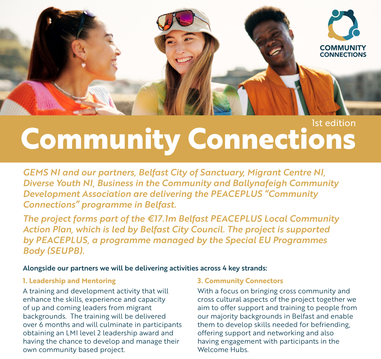

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

1st edition

Community Connections

GEMS NI and our partners, Belfast City of Sanctuary, Migrant Centre NI, Diverse Youth NI, Business in the Community and Ballynafeigh Community Development Association are delivering the PEACEPLUS "Community Connections" programme in Belfast.

The project forms part of the €17.1m Belfast PEACEPLUS Local Community Action Plan, which is led by Belfast City Council. The project is supported by PEACEPLUS, a programme managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB).

Alongside our partners we will be delivering activities across 4 key strands:

1. Leadership and Mentoring
A training and development activity that will enhance the skills, experience and capacity of up and coming leaders from migrant backgrounds. The training will be delivered over 6 months and will culminate in participants obtaining an LMI level 2 leadership award and having the chance to develop and manage their own community based project.

2. Community Orientation and Cultural Facilitators
This opportunity is for people from migrant backgrounds to undertake training and support to develop their facilitation skills and to then help us deliver impactful and enjoyable sessions for other project participants in the Welcome Hubs. Our facilitators will also help co-design a useful "Community Connections APP" which we hope will help the project leave a legacy behind when completed.

3. Community Connectors
With a focus on bringing cross community and cross cultural aspects of the project together we aim to offer support and training to people from our majority backgrounds in Belfast and enable them to develop skills needed for befriending, offering support and networking and also having engagement with participants in the Welcome Hubs.

4. Welcome Hubs
Three Belfast City Council Community Centre locations have been identified as suitable spaces to operate as Belfast Welcome Hubs, providing a weekly space for people that are new to Belfast to meet, make connections and to network with other support organisations. We will deliver a series of activities during the next 2 years that will focus on integration and inclusion in a casual and safe setting.

ABOUT GEMS NORTHERN IRELAND

GEMS Northern Ireland

About GEMS NI

As the lead partner GEMS NI will provide overall project management and coordination for the project. We will engage and support our partners to ensure delivery coordination across all strands as well as supporting the recruitment for each of the different project strands. We will also provide quality assurance, governance, and project monitoring on behalf of the partnership. GEMS NI and our staff will offer ongoing support to our partners as well as engaging directly with key stakeholders to ensure successful project delivery and achievement of outcomes.

Staff Profiles

Stephen Atkinson – Project Lead
Stephen is the GEMS NI project manager and key contact for "Community Connections", his role will be to manage project activities and help to co-ordinate each strand of the project delivery team. Stephen brings a wealth of knowledge to the programme team having managed a number of large-scale employability and skills projects and is excited about the potential of this project.

Andrew Snowdon – Project Lead
Andrew is GEMS NI monitoring and evaluation lead for the project, ensuring that our project participant data is collected, recorded and maintained throughout the project delivery. Andrew has many years' experience working with GEMS NI in a quality assurance and monitoring role and will bring excellent experience and support to project partners and participants.

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PARTNER PROFILES

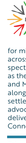
Belfast City of Sanctuary

About Belfast City of Sanctuary

Belfast City of Sanctuary is part of a UK-wide movement committed to creating a culture of welcome for people seeking sanctuary. We work with schools, universities, faith groups, and community organisations to promote inclusion, challenge discrimination, and celebrate the contributions of refugees and asylum seekers. Our programmes include awareness campaigns, Sanctuary Awards, storytelling initiatives, educational workshops, advocacy, and capacity-building that empowers sanctuary seekers to lead and thrive.

Role in the Community Connections Project
Within the Community Connections Project, Belfast City of Sanctuary provides leadership and coordination through two key roles. Israel Eguagie, Project Lead, offers strategic oversight and ensures that our contribution aligns with the project's wider goals and long-term impact. Abiola Akano, Project Coordinator is seconded into the project and is responsible for coordinating workshops, supporting partner organisations with strand delivery, mentoring schemes, and engagement activities that foster leadership, cross-community dialogue, and participation of minority ethnic-led organisations.

Staff Profiles



Israel Eguagie – Project Lead
Israel provides overall leadership and strategic direction for Belfast City of Sanctuary's role in Community Connections. He ensures alignment with the project's long-term vision and supports collaboration across partner organisations. With extensive experience in civic leadership, advocacy, and partnership building, Israel plays a key role in embedding the voices of sanctuary seekers and strengthening community connections.

Abiola Akano – Project Coordinator
Abiola coordinates the day-to-day delivery of Belfast City of Sanctuary's engagement in Community Connections. She leads on workshops, mentoring schemes, and ethnic-minority focused activities, while also managing recruitment, onboarding, safeguarding, and reporting processes. With a strong background in youth engagement and community development, Abiola is passionate about empowering minority ethnic communities and fostering inclusive dialogue across Belfast.

Hopes for the Project
Through this partnership, Belfast City of Sanctuary hopes to strengthen relationships across communities, amplify the voices of sanctuary seekers, and foster safe, welcoming spaces where diversity is celebrated. We aim to build lasting partnerships and ensure that minority ethnic communities play a leading role in shaping our shared future.

Other Information
Israel brings extensive experience in civic leadership, partnership building, and advocacy, while Abiola contributes expertise in youth engagement, community cultural development, and community development. Together, they work closely with Diverse Youth NI and other partners to ensure all activities are inclusive, impactful, and co-created with communities.

Migrant Centre NI

About Migrant Centre NI

Migrant Centre NI (MCNI), established in 2012, is a charity organisation committed to challenging racism and removing barriers for migrant and ethnic minority communities across Northern Ireland. MCNI provides a broad spectrum of services including initiatives such as the Global Majority Fund and the Migrant and Minority Ethnic Peacebuilders programme, alongside ongoing support in areas such as EU settlement advice, race hate crime support, advocacy, and financial wellbeing outreach. As a delivery partner in the PEACEPLUS Community Connections Project, MCNI contributes experience in capacity-building, underpinned by its longstanding commitment to inclusive service provision. MCNI's contribution to the project focuses on amplifying the voices of lived-experience leaders from migrant backgrounds, fostering inclusive peacebuilding, and strengthening civic representation. By working with other delivery partners, MCNI gains opportunities to expand its networks, share expertise, and contribute to a more integrated and equitable peacebuilding infrastructure. Engagement with this project offers community members access to training, support, and meaningful participation in shaping good relations and social cohesion.

Diverse Youth NI

About Diverse Youth NI

Diverse Youth NI is a youth-led charity working to empower Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic, refugee, and asylum-seeking young people across Northern Ireland. Through cultural enrichment programmes, leadership initiatives, and civic engagement projects, we provide platforms for young people to develop confidence, skills, and a strong sense of belonging. Our work bridges communities, challenges racism and division, and promotes integration through creative and collaborative approaches.

Role in the Community Connections Project
Within Community Connections, Diverse Youth NI is leading on Strand 2 – Community Facilitators, which focuses on training, supporting, and empowering a network of facilitators to engage local communities in dialogue, capacity building, and cross-community collaboration.

Staff Profiles

Abhinov Shyju – Project Lead
Abhinov provides overall guidance and strategic oversight to Strand 2 of the project, ensuring that our community facilitators are equipped to deliver inclusive, meaningful, and impactful engagements. Abhinov works closely with partners to support outreach, training design, and monitoring of outcomes, while fostering strong links between the delivery team and local communities.

Bliss Funmilayo Tolan – Project Coordinator
Bliss plays a central role in supporting the day-to-day delivery of Strand 2. She liaises directly with facilitators, manages session logistics, and ensures effective communication and coordination across activities. Her background in finance and community development brings both structure and energy to the programme.

Hopes for the Project
Through this partnership, Diverse Youth NI hopes to build a lasting network of trained facilitators who can continue strengthening community cohesion well beyond the life of the project, ensuring that diverse voices are not only heard but empowered to lead.

Other Information
Diverse Youth NI brings extensive experience of delivering youth-led programmes across Belfast and beyond, including cultural competence training, civic engagement sessions, cultural enrichment workshops, and Good Relations Week-Refugee Week-Summer events. Our involvement in Community Connections builds on this track record and allows us to extend our outreach into new neighbourhoods while amplifying the voices of young people from minority ethnic and host backgrounds.
As part of Strand 2, we are particularly focused on equipping facilitators with practical skills, including conflict resolution, cultural awareness, and inclusive dialogue methods. We are also committed to ensuring that young people and community members feel a sense of ownership in shaping the conversations and outcomes.
Both Abhinov and Bliss are passionate about creating safe spaces for dialogue and about supporting facilitators to bridge divides, challenge misconceptions, and foster long-term positive relationships within communities.

Business in the Community

About Business in the Community NI (BITC)
Business in the Community Northern Ireland (BITCNI) is a responsible business network committed to building a fairer and more sustainable society. We work with businesses across sectors to tackle key social and environmental challenges, helping them make a positive impact through collaborative action. Our work spans employability, education, environment, wellbeing, and inclusion, with a strong focus on creating opportunities for those furthest from the labour market.

Role in the Community Connections Project
BITCNI is leading **Strand 1—Community Leadership and Mentoring Programme**, which supports 36 participants from minority ethnic backgrounds over three years. This strand focuses on:

- A 6-month leadership and mentoring programme each year, providing 50 hours of workshops and one-to-one mentoring per participant
- Support from 12 mentors drawn from industry and civic sectors
- Clear pathways into civic engagement, public life, and accredited leadership development
- Reverse mentoring opportunities, where industry leaders learn directly from participants' lived experiences

Through this strand, we're building the confidence, civic literacy, and leadership potential of participants, while fostering more inclusive workplaces and communities across Northern Ireland.

Staff Profiles

Linka Lin – Employability Executive
Linka coordinates the delivery of Strand 1, supporting participants through coordination of mentoring, training, and progression planning. With a background in inclusive employment and community engagement, Linka ensures the programme is responsive, empowering, and impactful.

Gavin Hegan – Head of Place
Gavin provides strategic oversight for BITCNI's role in Community Connections, leading on partnership development and alignment with our broader responsible business agenda. Previously Assistant Director at one of Ireland's largest social enterprises, he brings deep understanding of operating psychologically safe environments where people can grow as leaders and contribute their full potential.

What we hope to achieve
BITCNI hopes to build a new generation of leaders from minority ethnic backgrounds, equipped to influence change and contribute meaningfully to public life. We also aim to deepen business engagement in inclusion and cultural competence, recognising that integration is everyone's responsibility.

Ballynafeigh Community Development Association

About Ballynafeigh Community Development Association

Ballynafeigh Community Development Association is a Shared Neighbourhood organisation providing community development and good relations projects for individuals and groups. BCDA is a mature community development organisation based in South Belfast. It was established in 1974, and in the 40 years since then the Association's work has focused on our role as a multi-purpose organisation, operating a resource centre and acting as a catalyst for the creation and delivery of local actions to tackle disadvantage and address those issues which impact on development and quality of life matters for vulnerable individuals and groups. BCDA's work is guided by our community development ethos which strives to beenabling, empowering, supportive and outward looking:

- Enabling by sharing knowledge and skills to enable people and groups to articulate their needs and to stimulate action to address them;
- Empowering by advancing the needs and solutions that people have identified for themselves, irrespective of whether the solution is being sought through self-help or statutory means;
- Supportive by promoting teamwork and shared responsibility as well as encouraging individual creativity and personal effectiveness;
- Outward-looking by encouraging an open and progressive outlook on life communities and cultures and endeavouring to share our approach and develop links with other organisations in Northern Ireland and elsewhere.

Gerry Tubritt (CEO of BCDA) will manage and support the Community Connectors strand Strand 3 of the Community Connections Programme. The Coordinator for this strand will be based at BCDA and managed by Gerry but linking across all of the strands of the project, recruiting and supporting "Connectors". The Coordinator will oversee linking Connectors to participants and designing bespoke engagements responsive to need. BCDA will enhance the reach of its Shared Neighbourhood development ethos. We are the Belfast base for MCNI and the main office for BCoS: being part of this delivery team with GEMS will broaden our reach and help us to contribute to a fairer and more shared society.

The Belfast Local Community Action Plan is supported by PEACEPLUS, a programme managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB).