

SUBJECT: A County of Sanctuary

MEETING: CABINET

DATE: 9th November 2022

DIVISION/WARDS AFFECTED: All

1. PURPOSE:

- 1.1 To begin the process of formally applying to become a county of sanctuary for those fleeing persecution and to provide updates on the Council's ongoing support for Ukrainians and accommodation for asylum seekers arriving in the UK.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1 That Cabinet agree to the council becoming a member of the City of Sanctuary network and working towards becoming an awarded member by going through an accreditation process.
- 2.2 That Cabinet receive an update on support currently being provided for Ukrainian refugees and identify areas where additional changes may be required.
- 2.3 That Cabinet note the current position regarding the Home Office approach to asylum dispersal in the UK.

3. KEY ISSUES:

- 3.1 The communities of Monmouthshire have done a huge amount to welcome people fleeing war and persecution. Abergavenny has been a town of sanctuary since 2016, during this time our county has welcomed a number of refugees from Syria and Afghanistan and this year more than a hundred residents have hosted refugees from Ukraine.

A County of Sanctuary

- 3.2 The Welsh Government has already declared 'Nation of Sanctuary' status for Wales to welcome people through safe and legal routes who need help on humanitarian grounds to rebuild their lives. The county council will now

formally commit to becoming a local authority member of the City of Sanctuary Network and working towards becoming an *Awarded Member*.

3.3 As part of membership Cabinet 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 and persecution;
- Endorse the City of Sanctuary Charter, 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;
- 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.

3.4 Following acceptance of our membership we will work towards awarded criteria. This includes passing a motion to support this pledge and developing an action plan, showing how we will meet the will meet UK local authority network criteria. This involves providing evidence that we are:

- Learning about what it means to be seeking sanctuary, both in general and specifically;
- Taking positive action to embed concepts of welcome, safety and inclusion. To take steps to ensure this progress remains sustainable;
- Sharing our vision, achievements, what we have learned, and good practice with other local authorities, the local community and beyond.

Full details of the procedure and criteria are available at

<https://la.cityofsanctuary.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/166/2021/08/Council-of-Sanctuary-Award-Minimum-Criteria.pdf> which should be read as an appendix to this report.

Ukraine Response

3.5 More than 110 Monmouthshire households have come forward to host families who have fled the war as part of the UK Government's Homes for Ukraine scheme. The council is also working closely with Welsh Government to help accommodate people under the Super Sponsor scheme which sees arrivals who are sponsored by the Welsh Government placed temporarily into welcome centres while more settled accommodation is identified.

3.6 The number of arrivals into both the UK and Wales from Ukraine has slowed considerably in recent months, although this could change at any moment given the dynamic situation in Ukraine at present. The biggest challenge will be finding move-on accommodation for those in welcome centres and when host placements come to an end. There are very few vacant social housing

properties and affordable private sector rentals continue to be in short supply. Fortunately, early indications are that around three quarters of hosts have opted to continue to support guests after the initial six-month arrangement comes to an end.

- 3.7 To recognise the incredible work done by hosts, the increased pressures they will be experiencing during the cost of living crisis and the challenge of finding affordable accommodation in our county when placements come to an end, we are offering a discretionary increase of £250 in the thank you payment between October and March bringing the total payment to £600.
- 3.8 A number of new fixed-term posts have been created, three based with housing and two within community development. These will increase the support provided to hosts and help refugees move into their own accommodation. To help with this, the authority can assist refugees with bonds payments and their first months rent in the same way that it assists local homeless households to prevent problems arising which can lead to worse outcomes and higher costs for public services.

Asylum Dispersal

- 3.9 The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 created an intention that no one area of the UK would be overburdened by the responsibility of supporting asylum seekers. Until this year participation in dispersal has been voluntary with the result that populations of asylum seekers are not equally spread across the UK with some areas seeing large concentrations. In Wales, Newport, Cardiff, Swansea and Wrexham have the largest numbers with Conwy, Caerphilly and RCT joining the scheme more recently and accommodating smaller numbers.
- 3.10 In April of this year, the Home Office announced that all local authorities in the UK will be expected to be asylum dispersal areas. This approach is designed to address the unsustainable pressures in the asylum system and increase the supply of dispersed accommodation across all councils. Each region and nation has been allocated a share of the forecast asylum seeker population.
- 3.11 The Wales Strategic Migration Partnership, hosted by the Welsh Local Government Association, has developed a draft Wales Asylum Dispersal Plan. Councils have been consulted and agreed with the principle that allocations will be based on population share. The sourcing and operation of accommodation and support in each area will be provided by Clearsprings Ready Homes who have been awarded the contract for this service by the Home Office. The local authority has had no involvement in the decision to award this contract or how it will be delivered. There is an expectation that they work closely with our housing team and Community Cohesion Officer.
- 3.12 There is a well-established ratio of 1:200 ratio of asylum seekers to general population, known as a cluster limit. If a council area reaches 75% of this ratio

then dispersal will move to another area. It is recognised that finding suitable, affordable accommodation within Monmouthshire will be challenging. The provider will consult the authority's housing team about any potential properties identified.

- 3.13 Cabinet will continue to be briefed as these three dynamic and inter-related areas of work progress to ensure that we do everything we can to assist those fleeing war and persecution and ensuring that this is done in line with our commitments to community safety and cohesion.

4. EQUALITY AND FUTURE GENERATIONS EVALUATION (INCLUDES SOCIAL JUSTICE, SAFEGUARDING AND CORPORATE PARENTING):

- 4.1 The proposal to become a county of sanctuary is about improving outcomes for refugees and asylum seekers by providing a welcoming environment, challenging discrimination and negative perceptions and ensuring equality of opportunity where possible within UK Immigration law. It strives to promote good relations between groups ensuring vibrant and cohesive communities.
- 4.2 The impact assessment identifies the positive impact that migration has on the economy and the potential for improved outcomes for some groups who will have fled persecution in their home country because of their sexual orientation or religious beliefs. It also highlights challenges, such as pressure on local housing which will need to be addressed through the Replacement Local Development Plan.

5. OPTIONS APPRAISAL

- 5.1 Recommendations 2.2 and 2.3 are briefings and do not require cabinet to make a decision or weigh up alternative policy choices. Recommendation 2.1 concerns the decision to apply to become a network of like-minded organisations wishing to improve the lives of refugees and asylum seekers.
- 5.2 The option not to join the network would deny the authority access to expertise and learning to progress its policy aspirations. Since membership carries no financial cost or risk it is deemed there is no need to assess value for money and no need to complete a full options appraisal.

6. EVALUATION CRITERIA

- 6.1 The success of our application to become an awarded member of the city of sanctuary network will be determined by a third party. The outcome of this application will be part of the evaluation of the success of the recommendations of this paper.
- 6.2 The success of our approach to supporting refugees from Ukraine will be based on i) the number of those accommodated in our county per head of population and ii) successfully preventing refugees from becoming homeless

through the successful identification of appropriate housing options iii) case studies produced after 12, 24 and 36 months identifying whether those fleeing the war have been accommodated, entered education and employment and become part of the community.

7. REASONS:

- 7.1 To ensure that the council becoming a county of sanctuary for those fleeing persecution while play its full part in asylum dispersal.

8. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

- 8.1 The costs of all actions related to Ukraine can be afforded within the tariff made available by the UK and Welsh Governments of £10,500 for each refugee staying with a host in the county with separate funding available for the Super Sponsor scheme. Harder to quantify is the opportunity cost of staff being diverted to manage the response.
- 8.2 The asylum dispersal policy comes with funding of £3,500 for councils for each new bed space occupied.

9. CONSULTEES:

Cabinet
Strategic Leadership Team
Housing & Communities Manager
Community Cohesion Officer

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS:

None

11. AUTHOR:

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12. CONTACT DETAILS:

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