

Brushstrokes VOICE  
mid-term external  
evaluation

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October 2023



# Introduction

Brushstrokes is a community project based in Sandwell and West Birmingham. The project was established in 2000 and is supported by Father Hudson's Care.

In 2021, the project received funding from the National Lottery Reaching Communities Fund to deliver the VOICE project. The project aims are to enable people to have a voice, get online, integrate, build community and improve employability.

Cloud Chamber were commissioned in August 2023 to produce an external evaluation of the project. The evaluation aims are to:

- Evaluate the extent to which particular project outcomes are being met
- Document what changes have been made to the project as a result of changing service user needs
- Make recommendations to improve performance
- Identify Brushstrokes wider impact in the statutory, voluntary and community sectors

Our evaluation is based on the following evidence:

- Semi-structured interviews with staff (7), stakeholders (7) and service users (2)
- Review of project documentation (including the original application to the Community Fund, reporting to the funder)
- Demographic data and service user surveys

## About the project

Lottery funding provides full or partial funding for the following posts within the project:

Community  
Development  
Worker

Office and  
Facilities  
Manager

Employment  
Advisor

Volunteer  
Coordinator

Advice and  
family support  
worker

Digital Skills  
Advisor

Resources  
Assistant

The project expects to direct benefit around 3,000 people over four years. The main project activities include the development of a service user panel, provision of employment advice, volunteering opportunities, family support and digital skills training.

## Evaluation structure

- **Reach and KPIs:** we examine the reach of the project and document reported performance against targets
- **Learning and improvement:** considers enablers, barriers and process improvements related to the funding
- **Outcomes:** are then considered for service users, the organisation (Brushstrokes) and stakeholders
- **Impacts:** we provide some indications of the impact the project is having
- **Conclusions and recommendations:** we conclude the report providing recommendations for the future

# Reach and KPIs: Brushstrokes is increasing its reach and exceeding its expected outcomes

**Brushstrokes is helping more vulnerable people.** Brushstrokes provided support for over 3,000 clients in year 2 of the project. This means the charity has helped 1,310 families and over 6,000 individuals in year 2 alone. New clients represent over half (53%) of all service users each year. Compared with reach before the VOICES project began, the number of service users has more than doubled (see figure 1).

**The client base continues to diversify.** In the year before the VOICES project began, Brushstrokes was service 103 nationalities. This has since grown to 120 nationalities in Year 2. Closely linked to global events, the charity is helping a greater number of Afghan and Sudanese clients over the past two years.

**More clients are located in Sandwell.** The proportion located in Sandwell Borough has increased to 70% in Year 1, up from 65% in 2020/21. This is likely to be because of the centralisation of dispersal at hotels, of which there are five in proximity of Brushstrokes. The client base remains stable with respect to age group (most commonly aged 35-44) and gender (more commonly males).

**Brushstrokes is exceeding outcomes set in its lottery application.** See figure 2. Social and community activities have included a Men's Group, Women's Group, Film night, Games Zone, Theatre Zone, trips to sporting events and arts/culture project. The Brushstrokes community café continues, with high levels of demand from new and existing communities.

Figure 1: Total service users by year

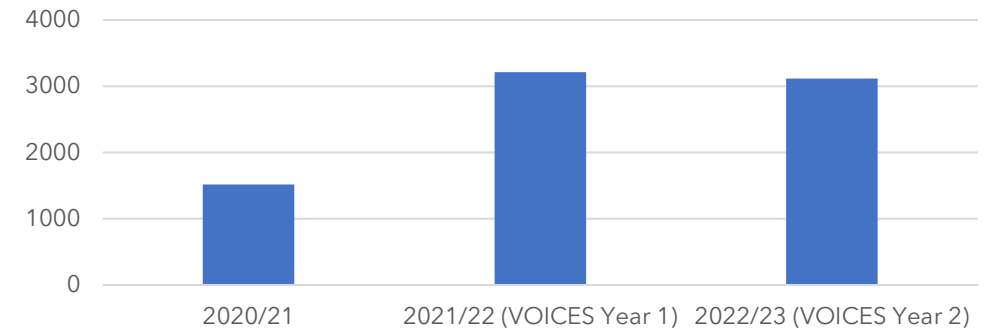


Figure 2: Quantitative targets

Outcome indicator (from lottery application)	Y1	Y2	Total
80 individuals supported with digital skills	46	58	104
500 individuals receive integration support	2,276	3,285	5,560
50 individuals supported with employability	146	343	489
3 new social and community activities	8	-	8

# Learning and improvement: services are enabled by good partnership working, progressive volunteering and a strong ethos

## Enablers

- **Strong partnership working.** Brushstrokes work in close partnership with other organisations both in terms of service delivery and strategically, to best meet the needs of clients. There is an excellent working relationship with Sandwell Council, and Brushstrokes is a prominent member of Sandwell Consortium (working collaboratively on advice provision).
- **Understanding communities.** Brushstrokes has a very good understanding of the communities it serves. A critical factor is the lived experiences of a number of staff, as well as the open and welcoming environment nurtured by the charity.
- **Holistic models and linking to wider initiatives.** Brushstrokes individual activities complement one another well, and decentralised assessment processes mean better access for service users to the services they need. Work around the service user panel dovetails with other initiatives such as Asylum Guides (Refugee Action), community research (University of Birmingham), leadership and public speaking training (Caplor Horizons).
- **Volunteering.** Brushstrokes has significant voluntary support for its activities, with a bank of around 80 volunteers contributing to services. Many volunteers have lived experience, and/or are ex-service users - which builds community and provides progression opportunities. Some volunteers progress to become members of staff. Volunteering is now a key feature of outreach efforts, which increases effectiveness.
- **Ethos.** Brushstrokes have a very strong organisational ethos centred around meeting client need, collaboration, proactivity, and openness (sharing information).

## Barriers

- **Service user circumstances can be a barrier to greater representation.** With many of Brushstrokes clients being asylum seekers, there are inherent barriers from being in that situation with some individuals not willing to be a more prominent voice (i.e. public speaking) for fear of reprisals.
- **External environment affects service user voice.** Preconceptions and negativity in the press can have an effect on the openness of service users, or the willingness to get involved in the first place.
- **Funding environment.** The national funding environment for resettlement tends to be reactive (i.e. specific targeted resettlement schemes), this means Brushstrokes has to be agile and often has to take risks to meet needs and wait for the funding to catch-up.

## Improvements

- **Service User panel.** To be more effective, it would be good for service users to begin advocating for peers more. Greater awareness among staff might help to recruit a more representative membership. Creating different roles within the panel (on top of pre-existing leadership roles) might be valuable in giving members more ownership. A more diverse/representative group would be beneficial (to match the client base) and more opportunities for training would be helpful.
- **Employment advice.** Reach might be improved by providing group sessions. More work could be done in better informing service users of their rights and obligations in employment. Better long-term follow-up of clients would allow better understanding of outcomes, and provide opportunities to help further.
- **Organisational.** An improvement noted by stakeholders was a better recognition of referrals from other organisations.

# Service user outcomes (1): lottery funded posts are helping to broaden outcomes in terms of employability, building knowledge, confidence and connectedness

**Employment and access to benefits.** 470 clients received employment advice in Year 2 of which 73% were new cases. Various outcomes are shown in figure 3, with ultimately over 100 clients supported into employment. In year 1, Brushstrokes secured welfare benefits gains of £885k as a result of advice provided.

**Skills, knowledge and confidence.** Stakeholders and staff reflected on the ethos of the charity in not creating dependencies; ensuring that service users are empowered and enabled to find employment, access services or integrate into the UK. Service user panel members have access to training and public speaking opportunities to increase their skills and confidence. Advice work embeds knowledge of systems, and service users were aware of their rights in the UK (over 50% of service users agreed or strongly agreed they were aware of their rights). Volunteers were often progressing into employment, both within Brushstrokes and among other organisations.

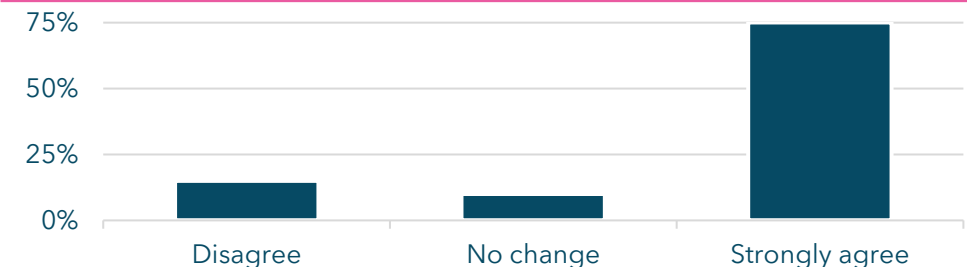
**Connected to the community.** The Community Development coordinator role has increased the frequency and breadth of activities offered by the charity. This, alongside the approach and ethos of other support, strengthens Brushstrokes connections with and between members of the community. Activities have expanded to film nights, football, events, gardening, and art classes. Two fifths (39.9%, n=128) attended local events and activities regularly (n=128).

**Reduced social isolation.** The community café is a good example of how Brushstrokes reduces social isolation; this continues to be popular, often oversubscribed. Frequent meetings of the men's and women's group contribute to reduced social isolation. Proactive outreach work in contingency hotels contributes also. Nearly half of service users surveyed agreed or strongly agreed they had friends and people to turn to if needed, a quarter neither agreed nor disagreed (n=128).

Figure 3: Employment and benefits advice statistics

	Year 2	Total
Employment Advice clients	470	616
New Employment Advice clients	343	
Support to apply for jobs and submit applications	111	
Attending job fairs	38	
Supported to attend interviews	52	
Secured employment	76	104
Welfare Benefits Advice	804	804

Figure 4: Feeling welcome in the community since accessing support



“If I ever go into Brushstrokes; it's not just new migrants and new communities using their services. All ethnicities, cultures and religions are represented...” **Stakeholder**

# Service user outcomes (2): Brushstrokes is likely to be improving health outcomes and service users have the opportunity to engage and influence policy/strategy

**Improved mental and physical health.** While expanded advice and employment support offers are likely to lead indirectly to this outcome, more tangible examples come in the form of orientation sessions or new arrivals, and outreach in contingency hotels. Often this has been in response to public health concerns.

Mens' and Women's groups both actively and specifically promote wellness and good mental health. Importantly, Brushstrokes is helping to challenge stigma related to health from the trust it has built with many communities. A recent survey of service users (see figure 2) shows that over four fifths of service users believe their wellbeing has improved since being helped by Brushstrokes.

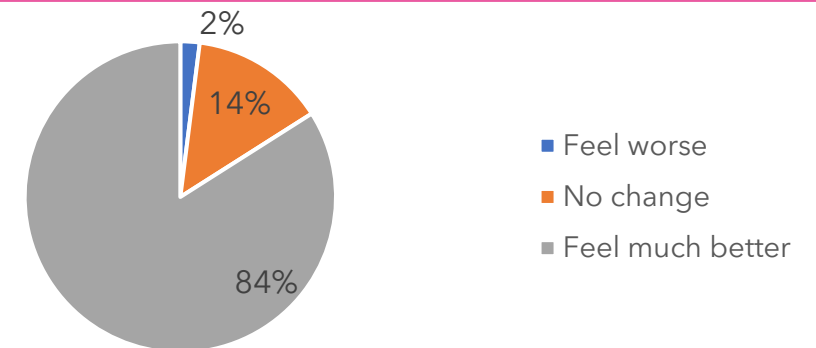
Evidence from Brushstrokes surveys demonstrates that over two thirds of service users agreed or strongly agreed they could access health services when needed. A half of service users (52%, n=129) agreed or agreed strongly that they feel control of things in their life, and nearly three quarters had things in life to look forward to.

**Civil society engagement, influencing local policy and strategy.** The service user panel has contributed to various consultation exercises including those on NHS service provision, the commission for integration, perinatal mental health. There are increasing opportunities for service users to advocate for others through training and public speaking opportunities.

A key influencing agenda for the service user panel has been issues in Application Registration Cards (ARC), with concerns have been raised with local colleges about access to education and training provision.

Over three fifths (60%, n=129) agreed or strongly agreed they were active in a faith, community or voluntary group.

Figure 5: Wellbeing improvements since attending Brushstrokes



“Brushstrokes are really key in health inclusion; helping migrants to access what they are entitled to, increasing their knowledge, navigating systems and articulating their health concerns” **Stakeholder**

“If a problem isn't solved, we can at least explain more about what we're facing in our journey; it's important we have a voice” **Service user panel member**

“There are lots of opportunities. Often there are courses that might pop up, which you can join - for example on presentation skills.” **Service user panel member**

# Organisational outcomes: Brushstrokes is increasing its reach and is increasingly led by lived experience

○ **Greater reach into new communities.** As mentioned previously (reach and KPIs section), Brushstrokes is demonstrating increased reach and diversity of its client base. Expansion of advice work, facilitated by lottery funding, is driving a greater geographic reach (for example immigration advice in Dudley). Brushstrokes have a high degree of trust and embeddedness with communities, stakeholders often view this as a unique part of the charity's offer. For example, engaging with Roma and Gypsy community.

○ **More effective referrals of complex cases into Brushstrokes.** Good partnership working, particularly with the advice commissioning function in the council, has led to more appropriate referrals overall. Volunteers are now supporting advice work, reducing the administration burden and meaning that trained staff can focus more on complex cases.

○ **Work led by lived experiences.** There are a number of mechanisms that mean that Brushstrokes work is increasingly led by lived experiences. A representative of the Panel sits on the Brushstrokes Management Committee, minutes from meetings are published and shared among staff, and staff members regularly attend panel meetings to talk about specific issues. In addition, discrete developments are often discussed at the panel, for example the refreshing of the Brushstrokes Website. Staff told us that they often consulted with members of the panel (and other service users) ad-hoc to get quick feedback. Importantly, issues raised by the panel are informing approaches to advocacy and influencing by Brushstrokes. A WhatsApp group aids communication, particularly in raising and discussing emerging issues.

“In a photography project linked with contingency accommodation, service users were encouraged to tell stories through photos. This helped share learning for others; other residents can their experiences and there is a greater appreciation of their struggles”  
**Stakeholder**

“Brushstrokes are so aware of needs. They are really valuable to the Council as they are trusted in communities, and it takes time to build that trust”  
**Stakeholder**

## Additional outcome: Levering external support

Posts funded by the VOICES grant have been able to lever in additional funding and expertise:

- **Explore, renew adapt project** - the community development post is funded for two hours a week by Refugee Action to be engaged in a national experts by experience initiative
- **Family advice** - The benefits and family support worker post has levered additional funding from Sandwell Consortium to deliver family advice in Wednesbury
- **Employment support** - Employment Services Coordinator has supported a number of wider funded activities including Refugee transitions outcome framework employment support , Homes for Ukraine employment support , WMCA Multiply 50+ project (via Sandwell Consortium) among others
- **Digital skills** - volume of support has been widened by further lottery funding and collaboration with Sandwell consortium.

# Stakeholder outcomes: Brushstrokes is heavily influential among stakeholders, aided by its expertise, lived experience and leadership style

**Positive influence on local plans, policies and services.** For some stakeholders, Brushstrokes already had a strong influence on policy, plans and services. This has been accelerated more recently due to more time and space within the organisation to attend events and collaborate. A greater number of staff are involved in this activity. Greater formalisation of the service user panel adds weight to the arguments Brushstrokes puts forward.

There is a culture and ethos of strong partnership working; and a particularly strong relationship with Sandwell MBC which means there is often significant influence. Brushstrokes were central both to the council's bid to become a Borough of Sanctuary, and the obligations that brings. Brushstrokes was also instrumental in developing services for families who are at risk of being destitute with no recourse to public funds. Brushstrokes arguments to policy makers are well articulated and backed up by lived experiences. Brushstrokes lead by example, generating authority through its actions, and when needed can be assertive in advocating for change.

**Increased capacity to support complex cases.** Brushstrokes bring significant expertise - particularly with respect to immigration advice whereby they are the only organisation in the borough qualified to OISC level 3. Across many Brushstrokes services, a commitment to training staff helps to deal better with complexity.

**Brushstrokes is the first port of call for new communities, taking pressure off other services.** Brushstrokes proactivity in engaging new communities (particularly in contingency accommodation) means they are more likely to build relationships and trust that make the charity a first port of call. The holistic offering of Brushstrokes is critical, with most directorates in the council working with Brushstrokes to a certain extent. The ability of the charity to lever in external funding is positive for service delivery, in a constrained funding environment.

“Brushstrokes were fundamental partners in achieving the borough of sanctuary status, both the staff team, and the service users with lived experience” **Stakeholder**

“We will continue to work with Brushstrokes and the Service User panel, as they are invaluable in supporting activities, strategies, and meeting the obligations connected with borough of sanctuary status ” **Stakeholder**

“Brushstrokes do not always rely on the local authority for funding, they have often worked with larger external organisations that provide support and interventions outside of council funding that benefits our population. ” **Stakeholder**

“Brushstrokes are a preferred and trusted partner. They have strong links with health partners, and education and college partners. They are proactive in making new networks, identifying gaps, and telling us about the need. ” **Stakeholder**



# Impacts: many of the impacts initially envisaged are likely to be arising from the project

- **Better meeting service user needs.** There is an overall increased visibility of need as a result of the service user panel. Stakeholders are more aware of the panel, and the frequency of the panel meeting makes service user voice less ad hoc. Service users are organically identifying new needs, and shaping services internally and externally to best meet those needs. Enhanced employment and digital skills support is a clear need among clients that has been supported by Brushstrokes, as well as expanding advice services.
- **Reduced burden on health and social care.** While it is difficult to robustly evidence this impact, Brushstrokes work in health inequalities is likely to be identifying needs earlier and going some way to alleviating pressures on stretched healthcare services. Stakeholders commented that Brushstrokes was supporting migrant health needs more comprehensively than other geographical areas.
- **More representative migrant voice.** While the formalisation of service user voice has been a positive development for Brushstrokes, more work needs to be done to ensure balanced representation of all the service users served by the charity. The group tends to have greater representation among asylum seekers, rather than refugees. Historically, particular groups were over-represented – although that has lessened over time.
- **Community cohesion.** Stakeholders were unequivocal in their view that Brushstrokes was a key driver of community cohesion in Sandwell. Projects and activities were attracting existing (and non-migrant communities). Survey evidence showed that nearly three fifths of respondents agreed or strongly agreed they belonged to a group or community that includes people from a different background (n=127).

“Brushstrokes are a quick responder to immediate basic need. Do feel their ethos is more about empowering and seeking to change the circumstances.” **Stakeholder**

“Brushstrokes educate about the health system. Letting people know they can see a practice nurse or pharmacist. Through describing the system, and giving those NHS navigation sessions, people are not avoiding health problems. So there is a real health outcome impact.” **Stakeholder**

“Brushstrokes massively contribute to integration. Their whole approach is about resettlement; it’s very much about creating independence, making sure there are no dependencies with staff” **Stakeholder**

“Brushstrokes is a relaxed and comfortable environment. Service users are able to meet people on the same journey – often connect and friendships develop” **Stakeholder**

# Concluding remarks and recommendations

## Conclusions

The evaluation, while small in scale, saw reasonable evidence that outcomes as initially envisaged were being met.

Lottery funding has provided extra capacity for the charity to grow services that meet needs among its client base.

The funding has been complemented by internal changes whereby a new tier of management has been introduced to reduce operational pressures on the project manager.

Alongside an increase in staffing, and positive progression between roles, Brushstrokes is maintaining its organisational ethos.

Brushstrokes is a trusted organisation among service users, and has close working relationships with key stakeholders across Sandwell.

Influencing of local policy and strategy is enhanced by the service user panel, building on an already very strong culture of listening to the voices of lived experience. There is some evidence that the organisation is influencing at a national level, with appearances on national news programmes (e.g. BBC) and work with national organisations.

## Recommendations

- **Continue work to diversify the service user panel.** Consider ways to attract new members to the panel, including greater awareness of the role among staff, and specifically targeting under-represented communities.
- **Strengthen use of indicators of integration.** Using the national indicators is valuable to broaden evidence of outcomes. Strengthen collection of this data to examine trends and also seek data on external comparators where possible.
- **Introduce more advocacy into the service user panel.** Consider finding an external provider to deliver advocacy training to service user panel members, and increase opportunities to gather wider opinions from service users.
- **Consider suggested improvements.** A number of potential improvements are noted in the process learning section provided by staff and stakeholders. Give some consideration to group employability sessions, longer term follow-up, creating different roles within the service user panel, and greater recognition of referrals.

# Appendix: Supporting stakeholder feedback (1/3)

<p><b>Reach</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Brushstrokes are doing an excellent job on reach, they already have outreach to one hotel [dispersal hotel].”</li> <li>• “When council services were shut down, Brushstrokes were still open (car park access). That lead to a identifying a new community they (or the council) had ever engaged with before and they advocated that they needed support on their behalf”</li> <li>• “It would be good to have a Brushstrokes in each of the towns [making up Sandwell]. Would be fabulous from a personal point of view.”</li> <li>• “Brushstrokes are often the ‘first boots on the ground’. In response to an urgent need, often they say ‘I can get someone in there in a couple of days’. It’s a testament to their passion and commitment to new arrivals, and meeting their needs.”</li> </ul>
<p><b>Partnership</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “We have a really close partnership with Brushstrokes, we really appreciate them”</li> <li>• “Brushstrokes are not precious about clients, some organisations have ‘their’ community and ‘their’ population. But Brushstrokes has a sharing culture. If they’ve identified a need or a community needs intervention, then they will work with a partner organisation”</li> <li>• “Our services complement each other - we’re not specialist in immigration advisors; this is the main area where we refer people to Brushstrokes. We all recognise specialisms.”</li> <li>• “Brushstrokes heavily involved in supporting the STEPs project [Transition Education for New Migrants]. They support access, wider advice, language, health support etc. Brushstrokes are quite proactive in making new connections.”</li> <li>• “They are not money led. Really think they are extraordinary partners. They are always trying to solve problems together. For instance, we were talking about food banks/poverty and Brushstrokes have interesting and helpful ideas to reduce dependence.”</li> <li>• “We have a really close partnership with Brushstrokes, we really appreciate them”</li> </ul>
<p><b>Added value and enablers</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Brushstrokes attracts external funding. They are not just reliant on Local Authority funding. They are very good in identifying a need and getting external funding, which improves the health and welling of our communities.”</li> <li>• If Brushstrokes take on an action, you can be quite confident it will get actioned.”</li> <li>• “They are a treasure really. They are a good example of, if you get a good culture, it attracts others. ”</li> <li>• “The mix and diversity of all the service users, and volunteers is an indicator of a good organisation. Also the amount of volunteers that support it. They value their volunteers; taking them on a journey and building a sense of belonging.”</li> <li>• “We’d be lost without them”</li> <li>• “Their staff have lived experience, that is a strengths of the organisation”</li> <li>• “Conscious of Brushstrokes having two key advantages. While it has a church/parish background, I don’t think it is perceived as faith-based. That is helpful. Other key strength are Brushstrokes connections with Sandwell council.”</li> </ul>

# Appendix: Supporting stakeholder feedback (2/3)

<b>Influencing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• “Brushstrokes have more clout as they are larger. Their network is better, and more effective in advocacy and influencing policy.”</li><li>• “Brushstrokes was one of the first to say we need to realign funding towards digital skills - they advocated for redirected funding to buy tablets and devices so people can continue language learning.”</li><li>• “Brushstrokes have been vital and been quite forthright in tackling issues. Statutory organisations are often bound by reams of regulations and funding restrictions. But they are quite vocal in saying this is our need, what are you doing to address it.”</li><li>• “Re: the NRPF pathway, if you go to most Local Authorities they will cringe and hide. But Brushstrokes has been quite forthright about finding ways to support vulnerable clients. We do now have support, via section 17, for families, to refer through to the Brushstrokes team. It’s a fantastic model of good practice.”</li><li>• “Brushstrokes are definitely having an influence outside Sandwell. They are involved in regional partnerships and have great relationships with orgs outside the Borough, that look at national policy - asking awkward questions. They are very vocal in making things better for vulnerable people.”</li><li>• If anything is going on [nationally]- they will be aware of it and telling statutory organisations about national policy”</li><li>• “Brushstrokes have been on BBC news, they are winning awards, and doing media interviews. That increased visibility helps them in relation to taking on national campaigns.”</li><li>• “Brushstrokes know loads about what’s going on in the region. They keep an eye on changes in legislation and inform us about what’s going on.”</li><li>• “Brushstrokes often move into the need and we often have to catch-up.”</li></ul>
<b>Service user panel</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• “We’ve used the panel, and where we’ve sought opinions, they are always really forthcoming. Also forthcoming in terms of case studies and sharing those stories. Outside of their participant voice initiative, they often do activities to help people tell their stories”</li><li>• “The panel definitely helps, with the whole aspect of hearing the voice of lived experience. The key question in terms of accessing funding is how is that lived experience voice generated and used to feed into policy and also improve the service delivery in the organisation”.</li></ul>

# Appendix: Supporting stakeholder feedback (3/3)

<b>Integration and community cohesion</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• “Brushstrokes is right at the heart of the community in Smethwick and the immediate surrounding area.”</li><li>• “If I ever go into Brushstrokes; it’s not just new migrants and new communities using their services. All ethnicities, cultures and religions are represented. The loveliness about it is that cohesion that Brushstrokes builds. If you’ve ever been to the coffee morning, its just buzzing. Lots of different people from different places.”</li></ul>
<b>Health outcomes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• “The work they do in health is very significant. Probably been ahead of some other boroughs. Brushstrokes are a close partner to the NHS, e.g. doing training GP specialists in migrant health.”</li></ul>