

SANCTUARY STRATEGY

2025-2028



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FOREWORD

Our borough has a proud history of supporting refugees and migrants. We see diversity as a strength, and this is testament to the vital role that immigration plays in the story and identity of Reading.

We are proud to celebrate the wonderful achievements and contributions that refugees, migrants and asylum seekers have made. And we are proud, as a community and as an organisation, that we have committed to supporting sanctuary-seekers who are fleeing violence and persecution.

Over a number of years, our residents, partners, the voluntary, community and faith sectors have displayed great compassion and kindness, going above and beyond to welcome refugees and asylum seekers into their homes and our community.

In these times of national and global tension, it is clear that sanctuary, a safe space and shelter, is needed now more than ever.

By becoming a Council of Sanctuary, we want to underline what we have already done, and go further in our support for sanctuary seekers, ensuring that everyone is welcomed to our town, that there are services to support people to build their lives here, and that all are given every opportunity to thrive here.

This strategy therefore sets out the Council's commitments towards becoming a Council of Sanctuary. It provides a common understanding of the meaning of sanctuary, acts as a policy anchor for the wide variety of work the Council will undertake, and offers a framework for delivery. The Council is making changes across the entire organisation to create a supportive environment for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants who access our services.

We are very pleased to recommend this strategy to make this Council a champion for all those seeking sanctuary in Reading.

Cllr Yeo

Lead Councillor for Housing

Cllr Emberson

Lead Councillor for Corporate Services and Resources

INTRODUCTION

City of Sanctuary

‘City of Sanctuary’ is a national movement which started in 2005, with the aim of building a culture of hospitality for people seeking sanctuary in the UK. Its goal is to create a network of towns and cities throughout the country, that are proud to be places of safety for those seeking sanctuary, and to help them integrate into their local communities.

Reading has a proud history of welcoming diversity, challenging discrimination and supporting refugees, asylum seekers and other newcomers. The Reading City of Sanctuary programme has run since 2015, led by Refugee Support Group, in association with a range of partners, with the objective of working with a variety of agencies, organisations and businesses to encourage the learning, embedding and sharing of sanctuary principles, as part of their governance and operations.

The Council’s approach to sanctuary

Reading Borough Council has always valued the contribution that those seeking sanctuary¹ can make to Reading; as well as being assets to our economy, asylum seekers and refugees bring with them a huge cultural diversity which enriches our society. We are therefore committed to taking practical steps to welcome and integrate all people into Reading’s community, by working in partnership to help those seeking sanctuary here to find opportunities to build relationships and engage positively in the life of their new communities.

In 2016, Reading Borough Council agreed the following motion in response to the humanitarian crisis in Syria and in support of the City of Sanctuary movement more generally:

“This council wishes to continue to promote the inclusion and welfare of those coming to Reading to seek sanctuary and resolves to support the Reading City of Sanctuary movement and to spread the sanctuary message of welcome across all sections of the local community.”

At the same time, the Council committed to house and support the resettlement of three Syrian refugee families every year, under the Government’s Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme.

In March 2022, the Council reaffirmed its commitment to the City of Sanctuary movement, following the increase in numbers of new arrivals in the borough through the various government resettlement schemes. We are seeking to formally achieve this through our application to the City of Sanctuary’s ‘Council of Sanctuary’ award, and the development of an RBC Sanctuary Strategy and action plan, which are required as part of this process.

Applying for the Council of Sanctuary award will ensure we have a clear direction as a local authority on the actions we will take, with the continued support from our voluntary and statutory partners, in order to meet the needs of our sanctuary seeking residents in Reading.

¹ People seeking sanctuary = refugees or asylum seekers from any background or immigration status

The Council's Sanctuary Strategy

Our Sanctuary Strategy sets out the Council's approach to embedding a culture of welcome for all across the organisation, through consideration of how those seeking sanctuary can be supported across all of its service areas and activities, and serves as a framework for the Council's response to and relationship with national Government programmes.

The strategy also aims to celebrate some of the successful work that has already taken place in this space over the past few years, as well as setting out the Council's vision and objectives for the future in terms of the integration of those seeking sanctuary into our communities, with an action plan for how we achieve these over the next three years, ultimately helping to improve the outcomes for people seeking sanctuary in Reading.

The strategy has been developed through consultation with a range of partners, including the voluntary and community sector, and with people with lived experience of seeking sanctuary. Key to this has been a series of workshops with VCS organisations which have informed the themes of the strategy and the action plan. A more formal consultation was also carried out in February 2025 with key stakeholders.

CONTEXT

Reading's diversity

People have been coming to Reading to live and work for centuries. Some have come as refugees, escaping harsh regimes or conflicts in countries such as Uganda and Ukraine. Others had no choice, arriving as enslaved servants or prisoners of war. Most people came in search of a better life for themselves and their families. Since the 1940s, new jobs in manufacturing, public transport, construction, IT and the NHS have attracted workers from across Britain and around the world².

Today, Reading has a very diverse population, with 46.5%³ of residents now belonging to the Global Majority, the joint (with Oxford) second highest proportion in the South-East after Slough, and up from 35% in 2011.

In recognition of this diversity, the Council has consistently championed race equality. In 2000, it launched, along with other public sector partners, the 'Reading Declaration, a charter for Race Equality in Reading', in response to the recommendations of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry which had brought into focus the need for an holistic approach to the promotion of equality. This placed Reading's public sector partners in a strong position to meet the legal duty, under the Equality Act 2010, to promote equality in carrying out their functions.

Government policy

Our ability to deliver our commitment to people seeking sanctuary is influenced by the Government's immigration policy and response. In March 2021, the Government published its 'new plan for immigration' policy statement which set out its intentions to 'build a firm but fair' asylum and illegal migration system, with 3 objectives:

- to increase the fairness and efficacy of our system so that we can better protect and support those in need of genuine asylum
- to deter illegal entry into the UK, thereby breaking the business model of criminal trafficking networks and protecting the lives of those they endanger
- to remove more easily from the UK those with no right to be here

In terms of accommodation and support for people seeking sanctuary, the Government has different approaches for those coming into the UK, with the main ones currently being:

- **Asylum Seekers** - the Government commissions providers who procure private sector accommodation across the country. The current system is at capacity and as such increasing numbers of asylum seekers are being placed in hotels. Since 2022, national Government policy has been to reduce numbers of asylum seekers in hotels and affect full dispersal across UK, with a tightening up of notice periods on cessation of support for asylum seekers to speed up move on.
- **Refugee Resettlement Schemes** e.g the UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS); Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS), Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP), Afghan Relocation Policy (ARP) - the Government works with local authorities to provide settled accommodation and support.

² For more detail - [Routes to Reading](#) | [Reading Museum](#)

³ ONS Census 2021

- **Homes for Ukraine Scheme/Ukraine Permission Extension Scheme (UPE)** - the public provide accommodation for new arrivals on the Homes for Ukraine humanitarian visa scheme. Sponsors and their properties are checked by the local authority to ensure sponsorships are safe, with a monthly 'thank you payment' provided. The UK Government works with local authorities to provide support services and to rematch individuals should placements end.
- **Hong Kong British Nationals (Overseas)** - a visa route in response to China's passing of the National Security Law which significantly impacts the rights and freedoms of the people of Hong Kong.

Residents who have been granted refugee status, and recent arrivals from Ukraine, have a right to apply as homeless under the homelessness legislation, should they be without accommodation.

In July 2023, the government passed the Illegal Migration Act, which provides the framework to stop illegal migration and ensures that the only way to come to the UK is via 'safe and legal routes'. This means that people seeking asylum through 'irregular means', such as arriving via small boats, will no longer be able to claim asylum in the UK. Safe and legal routes refer to immigration arrangements that provide access to the UK for humanitarian reasons, such as the various resettlement schemes and the Refugee Family Reunion Policy.

It is currently unclear what changes the new Government might make to policy and to the resettlement schemes in the future, however, regardless of those changes, Reading Borough Council will continue to be a welcoming council and to support those seeking sanctuary as far as possible.

Key issues for Reading

Once asylum seekers gain refugee status, housing affordability, availability and suitability remain core challenges in practically all communities across the UK and are felt particularly acutely in Reading, where there is a severe lack of affordable housing and room rents are at a premium. This puts an additional pressure on the local housing market, making housing more expensive (and therefore less affordable) and increasing the number of families/individuals who are presenting as homeless.

In addition, people seeking sanctuary can have unrealistic expectations regarding housing and can be reluctant to look at rentals outside of the area once they have made connections here.

Issues are discussed in more detail in the chapter on 'Our Key Themes'.

CURRENT SERVICES & KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

Reading Borough Council current provision

There is much great work already going on in Reading to co-ordinate activities that support and empower people seeking sanctuary. This section sets out and celebrates some of that work and recent key achievements.

Since 2016, Reading Borough Council has been supporting the **Government's refugee resettlement programmes**. The Council made an ongoing commitment to find suitable homes and support to three families a year through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (renamed UK Resettlement Scheme, UKRS), the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS), Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP) and Afghan Relocation Policy (ARP). As part of this commitment, the Council undertakes to identify rented housing. This has been either through the Council's Rent Guarantee Scheme, Housing Association or Council stock. It also undertakes to provide 12 months integration support for each individual. This is provided through a contract with Refugee Support Group.

In March 2022, the Council put in place the **Homes for Ukraine Scheme**, ensuring that sponsorships are safe, and that guests are able to access services and support. If sponsorships end, guests are rematched to a new sponsor or given access to housing advice and emergency housing, where priority need existed. The Council also commissioned Citizens Advice Reading to run the Reading Ukrainian Advice Centre to integrate displaced Ukrainians into the Reading community. Refugee Support Group has been commissioned since 2023 to undertake integration work with this community.

The Council's **Refugee and Asylum Team**, which sits within Housing, was created in January 2023 in response to the increase in people seeking sanctuary in Reading and the complex needs some clients present with. The team was expanded further in October 2023 and provides housing support for refugees in Reading, as well as managing the Homes for Ukraine Scheme, Ukraine Permission Extension Scheme and Afghan Resettlement Schemes. Once they have achieved their status or moved on from sponsored accommodation, the team offers personal housing plans to refugees, as well as advice, advocacy, reintegration and destitution support, and signposts and makes referrals to relevant VCS organisations for essential items and support not provided by the team.

A **Refugee and Asylum Seeker Panel** has been set up with partner agencies to discuss cases of particular concern, to ensure that they receive the right support. The team also runs quarterly refugee events with statutory and voluntary partners, which people seeking sanctuary can attend to receive advice.

The Reading **Sanctuary Partner Forum** was established in April 2024, building on the success of a multi-agency meeting that had been set up in response to the Homes for Ukraine scheme in 2022. The purpose of this forum is to promote collaboration amongst its members in order to address the challenges experienced by those coming from refugee, asylum seeking and other forced migration backgrounds. The forum will also oversee and monitor the implementation of this Sanctuary Strategy and action plan, as well as the associated **Community Plan** for Reading. The latter is a requirement of the application process for Council of Sanctuary status and sets out a plan for action by the voluntary and community sector.

Reading has received funding from the **Local Authority Housing Fund (LAHF)** to support the purchase of housing for those who are unable to find settled accommodation on resettlement schemes and will provide affordable housing for the future. We are purchasing 35 properties across 3 rounds; this will reduce the impact of recent arrivals on existing housing local housing.

ESOL courses are provided by the Council's adult education service, New Directions, to asylum seekers who have been in the UK for 6 months and refugees with certain immigration status. People seeking sanctuary also have access to all courses delivered by the service including maths, employability support, CV writing, hospitality and childcare courses, as well as a growing number of arts and crafts provision to support health and wellbeing.

The **cultural sector** provides people seeking sanctuary with opportunities to increase inclusion and well-being - Reading libraries and museums are safe welcoming spaces open to all. Reading **libraries** offer free 'Welcome to Reading coffee mornings' to refugees and asylum seekers, ensure that their library cards are accessible to that client group, and also act as a signposting service to other support. Our leisure partner GLL supports people seeking sanctuary by offering them a free six-month membership to our **leisure facilities**.

Reading Museum has achieved Museum of Sanctuary status in 2024, working with groups such as Refugee Support Group and Care4Calais to provide cultural activities. An example is the new Routes to Reading information panel within the Museum's 'Story of Reading' gallery, created in collaboration with Reading City of Sanctuary and Reading Refugee Group, which gives just a few examples of the many people who have made Reading their home over the centuries. Reading Museum is also working with the Museum of English Rural Life (part of the University of Reading which has Sanctuary status) through Museums Partnership Reading (MPR) to develop a joint sanctuary programme. MPR has also applied for Museums of Sanctuary status and has created its own 3-year sanctuary action plan (2025-2027). Creative Lives have funded a sewing project working with refugee communities through Refugee Support Group.

Brighter Futures for Children (BFfC) (who deliver children's services on behalf of the Council) looks after unaccompanied young people seeking sanctuary who are under 18, as 'children in care'. As far as possible, children are assisted with their English language acquisition within the mainstream classroom setting. 16-18 year olds are encouraged to enrol on a full time English and Maths plus ESOL course at Reading College. The Council and BFfC are committed to working with young adults leaving care to ensure stability and support when transitioning to adulthood. We work closely with education settings to ensure support pathways are clear. BFfC signposts schools to various local support groups, usually through the Family Information Service. The Reading Family Information Service provides links to other organisations providing help and support for those seeking sanctuary.

Adult Social Care aim to prevent and alleviate destitution and homelessness by providing essential 'safety-net' support to people with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), in line with the Care Act 2014, relevant regulations, and the Care and Support Statutory Guidance. When a person has NRPF, it is necessary to pay particular attention to their social and economic well-being, suitability of living accommodation, and physical and mental health and emotional well-being. The person's immigration status may mean that

they are unable to access benefits, and are likely to have insecure housing or be at risk of homelessness, and, in some instances, will not be able to work or access other services. These areas are considered as part of the Care Act assessment.

The **Registration Service** is responsible for registering all births, deaths and civil marriages that take place in the local authority area. The service holds all the records for the Borough and will provide first or replacement certificates for the statutory fee as well as signposting new parents or the recently bereaved to specialist services. Reading Registrars are not able to provide immigration or nationality guidance but can give expert advice to overseas nationals wishing to marry or form a civil partnership and have a legal responsibility to report any concerns of sham or forced marriage to the Home Office.

The health and wellbeing of individuals seeking sanctuary in Reading is a priority for the **Public Health team** as part of their wider population health improvement agenda. The team will work with partners to create effective systems responding to the healthcare needs of people seeking sanctuary, including trauma informed care, mental health support and information in community languages. The team have produced a healthcare and well-being information web page for those seeking sanctuary, which provides general information to people who have newly arrived in Reading and wish to know more about the local healthcare system.

REDA (Reading's Economy & Destination Agency) have facilitated discussions with to both Afghan women and Hong Kong migrants with setting up their own businesses. Some have then gone on to attend their self-employment course, with small start up grants offered. REDA also run outreach sessions every week at libraries across the borough to provide employment related information and support.

The Council's **Prevent action plan** includes the development of this strategy as a mechanism to help reduce the risk of radicalisation that people seeking sanctuary can be exposed to.

Voluntary and Community Sector

Statutory and voluntary and community sector services and organisations across Reading have played a key role in welcoming and integrating people seeking sanctuary over the years, leading to the development of a wide-ranging infrastructure of support and services to meet the needs of those seeking sanctuary, and a strong tradition of collaboration between partners.

Refugee Support Group and Care for Calais in particular have a long history of engaging with asylum seekers at the hotels. There has been long term liaison between voluntary sector partners over strategic issues, as well as particular clients' needs. Both formal and informal language classes are provided by a range of providers.

Reading City of Sanctuary projects have included befriending and conversation sessions, and supporting other organisations to apply for sanctuary status, such as Reading School, and the Museum of English Rural Life. In addition, a number of Reading churches have become 'Churches of Sanctuary', the University of Reading has become a 'University of Sanctuary', Reading Library has become a 'Library of Sanctuary' and Reading Museum is in the process of application. Several Reading cafes have signed up to be 'Cafes of

Sanctuary' where customers can support those seeking sanctuary through donating to a coffee bank, and refugees and asylum seekers can access a safe place.

However, it is important to recognise that, although a wealth of services are currently provided, all partners involved in delivery are working with increasingly constrained budgets, often providing difficult support within short time frames, to large numbers of clients with complex needs.

Key Achievements

Launch of RBC Housing Refugee & Asylum Seeker team Jan 2023

Provides housing support for people seeking sanctuary, as well as more general advice and advocacy. The team facilitate the Government Resettlement Schemes to ensure the Councils statutory duties are fulfilled.

Refugee and asylum seeker workshops

Four Council of Sanctuary refugee and asylum seeker workshops took place in November and December 2023. Successes, issues and gaps were reviewed, with a number of solutions and actions identified. Some of these are reflected in the strategy Action Plan, while others reflected in the wider Community Plan.

Quarterly refugee and asylum seeker info events

5 events since July 2023
215 partners (and RBC)
750 clients

Launch of Sanctuary Partner Forum April 2024

the aim of promoting collaboration amongst its members in order to more effectively address the challenges faced by people seeking sanctuary.

VCS needs assessment Aug 2023

Themes explored:

- Asylum Contingency Hotels
- Housing
- Health & wellbeing
- Financial/destitution support
- Education, Training, Employment
- Communication/Language
- Young people & families
- Community integration
- Immigration - legal advice and support

Refugee and Asylum Seeker Panel

The Refugee and Asylum Seeker Support Panel meets to discuss general issues for the client group in Reading, and support for particular individuals in need. This meeting is made up of Refugee and Asylum Seeker Team officers and voluntary partners looking at emergency issues and specific cases.

WHAT IS OUR VISION FOR PEOPLE SEEKING SANCTUARY IN READING?

Vision

The Council has adopted the following vision, in line with the City of Sanctuary movement's vision for the UK:

'Reading is a welcoming place of safety and proud to offer sanctuary to all'.

This ambition for Reading helps to realise the Council's overall vision, as stated in the Council's Corporate Plan 2022-25, to

"help Reading realise its potential and to ensure that everyone who lives and works here can share the benefits of its success".

Social inclusion and reducing inequalities in terms of health, wealth and life experiences has always been central to the Council's aims, due to the mismatch between Reading's outstanding economic success and the benefit to residents within some of our less affluent communities that are missing out on the opportunities this success should bring.

This aim for Reading's population as a whole also extends to increasing social inclusion and reducing inequalities as far as possible for those within our borough that are seeking sanctuary.

Values

Our vision is underpinned by the following five City of Sanctuary values which Reading is committed to adopting.

- **Welcome**
Refugees find sanctuary and compassion in the communities in Reading where they settle
- **Inclusion**
Services and communities in Reading actively engage in removing barriers and are well equipped to meet the needs of refugees and asylum seekers
- **Collaboration**
Stakeholders work together in Reading in strong and sustainable partnerships, recognising each other's strengths
- **Opportunity**
Refugees and asylum seekers can rebuild their lives, fulfil their aspirations, and make contributions to the Reading communities where they live
- **Equality**
Refugees and asylum seekers are recognised as individuals with different characteristics, needs and aspirations, and are treated fairly

Key outcomes

We will achieve our vision for people seeking sanctuary by delivering the following key outcomes. We know we have been successful when refugees and asylum seekers:

- feel welcome and supported in their new communities
- thrive safely in their communities
- build diverse positive relationships locally
- understand their rights, responsibilities, and entitlements
- access well-coordinated and effective services
- inform local policy and programmes where individuals wish to be more involved

Key objectives

We will achieve these outcomes by working towards the following three key objectives. These form the structure for the action plan which has been developed to implement this strategy.

- Mainstreaming the City of Sanctuary approach across Council services
- Providing services to people seeking sanctuary
- Supporting the voluntary and community sector, as well as our public and business sector partners, to support people seeking sanctuary

1. Mainstreaming the City of Sanctuary approach across Council services

This means that corporately, the needs of people seeking sanctuary will be more formally considered. We aim for services and directorates within the Council to be fully engaged with the City of Sanctuary approach, so that we can ensure a whole organisation response to the needs of those seeking sanctuary, maximising the resources available and ensuring that their needs are considered as part of the services we deliver or commission. We want to encourage Council services to consider how they could contribute to greater inclusion of people seeking sanctuary.

One way this can be achieved is by developing a workforce that better understands the issues and needs of people seeking sanctuary, so that they feel more confident in supporting people in a compassionate and effective way, knowing when to provide support and when to refer to specialist services. We will therefore be developing a programme of communication and awareness raising aimed at Council staff, to increase knowledge of the likely issues encountered by people seeking sanctuary in Reading, and to encourage consideration of this client group in service planning and development.

Examples of the kind of considerations that services might make include:

- Do staff know how to access our interpretation services? Is our language clear and universal? Do we have any requirements which inadvertently disadvantage certain groups? Are we promoting our services to those seeking sanctuary? Do we know which services are being accessed by people seeking sanctuary? Has there been explicit consideration of any needs these individuals may have? Do services understand the marginalisation those seeking sanctuary experience?

2. Providing services to people seeking sanctuary

The Council currently provides a number of different services to people seeking sanctuary, as outlined in the 'Current services' section. In particular, the Refugee and Asylum Team within Housing was set up in 2023 to provide housing support for refugees in Reading, as well as advice, advocacy, and reintegration and destitution support. However, direct service delivery is limited as Government funding influences the size of the resource that the Council can allocate for this purpose.

One of the aims of this strategy is to increase awareness across the Council of services provided to people seeking sanctuary in Reading, in order to promote better co-ordination of those services. A Council Sanctuary Strategy Working Group, which was set up specifically for the development of this strategy and action plan, has helped to further this aim. Going forward, co-ordination of services, both Council and partner-provided, will be achieved via the Sanctuary Partner Forum.

One of the key projects we are planning to undertake under this objective is to develop a comprehensive welcome pack for new sanctuary seekers, as well as information for Council staff so that they can either support those seeking sanctuary more effectively or know where to signpost them. In order to develop this, we will need to map the customer journey for someone seeking sanctuary and to identify the different pathways. One of the key findings from the consultation with the VCS is that those organisations supporting this client group don't necessarily know who else is providing other services. Customer journey mapping and mapping of services is essential to improving co-ordination and thereby increasing efficiency of services.

3. Supporting the voluntary and community sector, as well as our public and business sector partners, to support people seeking sanctuary

Reading Borough Council supports a vibrant, independent, and self-sustaining voluntary and community sector within the borough. Among the sector's many positive impacts supporting residents and enhancing the town's cultural opportunities, it makes a significant contribution to social inclusion and community cohesion in Reading. The Council, along with the many and varied groups and organisations that make up the voluntary and community sector, have the same broad ambition of improving the quality of life for the residents and communities of Reading and there is a long history of organisations working together in partnership for the benefit of our residents.

The Voluntary and Community Sector Compact 2023-25, between the Council and Reading's voluntary and community sector, sets out the basis for strategic engagement, partnership working and collaboration, to deliver our shared ambitions. There is also a dedicated role within the Council to support the voluntary and community sector in the borough, including the provision of information and support for relating to funding opportunities.

In addition to providing support in terms of engagement, relationships and processes, the Council also invests in the VCS through a variety of contracts and grants, in order to create more capacity to achieve our corporate priorities.

The Council has been working with the VCS for a number of years on supporting people seeking sanctuary in Reading. In terms of funding, the Council's main voluntary and community sector commissioning framework (Closing the Gap) includes a specific commissioning lot for refugee support, providing for two outreach worker posts at Refugee Support Group and Reading Community Learning Centre to improve signposting and

referrals, and ESOL for health classes and yoga classes. The Council also contracts Refugee Support Group to provide a package of integration support for families supported through the Government refugee resettlement schemes.

Additionally, the Council has grant funded:

- Refugee Support Group to increase its legal casework capacity, provide Ukraine integration support and provide weekly ESOL drop-in sessions.
- Reading Community Learning Centre to part fund sessional crèche worker salaries for the summer 2024 term, for approximately 18 children to enable migrant, refugee, and asylum-seeking women to attend regular classes, which helps to decrease their isolation and loneliness and access improved wellbeing and mental health.
- The Rising Sun Arts Centre (in partnership with RSG and Reading City of Sanctuary) to enable a successful dressmaking project for refugees to continue to meet and to develop its work.
- RBC has agreed to provide grant funding in 2025 to Faith Christian Group for the Warm Spaces project, to provide a 'warm space' shelter specifically for refugees who are rough sleeping, following the success of the project this year.

The Council is also working collaboratively with the VCS in a number of other ways to support those seeking sanctuary. A needs assessment was carried out with VCS partners in August 2023 to better understand the key issues for people seeking sanctuary, and which resulted in the funding to increase legal casework capacity mentioned above. As mentioned in the 'current services' chapter, the Refugee and Asylum Seeker team has set up an emergency panel with VCS partners for people seeking sanctuary, and runs quarterly information events with partners, which people seeking sanctuary can attend to receive advice and organise further meetings. The Council has also held a number of workshops with VCS organisations and partners to explore sanctuary seeker issues and discuss potential solutions, which has been instrumental in informing the development of this strategy and action plan.

Perhaps most significantly and building on the success of the former Ukrainian Multi-agency Wellbeing Forum, the Council has brought key partners together across Reading, including the VCS and statutory partners, to form the **Sanctuary Partner Forum**, with the aim of promoting collaboration amongst its members in order to more effectively address the challenges faced by people seeking sanctuary. The forum will oversee the development of, and monitor, a **Community Plan** for Reading which will set out a co-ordinated plan of action across partners to address the issues of those seeking sanctuary. The Community Plan is required as part of the Council of Sanctuary award application.

Action Plan

The Sanctuary Strategy action plan sets out the actions that the Council is planning to take over the next 3 years to achieve the vision and outcomes set out above, and effectively forms a subset of the wider Community Plan mentioned above.

The action plan is structured according to the three objectives of: mainstreaming a culture of welcome across the organisation, delivering direct services to people seeking sanctuary and supporting the voluntary and community sector and other partners to provide services.

The action plan also shows which actions relate to each of the key themes that were identified through the Council's consultation with service providers and people with lived experience of seeking sanctuary.

The action plan will evolve and develop over time, in response to ongoing feedback and as new opportunities or challenges arise. In order to ensure transparency and accountability, we will publish an annual review of progress against the plan, and publish a new iteration of the plan for the next year.

Governance and accountability

Within the Council, the implementation of the strategy and action plan will be monitored by the Council's Strategic Inclusion Board.

The action plan will also be overseen and monitored by the Sanctuary Partner Forum, which includes Voluntary and Community Sector and statutory partners, as well as Reading Borough Council key services. There will also be annual reports to the Lead Member for Housing.

OUR KEY THEMES

Our key themes for the strategy have been developed from an analysis of the key issues encountered by people seeking sanctuary in Reading.

These issues have been explored via a series of workshops held with the VCS and partners, including residents with lived experience, as well as our quarterly refugee and asylum seeker events. We also carried out a needs assessment with VCS partners in August 2023 and a survey with Council services in Autumn 2023, asking about their views of the issues and barriers for people seeking sanctuary.

These themes are reflected in the action plan which aims to implement this strategy.

- Housing & homelessness
- Health & well-being
- Employment & benefits
- Social inclusion
- Education & language
- No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)/ destitution
- Cross-cutting

Housing & homelessness

There are widely recognised safeguarding and safety concerns at asylum seeker hotels across the country, including Reading's hotels, such as poor and unsanitary living conditions, overcrowding, low quality and monotonous food, and low morale, as well as reports of poor management and abusive staff. These factors can lead to mental health problems for some.

Another significant difficulty is that, once granted refugee status, asylum seekers lose entitlement to their Home Office accommodation and associated financial support, and have only seven days to find new accommodation. At this point they become homeless and the Council is then required to respond rapidly.

In addition to the tight timescale, people seeking sanctuary can suffer discrimination from estate agents and landlords, due to their status or because of their Universal Credit allowance or work situation. And if accommodation is offered, many landlords request multiple months' rent in advance, as well as a deposit or guarantor.

Local authorities are provided with very little information about people seeking sanctuary living in dispersed accommodation within their area, who may be in desperate need of support. Since 2012, responsibility for providing dispersed accommodation has been outsourced by government to private contractors. This situation severely limits the ability to offer support to these new residents, influence accommodation standards, and to link them to early preventative services as part of the Council's statutory duties. This often means that residents are only able to interact with support services at the point of crisis.

Health & wellbeing

Good health is an essential requirement for people seeking sanctuary to rebuild their lives.

During the journey out of their country, individuals may face harsh or dangerous conditions that have severe consequences for their physical and psychological wellbeing. Undiagnosed or untreated trauma is therefore a common health challenge amongst those seeking sanctuary. Despite national campaigns to increase awareness of mental illness, stigma still exists in communities which can lead to rejection of healthcare. Mental health illness can also be exacerbated by the current delays to asylum claim processing time and the reported unsuitable conditions in asylum seeker accommodation.

Generally, people seeking sanctuary face challenges around accessing medical care, often due to complex bureaucracy and language issues. There is evidence of stigma among around accessing sexual health support and maternity care. A scarcity of specialist and culturally sensitive services, such as these and mental health support, can cause excessive waiting times to access care, which in turn can lead to crisis. Lack of trust in the UK health system also compounds the problem, with people seeking sanctuary fearing that if this information is shared with officials it will negatively impact their application.

Additional health challenges for people seeking sanctuary include poorly controlled chronic conditions such as diabetes, and acute maternity care. Late presentation of pregnancy and complications from female genital mutilation adds to the health issues for women. Communicable diseases, including vaccine preventable illness such as TB and sexually transmitted infections, also have wider population health implications. The social determinants of health which affect health outcomes of the general population are often more extensive for people seeking sanctuary.

Food poverty among individuals seeking sanctuary is also an issue which affects health outcomes, and serious concerns have been raised about inadequate food and nutrition access. This is linked to low income which reduces food options, leaving people, particularly infants and children, at risk of malnutrition and physical and mental health ill-health.

Employment & benefits

The absence of the right to work for people seeking sanctuary greatly limits their ability to support themselves. Asylum seekers can gain permission to be employed in an industry on the 'Shortage Occupations list' but in reality, the view is that job availability from the list tends to be very limited.

Once refugee status is achieved, employment opportunities tend to be lower income, zero hour contracts or part time work opportunities. There are challenges with English levels, with qualifications and experience being accepted, and with delays to the bureaucracy to allow work. The current system therefore effectively forces some people seeking sanctuary into precarious and illegal employment.

Businesses sometimes discriminate against people seeking sanctuary because of their status or language. Those seeking sanctuary are also more open to exploitation from employers, particularly regarding unpaid apprenticeships.

Education & language

English language proficiency is a foundation for all other aspects of integration and should be treated as a priority. However, funding for ESOL comes from a number of different government departments, all with different eligibility criteria, making it difficult to navigate.

The two major providers of formal ESOL classes in Reading are New Directions College and Reading College, and there is competition for places. There are additional providers of free formal and informal classes at different levels by voluntary sector partners, however people seeking sanctuary do not always have knowledge of the range of classes, courses and language support on offer, and there is no overall summary of ESOL providers in Reading. This is currently being addressed through a mapping exercise being carried out through the ESOL Provider Network.

Other barriers to learning include stress, availability due to work commitments, transport to classes and courses, and the need for laptops.

There is little additional funding for schools serving the children of families seeking sanctuary, and children are assisted with their English language acquisition within the mainstream classroom setting. This has led to a reliance on the voluntary sector to provide youth ESOL classes. For parents, not having English as a first language can make participating in their children's education, talking to teachers and befriending other parents a huge obstacle.

Social inclusion

Not surprisingly, there can often be a general feeling of isolation among those seeking sanctuary, which can lead to low mood and potential mental health problems. This is made worse for asylum seekers who spend the majority of their time in their hotel room. English language proficiency can seriously inhibit the forging of social ties to other people in the local community. In turn, social isolation reduces the chance that people seeking sanctuary will know where and how to access available services. This highlights the importance of digital inclusion for successful integration, both in terms of reducing social isolation and enabling access to services.

Cultural differences, both between people seeking sanctuary and the general resident population and between the different refugee and asylum seeker groups, can hinder integration and increase the sense of social isolation. Even within groups of people seeking sanctuary from a particular country or with a shared religion, it can be difficult for people to form connections. Those seeking sanctuary can experience racism or xenophobia and consequently do not always find it easy to approach services.

Voluntary partners offer sessions for new arrivals to orientate themselves in the town. Reading libraries offer free Welcome to Reading coffee mornings, where people can gain advice and access services. The cultural sector also provides opportunities for social inclusion.

Volunteering opportunities can help with rebuilding self-determination and developing connections, but there can be challenges in terms of language and required documentation.

No recourse to public funds (NRPF)/ destitution

NRPF is a condition attached to the immigration status of certain people seeking sanctuary, which restricts eligibility for most benefits, including Universal Credit, and homelessness assistance. This can lead to destitution and exploitation. Among those most at risk are residents whose asylum applications have been refused but are unable to return to their home countries.

Local authorities are expected to consider all duties and powers that may be available to them to accommodate a person who is ineligible for homelessness assistance. This includes ensuring that, when applicable, duties to provide accommodation under the Children Act 1989 and Care Act 2014 are enacted to support families, care leavers and adults with care and support needs. When such duties are not engaged, the local authority must consider other legal powers that may enable accommodation to be provided. The housing authority should not turn the person away without giving them appropriate signposting information, and/or making a referral to an alternative support service that the person is identified as being entitled to. The local authority can provide accommodation and financial support to a family with no recourse to public funds under section 17 of the Children Act 1989, when a parent is without lawful immigration status.

This is a complex area, and through our Council of Sanctuary framework, we commit to reviewing our approaches to ensure there is awareness across the Council of our statutory duty, and to better coordinate our response. In order to provide a holistic response and ensure that all the available support options for an individual are considered, joint working between social care, the housing authority, and, in some cases, public health, will be required.

Current inflation levels and the cost-of-living crisis are increasing everyday costs for all people seeking sanctuary, as well as challenging the ambitions of statutory and VCS partners to fund and develop support services for this client group.

Cross-cutting

Another key issue which was highlighted in the workshops held with the VCS is that there is a **lack of awareness between providers of what services each provides**, and a consequent lack of co-ordination between organisations. Voluntary and statutory partners tend to work with their own clients on particular elements of support to people seeking sanctuary, so that support is compartmentalised, with experts working on their own particular areas. However, there is both the opportunity and the desire for better co-operation between partners, which will be explored via the new Sanctuary Partner Forum and Community Plan.

Managing the expectations of people seeking sanctuary was felt to be a significant factor in the ability of VCS organisation's ability to successfully provide services. The intention is that the planned 'welcome pack' will help with this by setting out what new arrivals can expect, and increasing their understanding of services, as soon as they arrive.

Lack of access to **affordable transport** was raised as a factor that can affect getting to medical appointments, housing assessments and employment-related meetings.

Although this didn't arise as an issue in the VCS workshops, awareness of the UK rules and regulations in relation to **crime and disorder** can be problematic for people seeking sanctuary. This may mean that behaviours that are acceptable in their home country may not be in the UK, but awareness of this may only become a reality after interaction with the criminal justice system. The risks for those seeking sanctuary of exploitation and exposure to hate crime can also be high. Many may feel unable or unwilling to come forward and report their experience, either because confidence in reporting systems is low, a fear of reprisals or experience of more authoritarian systems