

Wales Nation of Sanctuary

Newsletter



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Editorial: Stronger Together

The motto of the Welsh football team that did so well in the Euros seems appropriate as we focus on Wales for this special edition of the Newsletter, timed to coincide with our AGM in Cardiff on 15 July 2016. We would like to thank Eleri Williams of Swansea City of Sanctuary for compiling the bulk of the stories, Anna Wardell and Tatenda Mwarewangepo for helping with the design.

A year ago it seemed fanciful to talk of Wales as possibly becoming a 'Nation of Sanctuary'. Swansea and Cardiff had been declared Cities of Sanctuary, with established groups, and there was some interest in Newport, but that was about it. Since then, with the 'revolution of generosity', the number of groups has jumped to seven or eight, with hugely increased interest in refugee welcome all across Wales. All 22 councils have said they will receive resettled Syrian refugees, and in at least seven cases they have begun to arrive. In December there was a successful "Sanctuary in the Senedd" event, and before the Assembly elections in May an equally successful hustling in Wrexham.

As a result, all the Welsh political parties (except UKIP) have pledged support for Wales as a Nation of Sanctuary and specifically to set up an anti-destitution fund.

Unfortunately we are back to being told the Nation of Sanctuary idea is fanciful, but for a different reason. Wales voted for Brexit in the referendum, and there has been a spike in hate crime, making many refugees and other immigrants feel fearful and **unwelcome**. We are hopeful that we can harness this upsurge of support. We can see there are many native Welsh people who feel abandoned in their own country and have been misled into looking for scapegoats. We need to find ways of bringing these people together with refugees, who often suffer similarly from poverty, poor housing, lack of decent employment and injustice. We need to make a common cause and to work towards a culture of welcome for everyone in Wales, not just for refugees.



If we can use our new support to do this, we can have every confidence in Wales becoming the first 'Nation of Sanctuary' after all.

***Alan Thomas, Swansea City of Sanctuary and National Chair
Forward Maisokwadzo, National Communications Officer***

New Refugee Coalition in Wales

About 22 refugee organisations in Wales have come together to form the Welsh Refugee Coalition. The coalition works together in the interests of asylum seekers and refugees, to ensure that supporting organisations' limited resources can be used effectively and to speak with one voice on policies and practices affecting people seeking safety in Wales.

A joint manifesto, titled Seven steps to Sanctuary, was developed setting out what would be needed from the Welsh Government to make Wales a truly Nation of Sanctuary. Immigration is a non-devolved issue, so the Welsh Government cannot alter immigration rules. However, there are several areas which are devolved areas and can have a large impact on the lives of asylum seekers and refugees within Wales. These include health, education, transport and communities.

The Seven Steps to Sanctuary can be seen overleaf.

The full manifesto can be accessed at
www.childreninwales.org.uk/our-work/asylum-refugee-migration/

1. A welcoming Wales sustaining Wales' commitment to welcome refugees & supporting Wales to become the world's first Nation of Sanctuary.
2. Develop a National Migration Strategy - developing high national standards for the integration of people resettled in Wales, recognising and seizing the opportunities presented by migration to Wales and responding effectively to challenges.
3. Positively influence and engage the UK Government's migration legislation - Create effective and pre-emptive strategies for managing the impact of new immigration legislation to mitigate risks to the human rights and safety of migrants in Wales.
4. Devolved asylum support - pushing for a devolved asylum support system, including asylum accommodation and dispersal in Wales.
5. End Destitution in Wales - preventing destitution amongst asylum-seekers and refugees.
6. Fund specialist advice, advocacy and support services- protecting the delivery of vital services for asylum-seeking and refugee children, young people and adults.
7. Inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees in the development of policies that affect them-promoting the active participation of asylum-seekers and refugees in the policies that affect them.

Sanctuary in the Senedd

Following the UK-wide Sanctuary in Parliament II on December 1st 2015, over 120 people came to the Welsh Refugee Coalition's event 'Sanctuary in the Senedd' on 10th December, International Human Rights Day. A powerful partnership of refugees, friends, organisations and Assembly Members talked about how we can make Wales the World's first Nation of Sanctuary.

Co-Chair Betty said that every refugee arriving in Wales "is escaping fear, and has a dream. If we can make this country a place of safety and welcome, we have a chance to make that dream come true."

Rocio, Director of Ethnic Youth Support Team in Swansea, talked powerfully about her life as a refugee forced to flee Chile, and her journey to Swansea and to Cambridge University. She called for a Nation of Sanctuary where all refugees can contribute to a prosperous and thriving Wales.

AA, an asylum seeker from Syria, spoke about the hazardous journey that she and her young son took in trying to find safety. She chillingly told us: "If I had stayed in Damascus for any longer, that could have been my son dead on the beach like Aylan Kurdi".

Another asylum seeker, Amber, talked about the enforced destitution of asylum seekers, and her fears of the punitive Immigration Bill currently going through the UK Parliament, “I am terrified that my children will be on the street. What will happen to me?”

We heard about the simple acts that we can all take to make Wales a better place for asylum seekers and refugees. Aliya, a refugee from Iraq, shared her story of first arriving in Swansea, feeling

isolated and lonely. “I felt so much better when my neighbour said ‘Hello’ to me. I felt like I was walking on the moon”.

There were calls for us all to go further and have the challenging conversations with someone who you know who doesn’t agree with you.



An interesting and lively panel with William Powell, AM Liberal Democrats, John Griffiths, AM Labour, Ian Johnson, Vale of Glamorgan Councillor and Plaid Cymru Head of Policy and Ross England, prospective AM Conservatives gave a great opportunity to put the Nation of Sanctuary at the heart of Welsh politics. Liberal Democrats and Plaid both agreed to take forward a Migration Strategy for Wales, and to look into how to set up a fund for asylum seekers made destitute. We will be following up on these conversations with political parties to secure commitments that are outlined in the Refugee Coalition's briefing.

Over thirty asylum seekers and refugees took the platform of the Senedd, showing that they belong and are welcome at the very heart of Wales. In the words of Abdalla, a refugee from Sudan, asylum seekers and refugees' voices must be heard.



Growth of the sanctuary movement in Wales

As with the rest of the UK, the City of Sanctuary movement within Wales has exploded, following the 'revolution of generosity'. In the past year, the number of Welsh City of Sanctuary groups has more than tripled. Notably, new groups tend to be in non-dispersal areas such as Hay, Brecon & Talgarth, Neath Port Talbot, Abergavenny, Montgomeryshire and Pembrokeshire, as well as in dispersal areas such as Wrexham, Newport and Gwent. Some of these groups emerged from discussions and direct involvement with Displaced People in Action's 'Wales Cities of Sanctuary' project, whilst others emerged more organically.

Several of these newer, non-dispersal City of Sanctuary groups are in rural areas and work closely with the more established City of Sanctuary groups within Wales, providing fabulous 'respite sanctuary' weekends for asylum seekers from both Swansea and Cardiff. This proves that you do not have to have people seeking sanctuary in your community, workplace, or school to be a beacon of welcome.

Schools of Sanctuary seeks partnership working with Wales Alliance for Global Education

Many schools in Wales are part of the Wales Alliance for Global Education. Wales Nation of Sanctuary group is in the process of working out how Schools of Sanctuary can be part of this. www.hubcymru.org/hub/wage.html

Hay Festival

One of the newer City of Sanctuary groups in Wales, HBTS4R, was instrumental in achieving a huge level of visibility and support for sanctuary at the 2016 Hay Literary Festival.

This included groups of refugees visiting from Swansea and Cardiff, free tickets, refugee stewards, and several events within the festival with refugee speakers or focusing on refugee issues. This is in addition to organising several fundraising events throughout the Hay festival period.



Raising refugee voice through Sanctuary Speakers team

Swansea CoS has a Sanctuary Speakers team, which gave awareness raising talks and workshops to over 500 people last year. The team members often speak multiple languages, and share their experiences of life as an asylum seeker or refugee. The role not only offers people the chance to develop their English and public speaking skills, but also the opportunity to learn about services and opportunities in their local community. Speakers have delivered talks at Parliament, the Senedd, to trainee students, parent & toddler groups, and also to staff at Mind Cymru.

Making Wales a Welcoming and Prosperous Nation: Influencing the National Assembly for Wales Elections 2016. Hustings were held on April 14th.

Trefnu Cymunedol Cymru / Together Creating Communities (TCC), Oxfam, HOPE not Hate and the Welsh Refugee Council worked in partnership to deliver a National hustings to question the Welsh political parties on their commitments to migration, and poverty. The Welsh political parties were represented by the following people:

- Welsh Conservatives, Mark Isherwood
- Wales Green Party, Duncan Rees
- Welsh Labour, Ken Skates
- Welsh Liberal Democrats, Aled Roberts
- Plaid Cymru – The Party of Wales, Mabon ap Gwynfor.

Representatives from UKIP were contacted but no response was received.

The event was tightly co-chaired by local headteacher Ron Keating, the chair of the Syrian Association of Wales Ferass Nadde, and local minister Tracey Day, with time management by Noemi Santos, a local college student. There were five pre-arranged questions to begin the event with two focusing on priorities from the Welsh Refugee Coalition manifesto.

Over one hundred people attended the event including nine refugees and asylum seekers from Cardiff and Wrexham.

All the parties represented began the hustings with a clear commitment to work together to create a welcoming and tolerant nation, to challenge hate.

Specialist support services and a migration strategy:

Sara Roberts, a local activist who has just returned from a trip to give donations and support to people living in Calais and Dunkirk spoke about the urgent need to provide asylum seekers specialist support to be safe and well when they arrive in Wales. She then asked if the Welsh political parties would commit to a migration strategy that includes the provision of specialist support services.

The representatives from political parties all gave a vague commitment to supporting asylum seekers and refugees. There was no commitment to a broader migration strategy that would include outcomes for the employment, education, health, safety and wellbeing of all people arriving in Wales. There was a lack of understanding from representatives on the opportunities for Wales to take a creative and ambitious approach to migration. There was an understanding from representatives on the importance of supporting refugees and asylum seekers to integrate into Welsh society.

- “we have people fleeing war and persecution in Iraq and Syria, they are not here for a laugh, but want safety and sanctuary for their children to grow up with hope.” Mabon ap Gwynfor, Plaid Cymru – the Party of Wales.

- “proud history in Wales to provide a safe sanctuary, we back calls for Wales to be the first Nation of Sanctuary and will use all devolved levers to support integration.” Mark Isherwood, Welsh Conservatives.
- “Labour has already proved its commitment to refugees and asylum seekers through the new refugee inclusion action plan” Ken Skates, Welsh Labour.
- “We support Wales as a nation of Sanctuary, and want to find out what support there is to Local Authorities.” Aled Robets, Welsh Liberal Democrats.

Destitution:

Naser Sakka a refugee from Syria attended the event, he gave a short testimony from his time living in Cardiff with no home, no money, no food and no support. He then asked a direct question about the Welsh political parties’ commitment to a destitution fund. The five political parties all positively committed to a destitution fund:

- “Labour have decided today that we will commit to an 8 million discretionary destitution fund, including refused asylum seekers.” Ken Skates, Welsh Labour.
- “Liberal Democrats commit to a discretionary destitution fund” Aled Robets, Welsh Liberal Democrats.
- “Plaid commits to a destitution fund like in Northern Ireland.” Mabon ap Gwynfor, Plaid Cymru – the Party of Wales.

- “Greens support a destitution fund, and not to treat asylum seekers as criminals from the asylum system.” Duncan Rees, Green Party of Wales
- “Conservatives commit to a nation of Sanctuary including the principle of a Nation of Sanctuary. Yes to commit to a destitution fund. Prioritise and simplify funding through communities.” Mark Isherwood, Welsh Conservatives.

Faith groups a key partner in building a culture of welcome

Faith groups from across the spectrum support welcome and developing a culture of hospitality throughout Wales. Faith groups tend to be one of the services most accessed by people seeking sanctuary. In Swansea we have worked closely with one church which has recently set up a brand new project specifically supporting asylum seekers (managing the sourcing of donations, as well as hosting communal meals, and family art sessions).



Former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, addressed a joint meeting of the Welsh Independent Congregational Chapels in Swansea

in September, at which £900 was raised for SHARE Tawe, a voluntary hosting scheme for destitute asylum seekers in

Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme

All twenty two Welsh Local Authorities have committed in principle to accepting Syrian refugees under the government's resettlement scheme. Some are also involved in the smaller scheme for Afghan interpreters. The first Syrians to come to Wales under the scheme arrived in Aberystwyth just before Christmas to a great local welcome and some very positive publicity. So far four other Councils have received Syrians, while others are gearing up with contracts from the Home Office in place (See <http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/syrian-refugee-describes-arriving-aberystwyth-11593610> for story on first arrivals in Aberystwyth.)

A resettlement scheme of this size and scale has not been implemented within Wales before. This means that many local authorities with little or no experience of supporting refugees have chosen to provide sanctuary partly due to the influence of public demand. It has also led to improved links between the Home Office and the Department for Work & Pensions. It is hoped that these links continue to develop, outside of the relatively narrow resettlement scheme.

Cardiff University offers scholarships to asylum seekers

Cardiff University offers two scholarships for asylum seekers enrolled to study any course at the university. A statement from the University promoting the scholarship: “We are keen to ensure that all students who have the potential to succeed at Cardiff University have the opportunity to study here. “We are very aware that asylum seekers and the children of asylum seekers are often unable to access mainstream UK student funding. Therefore, we are making available two awards to students who are either asylum seekers or children of asylum seekers. Our awards will cover the cost of tuition and provide a non-repayable grant of £4,000pa to support your living costs.”

Asylum seeking women get a sporting chance

Every week, about 15 asylum seeking and refugee women attend the Women Get Active sporting class at YMCA Cardiff hosted by the Welsh Refugee Council in partnership with YMCA Cardiff and funded by Sports Wales. Many of the women are survivors of very difficult situations and feel the class provides an opportunity for them to escape, get back in touch with sport and have fun in the process.



Asylum seekers in Wales

Although the Syrian crisis has awakened many of us to the appalling experiences of refugees, asylum seekers have been with us in Wales for many years. Most of them have been sent to live here by the Home Office's 'dispersal' system.

In May 2015 there were 2,355 people seeking asylum in Wales (source: Home Office) – under 0.1% of our population. This includes people from Eritrea, Sudan, Iraq, Iran and Syria, who have fled similar violence and persecution to those arriving under the SVPRS. They are waiting months or years for decisions on their applications, whilst living on a *maximum* of £36.95 pw each, with no right to work, and limited access to education. Many fall in and out of utter destitution, due to a combination of Home Office policy, lack of legal advice, and cuts to voluntary agencies providing support.

A 'two-tier' system is being entrenched, in which the small number of people arriving under the SVPRS are treated well, whilst the majority of asylum seekers in Wales are facing escalating poverty and exclusion.

Migration in Wales Conference

In Wales, Refugee Week began with a major conference in Cardiff Bay, hosted by the Welsh Refugee Council, and COMPAS at the University of Oxford. The conference titled, Migration in Wales: Developing Local Strategic Frameworks



on Integration, brought together all the major Welsh refugee organisations, policy makers and even individuals from Norway and Germany. Participants examined the Welsh policy context, thought about alternative approaches and how best to develop cohesion. Forward Maisokwadzo (pictured left), National Communications Officer, joined participants to share the City of Sanctuary vision with those not yet

familiar with it. Finally, participants discussed the implications for local authorities of adopting new approaches to integration. Key themes that emerged were the importance of leadership, and shared vision in addition to close partnership working.

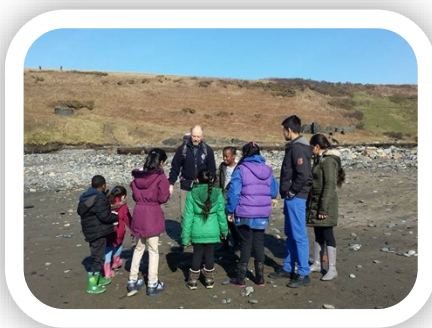
At the conference, Chris Sivers, Director of People, City & County of Swansea (pictured on the right) gave a presentation, focusing on the local authority's activities regarding integration. Swansea has been a City of Sanctuary since 2010, and has many initiatives working on the theme of integration. However, Sivers recognised that there are major challenges ahead.



Developing a city of sanctuary group: The experience of Hay, Brecon and Talgarth in Wales

The reason for writing up our experience is that we hope our group could be used as a template by other groups of interested individuals and organisations who wish to alleviate the plight of people seeking refuge, both in the UK and abroad. Our experience is especially relevant if, like us, you live in an area like ours which doesn't have any significant number of people seeking asylum or refuge living in the area.

We gathered together, a disparate group, by social media and word of mouth. We agreed to form a group to try to extend a welcome to people in need of refuge and to lobby our elected representatives to ask them to accept more people. We then organised street stalls in Hay and in



Hireath Hope's respite days provided inspiration to the group

Brecon to hand out information, seek signatures upon a petition to our elected representatives and ask people to join us in shaping a group. Within a short period of time we had over 100 supporters. We sorted out a committee and built a database of the skills and other support people had to offer – English as a second language, caring, driving, writing, art & art therapy, offers of homes, clothing, weekend trips etc.

We also realised that there were very few refugees or asylum seekers in our remote, rural area, and it was unlikely that many would arrive. However, we were close to cities (especially Swansea, Cardiff and Newport) with large and growing refugee populations. Following the example of Hiraeth Hope, a group based in Pembrokeshire, we decided that our best course would be to provide brief outings and stays for refugees to travel from the cities where they were based, to enjoy rest and recreation in our beautiful and peaceful countryside. In addition, we could supply volunteers, funding and other support to the various groups and agencies in the cities who were already working with the refugees .

We affiliated with City of Sanctuary, set up a Facebook page, a website) and a twitter account. We now have around 250 supporters on our database with whom we maintain contact by email. Between 25-30 people attend our monthly meetings. We were fortunate that within our first week we discovered the large social movement campaign for the rights of refugees and asylum seekers working under the banner of City of Sanctuary and within a short period we had linked up with the Swansea branch. Through City of Sanctuary we were able to make contacts with groups working with people seeking asylum and refuge such as Unity in Diversity, Share Tawe, SWARM and SHARP.

So what have we been doing?

We sent a petition to our MP, AM and council members and



continue to send letters and sign appropriate petitions.

We have attended Sanctuary in Parliament, in the Assembly and attended hustings for the assembly elections organised by Citizens UK Cymru. We met

our MP and AM to discuss support for people seeking asylum and refuge. We maintain our Facebook page, website and twitter accounts with newsworthy items and links.

Monthly trips to our wonderful part of the world, the Brecon Beacons, for between 12 and 60 Swansea-based asylum seekers – which we term “Respite Days”. The way this has panned out is that a supporter has agreed to be a coordinator and has worked with their village or town and friends to organise the hosting. These outings are a rip-roaring success, both for the hosts and the guests. As the word has spread amongst the asylum-seeking community in Swansea, the numbers of people wanting to come up for the day has grown so that there is always a waiting list for any trip. And among the villages of our area there is now a keen spirit of competition (in a good way) to host a Respite Day. We can now hold approximately one per month.

We have collected a massive amount of clothing and household goods from our generous communities, all sorted and boxed by volunteers, ready for delivery to any family who needs them and also for distribution at Respite Days. Some of these have been taken by the carload to refugee agencies in both Cardiff and Swansea. We also collected over 120 Christmas presents for seasonal children's parties. We have supported a number of local initiatives of individuals going to Calais or Dunkirk, giving them publicity on our network and goods to deliver. One of our group spent a week in Calais helping one of the agencies there. We have donated money & computers to the refugee drop-in centre in Swansea. A couple of our supporters have offered advice to a Swansea group on setting up as registered charity and applying for funding.

We are involving our 4 local secondary schools in our project. We hope for increased awareness about refugee issues amongst our young people. We have initiated an art and photographic project with Swansea. We are looking at opportunities for collaborative work between artists in our communities and in the refugee community. A couple of our members are working with women asylum seekers in Swansea to set up a women's asylum seekers support group.

We are a rural community of 3 small towns and a number of villages with a total population of around 12,000. Swansea has an estimated 1,000 refugees/asylum seekers, with around 200 using the main organisations we work with. They are delighted with our support.

Groups honoured for their work in promoting welcome to sanctuary seekers

Swansea City of Sanctuary hosted a workshop titled 'Meaningful Activity with People Seeking Sanctuary' where pledged supporters and volunteers were able to network and share knowledge.


Following these presentations, individuals and service providers were able to network with each other, to see what opportunities are on offer in Swansea.

The workshop also included the presentation of four sanctuary awards. Awards were presented to Swansea Council for Voluntary Service, the African Community Centre, Ethnic Youth Support Team, and Unity in Diversity. The awards were presented based on each of these organisations demonstrating



real commitment to the aims of Swansea City of Sanctuary, through their activities. This includes hosting talks from the Sanctuary Speakers, holding Welcome to Swansea Mentor training at their premises, providing counselling services to people seeking sanctuary,

and offering front line support to asylum seekers in Swansea.



Following this celebration, Hannah Chapman the Swansea City of Sanctuary Integration Officer, and qualified Occupational Therapist, gave a presentation about what is meant by meaningful activity and why this is so important when government policy prohibits asylum seekers from undertaking paid employment.

One of our Sanctuary Speaker volunteers, Gulnar Sohail, then shared her perspective of why keeping active and being able to contribute to her new community is a healing experience for her, with the 50 audience members.

The second session was focused on sharing best practice from some of our supporters. Julia Manser of Swansea Council for Voluntary Service highlighted best practice for inclusive volunteering, including ensuring there are a variety of roles and the importance of being able to adapt policies and adopt a petty cash system for on the day reimbursement of expenses.

Although Jon from Down to Earth was unable to attend in person, luckily we were able to screen their celebration video, featuring some of our volunteers. We strongly recommend watching the video to see some of the great activities our partnership work can provide.

Activities in pictures

Asylum seekers on a weekend break in St David's organised by Hiraeth Hope



Activities in pictures

Work experience breaks, with local smallholders, craftsmen and artists



Activities in pictures



Asylum seekers on a weekend break praying in the Cathedral in St David's

Upcoming events

Hay Brecon Talgarth: Saturday 30th July – Talgarth Away Day – summer sports weekend including a friendly football match between Talgarth Seniors and Unity in Diversity.

Wednesday 7th September – Sanctuary in the Senedd II (Cardiff Bay)

Saturday 17th September – Solidarity with Refugees: Demonstration march in London. A Welsh event is planned in Swansea to coincide with this big march – volunteer organisers required.

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