

RAS 21

Ymchwiliad i ffoaduriaid a cheiswyr lloches yng Nghymru

Inquiry into refugees and asylum seekers in Wales

Ymateb gan: City of Sanctuary

Response from: City of Sanctuary



Senedd Committee on Equality, Local Government and Communities - Inquiry on Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Wales

Submission from City of Sanctuary (Joint submission from City of Sanctuary UK & Ireland¹ and Wales Cities of Sanctuary project²) – compiled by Siân Summers-Rees, Chief Officer, City of Sanctuary, Tel: 07376 075303, sian@uk.cityofsanctuary.org

1.0 Introduction

1.1 This joint submission includes information derived from consultation with people seeking sanctuary and City of Sanctuary groups across Wales. It also relies heavily on the experience of staff who have worked in the refugee sector for a number of years. The response mainly addresses how the Welsh Government (WG) can support our vision of providing a welcome and building a culture of hospitality for people seeking sanctuary from violence or persecution. Additionally, we are part of the Welsh Refugee Coalition and wholeheartedly support the recommendations made within their submission.

2.0 About City of Sanctuary

2.1 City of Sanctuary is a grassroots movement dedicated to [building a culture of hospitality](#) and welcome, especially for people seeking sanctuary from war and persecution. Our growing network of over 80 groups includes [towns, cities and rural areas across the UK](#) and Ireland. They bring local people together with refugees with the aim that, wherever refugees go, they should feel safe and valued, find people who welcome them and understand their situation, and develop a sense of belonging. They mobilise support from local individuals, groups and organisations, offering the chance to meet and work together with refugees, including volunteering to provide practical help, and supporting improvements in service accessibility and inclusion.

2.2 The City of Sanctuary UK and Ireland organisation seeks to support the network. In Wales, it currently supports the 'Wales Cities of Sanctuary' project, which is co-ordinated by Displaced People In Action (DPIA) and is funded by the Big Lottery Fund. This project works primarily in Swansea and Cardiff, which have the largest populations of dispersed asylum seekers. It seeks also to spread the City of Sanctuary vision throughout Wales, with the aim of Wales becoming a 'Nation of Sanctuary'. The project outcomes are:

- a. The welcome of people seeking sanctuary will be improved across Cardiff and Swansea through the City of Sanctuary movement.

¹<https://cityofsanctuary.org/>

²<https://swansea.cityofsanctuary.org/>

- b. Community relations will be strengthened through an increase in the understanding of refugee and asylum issues in the receiving community.
 - c. The lives of people seeking sanctuary will be improved reducing isolation and increasing integration.
 - d. There will be an increase in access to services and an improvement within services in order to meet the needs of people seeking sanctuary.
- 2.3 Over the past year, in response to the biggest refugee crisis since the Second World War, the movement has grown considerably. In Wales, the network of City of Sanctuary groups has grown from two to 10, to include Hay Brecon & Talgarth, Neath Port Talbot, the Valleys, West Wales, Wrexham, Knighton, Bangor and Abergavenny as well as Swansea and Cardiff, with interest in forming groups in Newport, Montgomery and elsewhere.
- 2.4 With the exception of specific but limited resettlement schemes such as the Syrian Vulnerable People Relocation Programme, UK government support for asylum seekers and refugees is continually being cut back, while policy is aimed at creating a more hostile environment for undocumented migrants generally. As Maurice Wren, CEO of the (British) Refugee Council, has pointed out, it is no longer feasible within funds available to provide a comprehensive professional support service to meet the needs of asylum seekers and refugees. It is therefore necessary to create partnerships with grassroots support organisations and networks, of which City of Sanctuary is a prime example, in order to mobilise voluntary effort to enhance the limited professional resources available.
- 2.5 This submission is written with the commitment of the Welsh Government to becoming a 'Nation of Sanctuary' very much in mind. What is central to this concept is the principle that "refugee inclusion begins on day one of arrival", as outlined in WG's Refugee Inclusion Strategy, and we welcome WG's ongoing support for this principle. In order for Wales to become a 'Nation of Sanctuary' WG needs to be working proactively to support the City of Sanctuary movement to build a culture of welcome and hospitality across all spheres of society in Wales. Throughout this submission, and in dealing with the terms of reference outlined by the committee, we have outlined a number of recommendations which would help to realise that vision.

Recommendation 1 – WG should work with City of Sanctuary to build a culture of welcome and hospitality across all spheres of society in Wales so that Wales can truly become a 'Nation of Sanctuary'.

3.0 The pace and effectiveness of the Welsh Government approach to resettling refugees through the UK Government's Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (SVPRS)

- 3.1 WG's coordination role with regards to the SVPRS is to be very much commended. However WG should take a more proactive approach to the scheme by promoting best practice and disseminating information about what works well. For example, City of Sanctuary groups across the UK have undertaken activities to support local authorities to welcome people seeking sanctuary and promote a culture of welcome in their communities. Unfortunately some City of Sanctuary groups in Wales have experienced low engagement from local authorities. *"Professionals and agencies can sometimes appear to discourage rather than facilitate the contribution of voluntary individuals and groups. Yet, as [the local authority] has repeatedly stressed, the goodwill and involvement of the*

community is crucial for the settlement programme to be successful”.

- 3.2 One of the key ways that City of Sanctuary groups can support the SVPRS is to increase the opportunities for relationships to develop between local people and those seeking sanctuary. For example, the Neath Port Talbot group has been approached to act as a conduit to local communities and organisations, which can thereby be encouraged to include people seeking sanctuary in their activities. This is particularly important in areas which have not received people seeking sanctuary before. Through focusing on activities that bring people together, City of Sanctuary groups promote community cohesion and inclusion. As these groups are run by volunteers they offer good value for money. It is also better value to provide activities for all people in the community, compared to projects aimed specifically at supporting asylum seekers and refugees.
- 3.3 We recognise local authorities’ duties with regards to safeguarding and data protection City of Sanctuary groups are able to DBS check lead volunteers, recognise that personal details cannot be given out and are mindful that the safety of these families is paramount. City of Sanctuary is working on a ‘Top Tips’ toolkit which aims to address the issues that have arisen thus far and promote best practice examples.

Recommendation 2 – WG to promote the involvement of City of Sanctuary groups across Wales to support resettled refugees arriving through the SVPRS and to increase opportunities for relationships between local people and those seeking sanctuary.

- 3.4 A major concern is that there is now a two tier system of support for people seeking sanctuary, which causes a very real risk of division in the asylum seeker and refugee community. Syrian refugees are given bespoke support as they are welcomed at their arrival point, taken to their housing, supported with cash for their first few weeks until benefits start, accompanied to health and education related appointments and supported to find employment. This is in stark contrast with the support other refugees receive. Asylum seekers waiting for a decision on their asylum claim are not allowed to work and have to live on just over £5 per day. If the claim is successful they are given only 28 days in which to ‘move on’ to the mainstream benefit system (or a job) and find their own accommodation. During this 28 day period administrative delays with National Insurance numbers and benefit claims often result in people becoming destitute.
- 3.5 Whilst there is some specialist 'move on' advice funded by WG, it is limited due to capacity and there is no specialist education and employment advice. We would draw the committee’s attention to the previous Refugee Integration and Employment Service. In addition to advice this service also offered mentoring which we believe is essential to support integration. Swansea City of Sanctuary has a very successful scheme offering both mentoring and orientation for asylum seekers on dispersal. This service often leads to relationships being formed with members of the local community, and to the participant taking on a volunteering role themselves which further helps them integrate in the local community. This seems particularly critical under the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, through which WG has committed to putting cohesion and equality at the heart of how Public Bodies deliver policies and services in the future.

Recommendation 3: As far as possible the good practice in terms of support to refugees in the SVPRS should be replicated for all those seeking sanctuary. Similarly, the good practice being developed in mentoring asylum seekers should be used as the basis for mentoring services aimed at new refugees.

3.6 Please note also Recommendations 6, 8 and 13 below, on Housing for New Refugees, on Education and Employment Advice and on refugee awareness training for advisers in mainstream employment and education organisations. We would draw attention to the pilot underway between UKVI and DWP in England which is providing specialist JobCentre Advisers to speed up the 'move-on' process. If successful in preventing homelessness and destitution we would welcome the roll-out of this initiative in Wales as soon as possible.

4.0 The effectiveness of the Refugee and Asylum Seeker Delivery Plan

The City of Sanctuary response here will focus on five main areas: Housing, Healthcare, Education, Employment and Volunteering.

4.1 Housing

4.1.1 Asylum Accommodation

4.1.1.1 Housing is one of the primary concerns that the City of Sanctuary movement has identified. We have enough evidence to state with confidence that the quality of housing provided by Clearsprings (Home Office contractor in Wales) is often very poor. We receive frequent reports of boilers or cookers not working, inadequate furniture and carpets. There is a lack of maintenance and the housing is often damp which can cause health issues. In one case a lack of running hot water contributed to the young boy in the family becoming ill and missing a week of school. The parents' concerns are now compounded by a penalty notice issued by the school for non-attendance.

4.1.1.2 When housing concerns are being addressed (usually after a considerable length of time), it is often without due respect for the privacy of the occupants. In another report from an asylum seeker who is also a Swansea City of Sanctuary volunteer, an electrician called out by Clearsprings to fix her cooker arrived late in the evening and in conversation with her was very disrespectful to people seeking sanctuary.

4.1.1.3 Perhaps most worryingly, people frequently report fear that highlighting maintenance issues will result in being moved out of an area where they may have only just been able to settle. Although Swansea City of Sanctuary has a very high number of asylum seekers volunteering with them, none were prepared to give named accounts of the issues with housing they have experienced for this reason.

4.1.1.4 Although asylum accommodation is not devolved, there are ways in which WG can use its powers to seek to improve this dire situation. Action to address the quality of housing for people seeking sanctuary is imperative, not least because of the links between housing and physical and mental health.

Recommendation 4 – WG must do all in its power to improve the quality of asylum accommodation in Wales, including:

- actively engage with the UK Visa & Immigration (UKVI) Asylum Accommodation and Support Transformation (AASST) stakeholder consultation on asylum housing;**
- call for the quality of asylum housing to be scrutinised by Welsh Government;**
- ensure that any new contract for asylum housing in Wales brings housing quality standards, complaints procedures, monitoring and enforcement in line with Welsh Quality Housing Standards.**

4.1.2 Destitution and Homelessness among Refused Asylum Seekers

4.1.2.1 City of Sanctuary is aware of increasing numbers of refused asylum seekers who are

evicted from asylum accommodation and have no right to public housing, no access to public funds or benefits and no legal right to work. Some City of Sanctuary member organisations are working to mitigate the effects of this UK policy. For example, in Swansea the SHARE Tawe voluntary hosting scheme provided 1700 bednights of accommodation to 17 destitute asylum seekers in 2015 and reached similar figures in only the first nine months of 2016.

4.1.2.2 City of Sanctuary asserts that the enforced destitution of vulnerable displaced people has no place in Wales and the prevention of destitution should be prioritised.

Recommendation 5 - WG expands the eligibility criteria for the Discretionary Assistance Fund (DAF) to include people seeking sanctuary who are 'Appeal Rights Exhausted'.

4.1.3 Housing for refugees

4.1.3.1 As noted above, the 28 day 'move on' period often proves to be insufficient for refugees to register for housing benefit and mainstream benefits. Whilst families will be regarded as 'priority need' and allocated temporary housing, many single vulnerable refugees experience homelessness and destitution. In Cardiff, the City of Sanctuary worker reports that some hostels report 30% occupancy by refugees. We would call for a unified approach to assessing whether a refugee is in 'priority need'. Consideration should be made of their circumstances and experiences in their country of origin, journey to the UK, time spent in the UK and language difficulties. In Swansea quite often single refugees are found to be in 'priority need' for housing.

Recommendation 6 – WG to issue guidance to local authorities on the priority need assessment for housing for refugees.

4.1.3.2 City of Sanctuary is concerned that the implications of The Immigration Act 2016 contains provisions 'Right to Rent Checks' will lead to increase in discrimination against refugees and result in rise in homelessness.

Recommendation 7 - WG to work with private landlords to raise awareness of different types of migration status to mitigate any impacts of Right to Rent Checks in Wales.

4.2 Health, Wellbeing and Social Care

4.2.1 Swansea benefits from a proactive Health Access Team which works in partnership with City of Sanctuary through referring people seeking sanctuary to its 'Welcome to Swansea' mentoring programme. We call for this best practice and partnership working to be emulated across Wales.

4.2.2 City of Sanctuary nationally has prioritised work on maternity services, supporting asylum seeking women who have experienced these services to speak at conferences and workshops. Maternity Workshops have been held in both Swansea and Cardiff within the past year, attended by health board staff, students and third sector. These cross-sector workshops identified a number of issues, ranging from cultural awareness to access to finance. The Wales Cities of Sanctuary project aims to facilitate further collaboration between the sectors in Swansea, with a view to increasing awareness of the services available, cultural considerations for maternity professionals, and joining up the organisations working with new mothers or mothers-to-be. We would welcome the opportunity to support research and action funded by WG in this area.

4.3 Education

4.3.1 From experience, City of Sanctuary can evidence the need for interventions to improve accessibility to education and training. We are acutely aware that people seeking sanctuary have different levels of education and training, so it is impossible to generalise about needs. The training and skills needs of refugees and asylum seekers may include language skills, other basic skills training, access to further and higher education or professional 'refresher' training courses. Our experience has been that people seeking sanctuary face additional difficulties in accessing education and training opportunities that are not addressed within the Refugee and Asylum Seeker Delivery Plan.

These may include:-

- Poor knowledge of entitlement and training opportunities
- Prohibitive fees and transport costs
- Limited access to childcare
- Lack of good written and spoken English
- Lack of recognition of overseas qualifications or prior learning
- Lack of knowledge of entitlements by the actual education providers

4.3.2 A specialist advice and advocacy employment and education service is needed to address the barriers to education and training asylum seekers and refugees face. This is no longer available in Wales. Previously DPIA's specialist advice service using an action planning approach was designed to overcome the challenges refugees and asylum seekers face when seeking to access employment, education, training and volunteering. Asylum seekers and refugees are often furthest away from the labour market therefore a specialist action planning approach is essential. There was sector-wide acknowledgement that 'dabbling' in areas of advice requiring specialist legal knowledge (e.g. welfare benefits during the current period of rapid reform) can lead to poor advice and increase the problems of the advice seeker.

4.3.3 There is lack of knowledge around the process of transferring skills, experiences and re-qualification in relation to particular professions by both statutory and third sector advice organisations.

4.3.4 NARIC (National Academic Recognition Information Centre) is the national body responsible for validating qualifications attained from countries of origin. However, it does not cater for individuals who have years of experience, skills and knowledge in vocational trades but no formal training, or for refugees who fled their countries of origin without certificates of their qualifications. Previously WG tasked Welsh Refugee Council, in partnership with DPIA, to raise awareness of Credit and Qualification Framework Wales and explore pathways for the recognition of prior learning for new arrivals in Wales. DPIA then led a successful pilot project using the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) as a method of identifying recent and relevant learning or experience which could be recognised and accredited. Unfortunately, no further work was undertaken.

Recommendation 8 – WG to fund a specialist advice and advocacy employment and education service and build on its previous work on the RPL process within the CQFW.

4.3.5 Due to the various kinds of status given to refugees, and the differing situations of asylum seekers depending on where they are in the asylum process, there is complexity around entitlements to education and training. People seeking sanctuary are too often wrongly advised by further and higher education institutions and advice providers about funding for courses. This is evidence of the need for a specialist advocacy service.

4.3.6 The delivery plan fails to address the fact that there is insufficient accredited ESOL provision at the range of levels required (including ILETS, required for qualified professions). Swansea City of Sanctuary states that the only accredited centre is Gower College Swansea, who are consistently oversubscribed. People seeking sanctuary arrive at all times of year, so there is a need for courses to start throughout the academic year.

4.3.7 Transport costs limit access to all means of inclusion but especially to education and training. Even discounted travel passes available to some students are not affordable for asylum seekers as they require an upfront cost (asylum seekers receive only £5 a week asylum support).

Recommendation 9 - The Welsh Government should work with further education colleges to offer a transport subsidy scheme for asylum seeking students.

4.3.8 With a very small level of funding, groups are able to develop conversation clubs and other informal provision. For example, Brecon Hay and Talgarth have assisted with English conversation classes. They identified 8 tutors, of whom 7 have ESOL qualifications. Sessions were delivered by pairs of tutors, in the local library, and we supplied an Arabic/English pictorial dictionary for each family that has been described as 'very helpful'.

Recommendation 10 – The Welsh Government to provide a small amount of funding to bolster the provision of informal English provision.

4.3.9 Due to local government cuts, local authorities are not always equipped to deal with the language needs of asylum seekers and refugees. In November 2016, Swansea City of Sanctuary was able to offer voluntary support to a school in the city as the local authority did not have any access to an interpreter in the language required.

Recommendation 11 – Welsh Government must ensure there is sufficient funding for local authorities to support sanctuary seeking children e.g. for an Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant.

4.4 Employment

4.4.1 The Wales Cities of Sanctuary project has identified the need for greater focus on employability throughout a person's asylum application, preparing them for work should their application be successful. We have found that people seeking sanctuary face various barriers which are not addressed within the delivery plan. These include:-

- Unfamiliarity with UK system and complex job application procedure
- Confusion over entitlements
- Qualifications not recognised
- Lack of UK experience
- Lack of English language skills
- Skills need upgrading

4.4.2 There is a huge variance in the levels of literacy and other skills amongst people seeking sanctuary. Skilled refugees often have great difficulty in establishing the transferability of their skills and qualifications to the UK labour market and the process of requalification. We therefore reiterate our call for the Welsh Government to fund a specialist education and employment advice service and re-visit the previous work started on the RPL and CQFW (recommendation 8).

- 4.4.3 Readiness for work training sessions which are suitable for asylum seekers and refugees who may have never accessed learning at all or have not undertaken any learning activities for a long time are also essential. This tailored training has previously proved to be an important stepping stone to further learning for many people seeking sanctuary e.g. CIEH Level 2 Food Safety & Health and Safety and Basic First Aid. These types of activity are hugely beneficial as they improve skills whilst increasing confidence and motivation.
- 4.4.4 Support for job search training workshops, job coaching including support with CVs, job application and interview techniques would be invaluable in assisting a smooth transition for refugees into the labour market.
- 4.4.5 Employers can greatly benefit from employing skilled refugees particularly in light of the cap on migrants from outside the EU which is causing shortages in many sectors e.g. care sector. City of Sanctuary offers pledged organisations refugee awareness training and encourage them to develop work placements for refugees and volunteering opportunities for asylum seekers. It is extremely important for people working with refugees and asylum seekers to understand how the experiences that have led them to flee to the UK might affect their behaviour, or their responses to the help offered.

Recommendation 12 – The Welsh Government should promote the City of Sanctuary movement to encourage more employers to take on refugees for work placements.

Recommendation 13 - The Welsh Government should support refugee awareness training for advisers in mainstream employment and education organisations e.g. Job Centre Plus and Careers Wales staff.

4.5 Volunteering

- 4.5.1 City of Sanctuary groups encourage pledged organisations to offer volunteer placements. This helps to create opportunities for relationships between local people and those seeking sanctuary. Volunteering in a range of settings provides opportunities for members of the receiving community to meet and form relationships with refugees and asylum seekers, which greatly contributes to community cohesion. City of Sanctuary has evidence to show that volunteering is particularly important for asylum seekers as most of them are unable to work for long periods which contributes to a process of de-skilling and can lead to diminishing mental health. Opportunities to volunteer are critical in remaining ready to transition into employment. Unfortunately, through our experience of supporting asylum seekers and refugees to volunteer, we have identified many barriers to doing so.
- 4.5.2 There is confusion over the volunteering entitlement and conditions for asylum seekers, exacerbated by Home Office guidance. Organisations in all communities need to be aware of best practice in inclusive volunteering, which would also support other groups at risk of social exclusion eg. disabled people, prison leavers, care leavers. For example, the Swansea Centre for Voluntary Service recently won a Sanctuary Award for the way they work with Swansea City of Sanctuary to open up volunteering opportunities to asylum seekers and match them with roles appropriate to their skills and learning requirements.

Recommendation 14 - The Welsh Government should issue its own guidance which clearly states that asylum seekers are entitled to volunteer no matter what the status of the claim, and that asylum seekers are allowed to volunteer in the public sector, as well as for non-profit organisations and charities.

4.6 Additional comments

4.6.1 All specific organisations and actions mentioned in the Refugee and Asylum Seeker Delivery Plan are Cardiff-centric, compounded by the restructuring of the Welsh Refugee Council, reducing its presence outside of the capital. All future funding must take into consideration the numbers of sanctuary seekers in Swansea, Newport and Wrexham, and be able to support the 'Nation of Sanctuary' concept across Wales. City of Sanctuary contributes to delivery of many of the outcomes in Refugee and Asylum Seeker Delivery Plan and would encourage the Welsh Government to support and promote the movement.

5.0 The support and advocacy available to unaccompanied asylum seeking children in Wales

- 5.1 We support the Welsh Refugee Coalition recommendation that the Welsh Government should fund a Welsh Guardianship Service to work with children and young people who arrive in Wales unaccompanied and separated from their families.
- 5.2 City of Sanctuary groups can play a support role through activities to bring children seeking sanctuary together with children in the receiving communities. For example, Northampton Town of Sanctuary is facilitating away days with mixed groups of youths e.g. taking the young people around the county visiting places of interest and enabling access cinema, theatre, swimming and other leisure pursuits.

6.0 The role and effectiveness of the Welsh Government's Community Cohesion Delivery Plan in ensuring the integration of refugees and asylum seekers in Welsh communities.

- 6.1 The Wales Cities of Sanctuary project contributes to delivery of the outcomes of the Community Cohesion Delivery Plan, particularly regarding improved community relations and cohesive communities, and inclusive notions of citizenship, identity and belonging. There are several examples of how the project enhances community cohesion in the evidence above.
- 6.2 In order for Wales to become a 'Nation of Sanctuary', wherever people seeking sanctuary go they should find people who will welcome them. So that communities are better prepared, WG should do more to raise awareness, challenge myths and stereotypes and promote the positive contribution of people seeking sanctuary. Raising awareness is essential to community cohesion generally. However, it is particularly important to ensure positive messages are heard in relation to the welcome of those on the SVPRS in places which previously had little experience of refugees.
- 6.3 We would like to see communities encouraged to take pride in offering a place of safety for people whose lives are threatened, and celebrating their contribution to our towns and cities. City of Sanctuary groups can support this work through offering refugee awareness training, bringing communities together with people seeking sanctuary and facilitating initiatives such as the Sanctuary Speakers team (run by Swansea City of Sanctuary).

Recommendation 15 - WG to demonstrate leadership by promulgating positive media stories and other public messages that all people seeking sanctuary are welcome in Wales. This should include stories about the welcome provided by communities receiving refugees through the SVPRS.

Recommendation 16 - WG to work with City of Sanctuary to support better dissemination of information, positive stories about people seeking sanctuary, and –

most important – training for people seeking sanctuary to speak directly to community groups, businesses and other organisations, and opportunities for them to do so.

6.4 In addition, access to leisure and cultural sites would assist with community cohesion. It is commendable that the majority of Cadw sites are free for asylum seekers and refugees. However, transport costs are prohibitive, particularly in Swansea.

6.5 Support for City of Sanctuary groups could help to overcome this barrier. Through the Sanctuary Breaks initiative, the Brecon, Hay and Talgarth group has facilitated breaks in various small towns and villages. The breaks have allowed people seeking sanctuary to have a fun day whilst creating the opportunity for local people to meet them. The group commented “It is especially lovely when children who have been apprehensive about what they have learnt about people seeking refuge from the media have actually met people and realised that they are not unlike themselves”. This shows that City of Sanctuary is actively building and contributing to community cohesion and would welcome further support from WG to develop and promote the movement further.

7.0 Conclusion

7.1 We acknowledge that many of the most important policy issues affecting asylum seekers and refugees are outside the areas of devolved competence of WG. However, the Welsh Government should be concerned about the impact of these issues.

Recommendation 17 – WG to monitor any adverse effects of UK immigration policy and either lobby for changes or to seek ways within its competence to mitigate these, including the impact of the new Immigration Act 2016 in Wales.