

CYNGOR SIR POWYS COUNTY COUNCIL.

CABINET EXECUTIVE

11th July 2023

REPORT AUTHOR: County Councillor Jackie Charlton
Cabinet Member for a Greener Powys

REPORT TITLE: Powys: A Council of Sanctuary

REPORT FOR: Decision

1. Purpose

- 1.1. This report is seeking approval for Powys County Council to formally join the City of Sanctuary Local Authority Network, and to begin the process of applying to become a 'Council of Sanctuary' as part of the City of Sanctuary movement¹. The proposal will help the Council to tackle poverty and inequality to support the well-being of the people of Powys, in line with our commitments within the new Corporate and Strategic Equality Plan, "*Stronger, Fairer, Greener*".

2. Background

- 2.1. This report uses the terms refugee and asylum seeker as defined by the 1951 Refugee Convention², that is:
- Refugee – a person outside of their country, who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.
 - Asylum seeker – a person who has crossed an international border in search of protection but whose claim for refugee status has not been decided. Until they receive a decision as to whether or not they are a refugee, they are known as an asylum seeker.
- The term sanctuary seeker is used as per the City of Sanctuary definition³, that is: both refugee and asylum seekers, as well as people seeking other forms of protection.
- 2.2. Powys has a long history of welcoming sanctuary seekers, and since 2016 Powys County Council has formally been supporting refugees to resettle in the county. As at 12th June 2023, the local authority is supporting 6 Afghan families, 15 Syrian families, and 105 Ukrainian families.

¹ The City of Sanctuary movement coordinates, supports, and grows networks of welcome. The organisation works with individuals, groups, and individuals to encourage inclusivity, solidarity, and compassion for people from a forced displacement background.

² <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/about-unhcr/who-we-are/1951-refugee-convention>.

³ <https://cityofsanctuary.org/resources/facts-and-figures/>

- 2.3. Powys County Council is current supporting the UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS), the Afghan Relocation and Assistance Programme (ARAP), the Homes for Ukraine scheme, and the Welsh Government Ukraine Super Sponsor scheme. In addition, we have one Community Sponsorship⁴ group, Croeso Llanidloes who, supported by Powys County Council, are working directly with the Home Office in the hope of shortly resettling a refugee family.
- 2.4. Resettlement in Powys is currently coordinated by the Resettlement Project Manager, within the Housing Service, whilst a separate Ukrainian Resettlement Team has been established (on fixed term contracts until 31st March 2024) within Property, Planning and Public Protection.
- 2.5. In February 2022, the UK Government mandated that all UK local authorities should accommodate a share of asylum seekers, under the asylum dispersal programme. To date, Powys does not officially accommodate any adult asylum seekers. However, plans are being drawn up with key partners to ensure that we are ready to accommodate any asylum seekers, should this be mandated by the Home Office.
- 2.6. In Powys, a 'Team Powys' approach has been adopted to support and assist refugees, and Powys County Council has worked in partnership across the public, private, and voluntary sector. This coordinated approach has ensured that the welfare of those moving into Powys is maintained, and that community cohesion between new and existing communities has been supported effectively. This was something that was formally recognised in the recent Staff Awards.
- 2.7. Community Support for sanctuary seekers in Powys is widespread, and seven support groups exist across the county, all of which are in place to welcome arrivals, and to support them on their resettlement journey in Powys. These communities are well connected socially, and help support individuals to be personally and economically resilient.
- 2.8. In 2019, the Welsh Government declared, in a plan endorsed by the United Nations, that Wales would become the world's first 'Nation of Sanctuary' whereby Wales will welcome people through safe and legal routes who need help on humanitarian grounds to rebuild their lives. Powys County Council has already begun to map out progress on work towards this plan, and should this motion be approved, work on this mapping, and the development of a local action plan will be progressed at pace.
- 2.9. The aspirations of this plan are aligned to the Council's new Corporate and Strategic Equality Plan, "*Stronger, Fairer, Greener*", as it supports the notions that we will be stronger by succeeding together, with communities and people that are well connected socially, and are personally and economically resilient, and supports a fairer Powys which is working to tackle poverty and inequality.
- 2.10. The only Welsh local authority who has achieved 'Council of Sanctuary' status is Swansea, with Flintshire, Newport, Vale of Glamorgan, and Monmouthshire local authorities both recently passing motions to work towards achieving the accreditation.

⁴ Community Sponsorship is a formal route for refugees.

3. **Advice**

- 3.1. It is proposed that Powys County Council formally join the City of Sanctuary Local Authority Network, and to begin the process of applying to become an accredited 'Council of Sanctuary' as part of the City of Sanctuary movement.
- 3.2. Should the proposal be adopted, Powys County Council will pledge to:
 - Support the City of Sanctuary vision that we will be a welcoming place of safety for all, and proud to offer sanctuary to people fleeing violence, persecution, famine, or natural disaster.
 - Endorse the City of Sanctuary Charter⁵ and agree to act in accordance with City of Sanctuary values and apply the network principles within our work as far as our specific context enables us.
 - Recognise the contribution of people seeking sanctuary. Sanctuary seekers are welcomed, included, and supported within our context and support local City of Sanctuary groups.
 - Challenge anti-refugee and anti-migrant attitudes wherever they are found.
 - Add the Council's name to a list of supporters of City of Sanctuary and contribute ideas for how we can turn this support into practical action.
- 3.3. Following this, if the City of Sanctuary movement accept Powys County Council's membership, the Council will develop an action plan showing how we will meet UK local authority network criteria. This involves providing evidence that we are:
 - Learning about what it means to be seeking sanctuary.
 - Taking positive action to embed concepts of welcome, safety and inclusion across all departments and staff within the Council. To take steps in ensuring this progress remains sustainable.
 - Work with our partners to implement the City of Sanctuary pledges through our actions and policies, and with our partners in the statutory and voluntary sector, as well as through services that we commission.
 - Sharing our vision, achievements, what we have learned, and good practice with other local authorities, the community, and beyond.
- 3.4. Powys County Council's action plan would follow the Welsh Government's Nation of Sanctuary – Refugee and Asylum Seeker Plan⁶, and following the development of this action plan, Powys County Council will move to become a fully accredited County of Sanctuary.
- 3.5. Progress will be reported to Cabinet on an annual basis, and the action plan will include both internal and external communication with staff, residents, and partners.
- 3.6. The Council will also work to align their Council of Sanctuary status with other areas of work, such as supporting LGBTQ+ and black and minority ethnic sanctuary seekers, as outlined within the LGBTQ+ Action Plan for Wales and Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan.

⁵ Available at: <https://cityofsanctuary.org/2022/02/02/charter/>

⁶ Available at: https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-03/nation-of-sanctuary-refugee-and-asylum-seeker-plan_0.pdf

- 3.7. Should the proposal be adopted, Powys County Council will contact 'City of Sanctuary' to pledge our support and to join their local authority network, therefore signing up as a supporting organisation.

4. Resource Implications

- 4.1. Through the activities of its resettlement projects, Powys County Council is already undertaking the activities required as part of the 'City of Sanctuary' pledge. The action plan demonstrating how Powys County Council meets UK local authority network criteria is able to be drawn up within existing resources, by the Resettlement Project Manager and the Ukrainian Resettlement Team.
- 4.2. Membership of the local authority network is free, however accreditation (for 3 years) as a Council of Sanctuary costs £1500. This fee can be covered within existing resettlement budgets.
- 4.3. The Head of Finance (Section 151 Officer) notes that any costs associated with the proposal can be accommodated within existing budgets and supports the recommendation.

5. Legal implications

- 5.1. Legal: The recommendation can be supported from a legal point of view.
- 5.2. The Head of Legal services and the Monitoring Officer has commented; "I note the legal comment and support the recommendation "

6. Data Protection

- 6.1. No data protection issues have been identified. This proposal does not involve any processing of personal data.

7. Comment from local member(s)

- 7.1. Not applicable - this will apply to all areas of Powys.

8. Impact Assessment

- 8.1. As outlined in this impact assessment, the proposal for Powys County Council to join the City of Sanctuary Local Authority Network, and to work towards becoming an accredited Council of Sanctuary will have a positive impact on both Powys County Council and our population. The acceptance of this proposal presents the below opportunities:
 - Publicly demonstrating that Powys is a welcoming place of safety for all.
 - Allowing Powys County Council to have access to a wider local authority network to share best practice, and learning.
 - For Powys County Council to share resources with other local authorities to ensure best value.
- 8.2. These opportunities allow for the below high-level impacts:

- Powys is recognised cross the UK, and by our key partners, as being a welcoming and tolerant County that succeeds together.
- The promotion of community cohesion across the county, ensuring that the Powys County Council is supporting fairness and equality, in line with the Stronger, Fairer, Greener corporate plan.
- Further strengthening of relationships with our public, voluntary, and private sector partners.
- An increased awareness of best practice and work being undertaken across UK local authorities to support sanctuary seekers, as well as greater collaboration opportunities.
- An opportunity to ensure that Powys County Council continues to embrace and promote the rights of sanctuary seekers, utilising shared resources, against a context of increasingly challenging budgetary pressures, providing value for money for the people of Powys.
- Improved outcomes for sanctuary seekers in Powys, who will likely benefit from the above actions of a personal wellbeing level, as well as ensuring that there is a greater awareness of sanctuary seekers in all areas of Powys County Council.

8.3. It should be noted, that although it is free to join the City of Sanctuary Local Authority Network, should Powys County Council become accredited as a Council of Sanctuary, there is an accreditation fee of £1500. However, this cost is minimal in comparison of the societal return on investment.

9. Recommendation

- 9.1. This report recommends that Cabinet agrees to the Council becoming a member of the City of Sanctuary Local Authority network, and work towards becoming an awarded 'Council of Sanctuary' by going through the accreditation process for the reasons outlined within the advice section of this paper.
- 9.2. Should Cabinet opt not to join the network, it would deny Powys County Council access to expertise and learning opportunities from being part of network.

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