

Essential Space

Est 2019

Centre of Inclusive Wellbeing

Our Next Chapter

From a small therapeutic space to a Centre of Inclusive Wellbeing

A report for our team, community and everyone who has helped shape Essential Space



Essential Space began in 2019 with a simple belief: everyone deserves somewhere they can feel safe, heard, valued and able to be themselves.

Our beginnings were certainly not glamorous. Our founder, SJ Bolton-Locke, started this journey from 1 shared therapy room, up three fairly horrific flights of stairs, with no heating or running hot water.

None of that mattered to the people who came through the door

What mattered was having a safe space. Somewhere they mattered. Somewhere the conversation wasn't driven by status, power or judgement, but by compassion, connection and what they needed.

That early ethos became the foundation of Essential Space.

Since 2019, we have operated as a not-for-profit organisation, growing carefully in response to the people and communities around us. What began with a team of just two people grew to include 8 counselling trainees, and now we see as many as 56 in our team today, and a total of 93 practitioners in our Essential Space community. Our overall therapeutic session count has risen from 1092 in 2020 to 19,020 in 2026! Our low-cost, affordable counselling and mentoring numbers have grown too, from 493 in 2020 to 12,035 in 2026!

That still feels quite extraordinary! But it demonstrates the need for mental health support in Gloucestershire.

Growing around the people who need us

As our team has grown, so has the way we support people.

Today, Essential Space provides accessible and low-cost counselling and mentoring alongside LEGO® brick-based therapeutic support, Play & Talk, creative mental health support, therapeutic groups and community projects.

We work with children, young people, adults and community groups, recognising that there isn't one right way to process difficult experiences or receive emotional support.

Sometimes talking is exactly what someone needs. Sometimes the words simply aren't there.

A piece of clay, drawing, play, photography, LEGO®, movement, or another creative process can offer another way to communicate something that is difficult to say aloud. This is one reason creativity has become such an important part of how we think about therapeutic support at Essential Space.

We invite our clients to shape their own support, encouraging them to think about what they need from us, whether that is talking therapy, creative expression or more practical support such as mentoring.

Our LEGO®-based therapeutic service continues to grow, and this autumn we are training four additional therapists to develop this work further. Used thoughtfully and appropriately, this approach can support people across different ages and developmental stages with communication, confidence, relationships, self-awareness and opportunities for positive change.

Listening to the people we support

One of the things that matters most to us is whether the people accessing Essential Space actually experience our service in the way we hope they do.

Our latest annual 360° feedback saw our highest level of participation in our anonymous client survey so far.

Behind those responses are real people and real experiences. We have received incredibly moving accounts of positive change, people describing how Essential Space, and the individual supporting them, helped them understand differently, navigate difficult periods, improve their mental health and make meaningful changes in their lives and overall wellbeing.

These stories matter to us far more than numbers alone. They remind us of our why.

Our community has grown too. Essential Space now reaches far beyond the counselling room. While low-cost counselling for adults, both face-to-face and online, remains our largest not for profit service, our community-based work and partnerships have continued to develop, enabling us to reach more people across Gloucestershire.

We now receive referrals and work alongside a growing network of local services, including NHS Let's Talk, Gloucestershire GP surgeries, local schools and Early Help services. These relationships help us to provide accessible therapeutic support within the communities where people already live, learn and seek help. We have also had the opportunity to connect with young adults through Gloucester City Homes and to support people experiencing adversity through our partnership with Gloucester City Mission. Our work with Cheltenham Central GP surgeries, local networks and Social Prescribing services has further strengthened the connections between Essential Space, primary care and community-based support.

Our neurodiversity support has also continued to grow. Building on our longstanding partnership with Sara from Peace of Mind, we have expanded this area of our work to include dedicated support groups for neurodivergent adults, as well as groups for parents and carers. This reflects our wider commitment to providing neuro-affirming support that recognises and responds to people as individuals.

Our Identity Space project, which supports LGBTQIA+ people across Gloucestershire, was also recognised with a Community Award in Stroud. This meant a great deal to the team. Identity Space was created around a simple but important principle: people should be able to access support, connection and community without feeling that they need to hide or change parts of who they are in order to belong.

Together, these partnerships and projects represent an important part of how Essential Space has evolved; from providing therapeutic support within our own rooms to becoming part of a much wider network of care, connection and inclusive wellbeing across Gloucestershire.

What inclusive means to us

Inclusivity means considering the person in front of us rather than expecting them to fit a particular service.

It includes people of different ages, cultures, ethnicities, faiths and beliefs; disabled people; neurodivergent people; LGBTQIA+ people; people of different gender identities; people experiencing financial hardship; individuals and families who have experienced trauma or exclusion; and people whose lives, relationships, communication or support needs simply don't fit neatly into boxes.

Whatever someone's background, identity, income, family structure or route into our service, they are welcome in our space.

Learning from what we have experienced

Our training work has grown from the experience gained through providing therapeutic services within our community. The mentoring team have begun a volunteer-led project supporting mentees with day-to-day challenges and helping people grow the skills and confidence to self-advocate. The team have developed training for team members, with the first rollout beginning in the Stroud area, and future plans to extend into Gloucester and Cheltenham in spring 2027.

In 2027, we also plan to begin teaching our Level 5 Diploma in Creative Counselling for Children and Young People aged 4–18 years.



The programme is rooted in something we see repeatedly in practice: creativity can be an incredibly powerful aid to express and communicate, particularly when words alone are difficult to find or simply aren't enough.

We want future counsellors to understand not just what creative approaches they can use, but how to use them safely, ethically and meaningfully while keeping the therapeutic relationship and the young person at the centre.

2026: securing our future

For Essential Space, 2026 has been about foundations.

After seven years of operating as a not-for-profit Community Interest Company, alongside a separate Ltd company established to support the development of our therapeutic training, we have been working towards the next chapter for Essential Space, becoming a registered charity.

This transition will help us protect and secure the future of the services we have built, strengthen our foundations for continued growth, and formally recognise the public-benefit work we provide to communities across Gloucestershire and, through our online support, to people throughout the UK.

We have welcomed new volunteers and are developing our new trustee team to strengthen our governance and provide thoughtful oversight as Essential Space continues to grow.

Growth matters, but purposeful growth matters more.

We want the people helping to govern Essential Space to keep us connected to our original purpose, ask important questions, protect the people who use our services and ensure our work remains ethical, meaningful, financially responsible and genuinely beneficial to the communities we exist to support.

Our next chapter has a new name

Essential Space, Centre of Inclusive Wellbeing

We will still be known simply as Essential Space. But our full name captures what has been at the heart of our work since it began in 2019.

I am especially thankful to the colleagues and friends who believed in those early dreams and helped turn them into the Essential Space we know today: Reece, Jen, Jo and Leann, and to our leadership team who have supported our more recent development, including Shelley as Shadow Director, Jenny, our Agency Coordinator, and Lisa, our New Essential Space Manager.

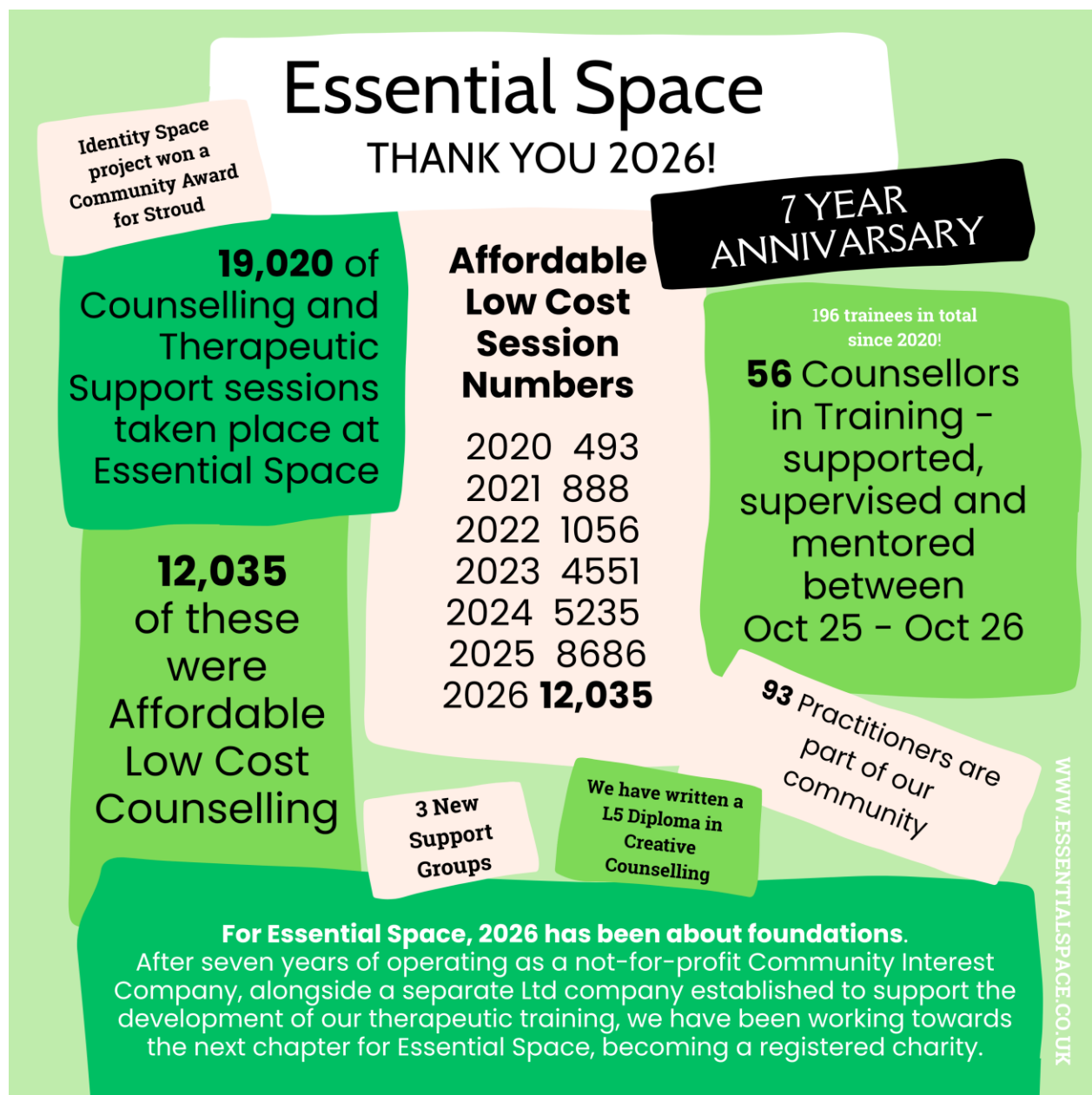
My thanks also go to every client who has trusted us with their story; the 196 trainee counsellors, to date, who have completed their clinical placements with us; the qualified counsellors who have chosen to offer discounted support or base their practice within our spaces; and our dedicated team of supervisors, whose guidance helps us to practise safely, ethically and always with the person at the heart of the work.

We don't believe support should be better because somebody can afford more.

We don't believe someone's identity, diagnosis, difference, communication style, age, background or life experience should determine whether they feel they belong.

**We believe in sitting alongside people and providing
safe spaces, and a place where they matter.**

And that is the foundation we are taking with us into our next chapter



We don't expect anyone to become a different version of themselves before they are worthy of support. Just meaningful, affirming, compassionate and sometimes difficult conversations, held as safely as we can, and cantered around the person who has trusted us enough to walk through our door. Essential Space has never been built by one person. It has grown through collaborative commitment and the belief of a whole community.

SJ Bolton-Locke October 2026 - Founder of Essential Space