



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

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TITLE **Progress Towards Wales becoming a Nation of Sanctuary**

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Today we mark Refugee Week, an annual festival of events to celebrate the valuable contributions made by people seeking sanctuary in the UK. These celebrations bring together people from all backgrounds to create better understanding between communities and promote integration.

The theme for Refugee Week 2019 is 'You, me and those who came before'. We are encouraged to explore the lives of refugees, and the people who have welcomed them, throughout our history. This is a fitting theme for our nation as Wales has enjoyed a long history of welcoming refugees, and we continue to benefit from their skills and entrepreneurial spirit.

This Refugee Week we reiterate our ambition to make Wales a nation of sanctuary. In January we published the 'Nation of Sanctuary – Refugee and Asylum Seeker Plan', which is driving forward this ambition for Wales. In just under five months we have already seen significant progress in delivering actions contained in the plan.

The ambitious 'Restart: Refugee Integration Project' will be officially launched on 20 June. At least 520 refugees will receive a holistic assessment of their needs, skills and desires, followed by bespoke support to aid integration in Wales' four asylum dispersal clusters. The project will improve access to language tuition, employability support, mentoring, qualification recognition, knowledge of rights and entitlements and more.

We have commissioned a consortium led by Cardiff and the Vale College, supported by other colleges and ESOL providers across Wales, to deliver this work with us. The project will be widely promoted amongst people who support refugees. Although asylum seekers will not be eligible for the employability support due to UK Government restrictions on the

right to work, they will benefit from the establishment of ESOL Hubs for each of the Welsh dispersal areas.

We believe that the skills of asylum seekers are currently being wasted across the UK. We have urged the UK Government to relax work restrictions and we are encouraged that the Future Immigration System White Paper includes a commitment to review this. The ReStart project will also work with employers to dispel myths about employing refugees and will seek to support our employment services to become more inclusive.

Not all people seeking sanctuary are allowed to work and many find themselves in risk of destitution. We have continued to explore opportunities to reduce this risk and mitigate the impact of destitution experienced by all affected. For the first time, the Discretionary Assistance Fund can be accessed by any sanctuary seeker if they are experiencing destitution.

We recognise that many asylum seekers and refused asylum seekers do not have access to good quality legal advice. This can undermine their asylum claims and force them into destitution. We have also commissioned research to look into options to support such individuals through the provision of legal advice and professionalising 'hosting' arrangements for refused asylum seekers. This is a complex issue which cannot be resolved hastily but we are making good progress on looking for solutions which could offer sustainable solutions for individuals. By providing these individuals with a roof over their heads at such a critical time, it allows them an opportunity to explore their options, which may lead to a fresh asylum claim, or engagement with the UK Government's voluntary returns process.

Good quality information is key to the successful integration of people arriving in Wales. We will very shortly launch the Sanctuary website, which provides essential information for refugees and asylum seekers on a variety of issues including access to healthcare, education and employment. The website incorporates translation and text-to-speech software which translates the information into over one hundred languages, vastly increasing the accessibility of the website.

The need for information applies both ways, and those who provide services to people seeking sanctuary also require appropriate knowledge and information to support integration. In April we published a series of guides and information resources for social workers working with Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children, foster carers of these children, and the children themselves. Public Health Wales is co-producing an e-learning module focusing on refugees, asylum seekers and health. The module is part of training for NHS staff on equality and human rights, titled 'Treat Me Fairly', and is now being tested by staff from a number of health boards.

Of course, many of the levers to improving outcomes for people seeking sanctuary sit with the UK Government. We have liaised closely with the UK Government and their contracted Service Providers, as well as other key stakeholders, to oversee the transition to new accommodation arrangements from September 2019.

We are pleased that 'Clearsprings Ready Homes' has agreed to end forced room sharing of unrelated adults in asylum accommodation, which was one of the Welsh Government's key asks for the new system. We are also pleased that residents will be able to raise complaints

about accommodation through the Asylum, Issue Reporting and Eligibility provider, 'Migrant Help', rather than through the accommodation provider. We will monitor these carefully.

We continue to work hard to seek changes to the asylum system which will improve the well-being of asylum seekers, community cohesion and our ability as a Devolved Administration to make effective policy interventions to support these members of our community.

Since the launch of the plan, I have contacted key partners to raise awareness of the Plan and to gather the support we require to make Wales truly a nation of sanctuary. I have written to all Local Authorities and Local Health Boards in Wales, with responses that have been positive and demonstrate a commitment to work with us towards our shared goal. I have also met with the Welsh Refugee Coalition to discuss how we can work together on the implementation of the plan. In relation to the Dubs Amendment, I have met with the Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services and her officials to explore options for how we can welcome more young people to Wales from Europe. I hope to have more to say about this, soon.

In April I spoke about the Plan at the Sanctuary in the Senedd event. The event marked the significant milestone of Wales welcoming over 1,000 refugees under the Syrian Resettlement Programme and the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme. A milestone that was only achieved with the collaborative hard work of partners across Wales.

This combined effort in Wales has not gone unnoticed. In May, NBC News published an insightful article about our ambition in Wales to become a nation of sanctuary, which focused on the lives and experiences of refugees and asylum seekers. It explored the challenges faced by people seeking sanctuary and also the appreciation for the welcome they have received in Wales. The article offered a refreshing angle when compared to the hostility we have grown accustomed to seeing in the media.

When Refugee Week started in 1998, one of its key aims was to tackle negative portrayals of refugees and asylum seekers in the media. It is clear that events such as Refugee Week and Sanctuary in the Senedd also provide a valuable opportunity to counter the dehumanisation of refugees and asylum seekers. It is vital that people seeking sanctuary continue to have opportunities to share their views and experiences.

We have only had a few short months since we published this Plan but we are making good progress towards our Nation of Sanctuary objective in partnership with the Local Authorities, Local Health Boards, Public Health Wales, Wales Strategic Migration Partnership, Welsh Local Government Association, Welsh Refugee Coalition and other key stakeholders to improve the lives of people seeking sanctuary in Wales.