

# JOINING THE DOTS IN SANDWELL

## Joining the Dots in Sandwell



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On 10th October, we held our #RethinkingRefugee event in Sandwell, gathering council representatives and members of local businesses and community groups to discuss refugee resettlement and integration, and how we can rethink refugees as assets to the local community.

Topics covered the untapped economic potential of refugees, barriers to integration, and approaches to facing this challenge. Speakers included:

Surinder Singh (Electoral Participation Officer, Sandwell Council)  
Fuad Mahamed (CEO, Ashley Community Housing)  
Lucy Williamson (Himilo Training)  
Conrad Parke (Regeneration & Partnerships Manager, Sandwell Council)  
Abdulgadir Ali (Manager, Ileys Community Association)  
Dave Newall (Project Manager, Brushstrokes Sandwell)  
Richard Thickpenny (Business Development Manager, Ashley Community Housing)  
David Jepson (Director, Himilo Training)  
Cllr Syeda Khatun MBE (Deputy Leader & Cabinet Member for Neighbourhoods and Communities, Sandwell Council)  
Haile Michael (ACH tenant)

In his presentation, ACH CEO Fuad Mahamed described ACH's journey and its development in the context of the global refugee crisis. He discussed the need to see refugees as a resource, and to focus not only on humanitarian support, but on sustainable labour market integration. Lucy Williamson further explained the work we do through training courses and careers advice.

Following this, Conrad Parke of Sandwell Council presented his work on USE-IT!, a project to train people with overseas qualifications and fill NHS skills gaps, which had impressive results. Having exceeded its targets and been implemented in a wider area, the scheme stood out as a practical example of how we can make the most of refugees' skills and abilities, and create wider community benefits.

Discussion was then opened up to conference attendees, which prompted a valuable sharing of insights on these issues.

There was overall agreement on the importance of changing perceptions of refugees in the UK, and of unlocking the potential of individuals with overseas qualifications or experience. Maurice Wren, CEO of Refugee Council, spoke eloquently on the need to help businesses, communities and government bodies to see refugee integration as a valuable opportunity, and the impact a unified approach can have.

A particular theme that emerged was the need to 'join the dots' between the work individuals and organisations are doing to improve refugee integration, and to share knowledge and work together to create positive change.

In her closing remarks, Councillor Syeda Khatun MBE spoke of the historical diversity of Sandwell, and its commitment to refugee integration through targeted support and economic opportunity. 'That way, refugees become independent and self-reliant,' she said. 'And at the same time we all benefit from their skills and commitment in the local economy'.

You can read the conference outcome report [here](#).

