshop in April 2025, made possible with support from EHDC. EHDC funded RRN to run a follow-up table tennis and badminton session in June 2025 and approved RRN's proposed programme, based on the pilot findings.

#### **Methodology**

Feedback from young people was gathered through a focus group at the end of the final session, using open discussion and optional written notes/mentimeter responses to explore impact, learning and future need.

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Process learning reflections and observations were captured through a written survey completed by the session lead and volunteers. These reflections are included to inform learning about delivery modes and observed impact to complement the feedback provided directly by young people.

### **The programme**

Five sessions were delivered during the reporting period September 2025 - January 2026; two in Portsmouth and three in Petersfield. Sessions were designed to be inclusive, fun and low pressure, combining physical activities, board games, art-based activities to encourage enjoyment, teamwork and social connection. The funding enabled the project coordinator to enhance the programme by working with local providers Peter Ashley Centre, Treasure Island Adventure Minigolf and Art Therapist Rebecca Smith-Daniel.

Delivery was led by an RRN Project Coordinator, supported by two volunteers, one of whom is from the Ukrainian community. Sessions were delivered in partnership with local organisations, including St. Laurence Church, Petersfield, which hosted three sessions.

15 young people took part overall, with an average of six per session. Participants attend a range of secondary schools, including Bedales School, TPS, Churcher's College, Bohunt School, and Lord Wandsworth College. Young people were based across East Hampshire, including Petersfield, Liss, Alton, Waterlooville. Although some young people knew each other through school, the majority had not previously met. Attendance varied; some attended regularly, while others engaged more intermittently depending on availability and interest in particular activities.

### **Findings**

#### **Impact: What young people experienced**

Young people described Saturday afternoons as a time that would otherwise be spent at home studying or playing computer games. Several said that although they knew other Ukrainian families locally, they knew very few Ukrainian young people their own age and had limited opportunities to socialise with peers nearby.

During the observed session leading up to the evaluation discussion, the six young people present were from different towns and schools but appeared relaxed and comfortable together. The evaluator noted a warm, welcoming atmosphere, with frequent laughter and easy interaction. The word "fun" came up repeatedly in discussion. As this was the final session, the young people took group photos at the end and talked about staying in touch.

Throughout the focus group discussion, young people spoke of strong friendships developing through the programme. Two girls described how they met through the sessions and are now close friends. One boy explained that instead of spending the afternoon playing computer games, he chose to attend so that he could talk and spend time with others. The group reflected that they built these relationships through shared activities. The outings to the Peter Ashley Centre and to Portsmouth were mentioned by several participants as particularly important for developing friendship. They had independently arranged to meet



and spend time together after the previous session, extending that connection extended beyond the sessions themselves.



Mentimeter responses: What has this drop-in been for you?

### What young people said:

- "I really enjoyed these times, playing Mafia [Ukrainian game], logic games, all the trips we had."*
- "I really like these sessions, they are fun to be a Saturday activity."*
- "I'm really glad that we had spent this time all together."*
- "Thank you so much for spending time with us."*
- "I think it's really important for meeting people and socialising."*
- "I really enjoyed the badminton together"*
- "The best sessions for me were crazy golf, archery and just coming together and playing board games."*
- "If today's session wasn't on, I would be on my own studying or doing other work. I'm so grateful for this place and organisation for giving me new valuable friends and a lovely time from all adventures."*
- "I really liked the badminton and table tennis."*
- "I felt calm and enjoyed it."*
- "I would otherwise have been playing games on my own. This was fun and it helped me find new friends. I enjoyed playing games."*
- "I'm not a social person so I can't say that I made a lot of friends. But I did really enjoy this sessions. Instead of just sitting at home doing nothing I had somewhere to go and had a lot of fun. Thank you. I hope there will be more sessions."*

If you had to explain this drop-in to a friend, what would you say it's good for?

Making friends

I met other people

Games

Cool games and having fun

You can meet people

We do a lot of things like playing board games, we had archery, lasertag



## **What young people said they need going forward**

All six hands shot up when the evaluator asked whether this provision should continue. They were keen to explain why:

*"Socialising"*

*"It's hard to meet others the same age"*

*"Because it's fun"*

*"I really want it to happen again because I want to socialise with Ukrainian people."*

*"Fun and laughter"*

They talked about the enjoyment of meeting challenges together, playing games, being relaxed with peers.

The young people found it hard to suggest changes. One young man summed up the general feeling that *"honestly, just this is fun and fine"*. The format reflected ideas raised by young people at the co-creation workshop in April 2025, and those attending the evaluation felt the current approach met their needs.

All eleven young people attended the outing to the Peter Ashley Centre for archery and laser tag. In the evaluation discussion, several participants suggested that more sports, such as football and basketball, and games would be welcome in future.

## **Delivery learning and process feedback**

### **What worked well**

The following themes emerged across reflections from participants, staff and volunteers about what supported delivery and impact:

#### 1. A safe, consistent environment

The project provided a safe and inclusive space where young people felt comfortable, supported, and able to engage fully in activities. The small group size supported relaxed conversation and helped young people feel comfortable opening up and relaxing with peers and with the small consistent team facilitating the sessions. Dedicated staff and volunteers, with guidance and support from partners, including the East Hampshire Community Project Officer for Ukraine and the Community Support Worker and RRN's experienced CEO, were seen to have contributed significantly to the safety, engagement and active participation of the young people.

*"The drop-in provided a safe and nurturing space for young people from Ukraine to socialise, have fun, and connect with others who share a similar culture, language, and experience of moving to a new country."*

[volunteer observation]

#### 2. Engagement through activities

Activities were designed around the stated interests and ideas of the young people, including games, social events, and creative tasks. Involving young people themselves in deciding activities increased engagement, gave them a sense of ownership, made them feel valued, and contributed to the overall atmosphere and effectiveness of the sessions. A mix of physical activity, quiet time and fun games kept sessions appealing, and partnership venues provided varied, engaging activities.

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### 3. Social and emotional support

The project enabled young people to build friendships, connect with peers of a similar age and background, and feel part of a community, reducing isolation and fostering a sense of belonging.

*“Over the course of a few months, it was really positive to see a core group form, with young people building trust and strong relationships with each other.”* [volunteer observation]

### 4. Consistency and Regularity

The project ran consistently once a month led by consistent, experienced staff and volunteers, which allowed young people to build routines, and gradually strengthen relationships and engagement over time.

The coordinator reflected on the impact he observed:

*“They built meaningful relationships with one another, and there was an evident shift from the beginning of the project to the end. Over time, they discovered shared interests, learned to cooperate during various activities, and developed friendships that extended beyond the project itself - meeting independently outside of the drop-in sessions.”*

### Challenges

External challenges such as clashing schedules and schoolwork impacted on consistent attendance.

Volunteers flagged the impact on team capacity of the nature of this cohort, the intense support some of these young people needed placing strain on the team at times:

*“Some limitations included time, capacity, and the need for additional individual support for some young people. If the programme were repeated, longer sessions, increased staffing, and more structured wellbeing activities would be beneficial.”*

### Small changes suggested by young people

More sports-based activities, particularly football and basketball.

Continuing trips and off-site activities where possible in addition to the relaxed sessions in the familiar church hall.

### Session structure, communication and environment

Young people did not raise concerns about session structure, communication or access. The environment was described as fun, friendly and welcoming, and young people appeared at ease in the spaces used.

Staff and volunteers felt that the model was successful:

*“The flexible and relaxed delivery model encouraged engagement, communication, and emotional openness.”*

Staff observation echoed the young people’s comments on the impact of externally facilitated activities:

*“Attendance was generally higher for the activity sessions ... requested by the young people, while the sessions in Petersfield tended to be quieter. If the programme were to run again, I would suggest focusing*

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*on more activity-led sessions and continuing to involve young people in shaping the provision, as this seemed to create a light-hearted, engaging environment and encouraged regular attendance.”*

The following elements were felt to be vital for continued success and impact in the future:

*“- Ongoing financial support for staffing, activities, and costs, ensuring the project remains accessible to all young people.*

*-Dedicated, trained staff and volunteers are key to providing a safe, supportive, and engaging environment.*

*-Collaboration with partners and the Ukrainian community to support the team and reach more young people who may benefit from the project.”*

### **Conclusions**

Several themes emerged around the impact on participants:

- Connection and belonging: Young people valued spending time with others their age from Ukraine and forming friendships.
- Confidence and comfort in social settings: Sessions provided a space to socialise without pressure.
- Enjoyment and wellbeing: Young people repeatedly described the sessions as fun and relaxed. The Ukrainian support volunteer observed that “Many were experiencing displacement and emotional stress, and the consistent environment helped reduce isolation and improve ... wellbeing.”

This pilot addressed a clear gap in local provision for Ukrainian young people of secondary school age. Participants travelled from different towns, sometimes over long distances, because the sessions gave them a regular opportunity to meet peers, build friendships and spend relaxed, enjoyable time together. Several young people explained that the afternoons would otherwise have been spent alone at home.

The evidence suggests that the value of the project lay not in a single activity, but in the consistency, safe, supportive atmosphere and opportunity to connect with others in similar circumstances.

### **Recommendations**

Continue the drop-in model.

Future delivery should retain the core elements that young people valued: small groups, mixed activities, and a relaxed, welcoming environment.

Feedback suggests a greater emphasis on sports, including football and basketball, and games would be appropriate, alongside continuing occasional trips and outings.

Maintaining continuity of staff and venues will remain important to sustaining trust and familiarity.

Retain trips and off-site activities where possible, as these were consistently highlighted as enjoyable.

Ensure ongoing funding to allow regular sessions with a consistent offer, rather than short-term or one-off provision for young people who have clearly said they need the sessions to continue.

### **Acknowledgements**

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