

Submission to Our Future Wales Consultation

This document represents initial headline evidence and recommendations made by members of the Welsh Refugee Coalition. We stand ready to support any further work on this important process of policy development and to facilitate discussion with those with lived experience.

It should go without saying that the Covid 19 public health emergency has already hit the sanctuary seeking community in Wales particularly hard. This is both physically, in terms of access to some of the basics for life, to educational and electronic communications resources, but also more widely in terms of worsening mental health, as limits to normal social interaction have come on top of the many existing pressures involved in being an asylum seeker or new refugee.

We believe that Our Future Wales plans must address the mental and physical legacy of this period, whilst also building pathways to a much better future.

Addressing the legacy of lockdown

Every effort should be made to address key needs that have become especially acute for individuals during lock-down. Priorities include:

- **Destitution** – both new refugees and asylum seekers with no recourse to public funds have been provided for during the pandemic, but a long-term solution is needed. This needs to include implementation of the Welsh Government-commissioned recommendations on destitution along with guidance and support for local authorities in their duty to provide the statutory safety net of care for the most vulnerable. The Welsh Government should also continue to represent concerns with Westminster over policy on the right to work, Home Office support conditions and the speed and quality of asylum decisions.
- Lack of **access to communications and the internet** has become critical – for accessing public health information, advocacy services and social contact at a time when drop-in centres are closed. This is already a concern for Public Health Wales. The Welsh Government needs to address this energetically, both with the Home Office but also acting within their powers to ensure internet access in social and other housing.
- **Crisis support** – the Discretionary Assistance Fund, which has been proving its worth, needs to be extended and targeted to meet priority needs, including consideration of how to use it to support improved internet access for the most needy.
- **Housing** – as the housing market is extremely tight and uncertainty about rules continues an urgent need is to identify appropriate properties for refugees and work with private landlords and housing associations to address any prejudices or misunderstandings about the law affecting access to housing. Although not the responsibility of Welsh Government, the quality of asylum accommodation is a top concern for those with lived experience.
- **Closure of schools** – has impacted severely on refugee and asylum-seeking children, both in terms of digital exclusion and food poverty. As a blended approach and intermittent school closures may continue for some time, it is essential to ensure refugee and asylum-seeking children have equitable access to technology, internet and food.
- **Health** – we welcome the new focus of the Welsh test and trace system on communications with excluded groups or those with limited English or Welsh. This must however be made a reality, as many still do not fully understand what is currently required or how to get

support. Clarity is needed about potential support for any who are asked to go into quarantine.

- **Mental health** – concerted action is needed at all levels to address the needs. Asylum seekers and new refugees should be a priority for local safeguarding boards. There is a need for more counselling services, support for existing third sector services, and for clearer referral mechanisms for children and others at risk of abuse in addition to existing mental health trauma. The impact of loneliness and isolation will be considerable, especially as people often rely on ‘drop-in’ services which have been suspended¹ and some may not recommence for some time or be limited in scale.
- **Safeguarding** – a growing range of safeguarding issues need urgent action at the strategic and practical level, as individuals are becoming more vulnerable and less able to seek help – eg due to room sharing, shared accommodation for LGBT asylum seekers, lack of access to face to face advocacy sessions, closure of drop in centres, limited phone credit, rising mental health concerns and gaps in support for unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people.

Integration and Routes to Employment

With an employment rate of only 51% in the UK, refugees have poorer prospects than either UK-born or other migrant individuals; even adjusting for socio-economic factors there is still a 12% employment gap². Though this improves with time in the UK, a gap persists even after 25 years. They are much more reliant on public agencies like Job Centre Plus in their search for work, weekly pay is 55% less than UK-born employees and hourly rates 38% less. Refugees are however 8% more likely to be self-employed than UK-born individuals and within this employ others more frequently.

This is despite the fact that a good number of asylum seekers and refugees have skills or professions that are in short supply in Wales. Long stays in the asylum system with no opportunity to work and limited scope for volunteering mean that skills can atrophy, while language ability doesn’t improve as well as it could. With the huge pressures in prospect on the economy it is even more critical than ever to address these issues and open up routes to successful employment that will also benefit the wider society in Wales. Important measures include:

- A **coherent strategy** that identifies those with substantial to potential to move into work and supports them in this, building on the successful WARD programme for doctors. This should begin with asylum seekers on arrival in Wales, as opportunities to maintain and develop skills are often lost during long waits in the asylum process. A start should be made with key employment areas where there is a good potential match between refugee skills and opportunities in Wales, eg in the health sector, construction, teaching, IT and agriculture as well as interpretation/ translation services. Self-employment is a key opportunity and more targeted support should be offered to support this and help refugee-led businesses to start-up and grow.
- Urgent and **funded implementation** of measures along the general lines outlined in the Welsh Government’s recent Refugee Employment and Skills Support study³, but with much

¹ Clients in a recent study for Oasis Cardiff stated that loneliness and isolation were having a negative impact on their mental health. They also stated that there were increased levels of stress and anxiety.

² Centre on Migration Policy and Society, *Refugees and the UK Labour Market, 2019*

<https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/ECONREF-Refugees-and-the-UK-Labour-Market-report.pdf>

³ GSR report 20/2020: <https://gov.wales/refugees-employment-and-skills-support-study>

more ambition in respect of career pathways considered and, where appropriate, use of third sector partners.

- More wide-ranging and **profession-related language classes** in English and Welsh, available from arrival in the UK and monitored according to outcomes achieved; better access to vocationally related further education and volunteering for asylum seekers; support for transport and other educationally relevant costs.
- Further work to **reduce barriers to education** eg extending the Educational Maintenance Allowance for 16-18 year old asylum-seekers; and building on the Universities of Sanctuary programme to offer more opportunities for asylum seekers to access Higher Education.
- Supporting a green recovery by offering **free or subsidised bus transport** for asylum-seekers to enable them to access educational and volunteering opportunities, facilitating transition to employment.

Building Communities

The Welsh Government's Nation of Sanctuary Delivery Plan is committed to strengthening communities and social integration. Much more work is however needed in order to turn this vision into a reality:

- To **communicate** the issues and **break down barriers** within the media and population to offering welcome and understanding. This will require significant resourcing, eg through a centre that can support refugees and asylum seekers in telling their own stories, linked with UK-wide communications support organisations such as iMix.
- At a practical level support for City of Sanctuary groups, and others engaged in **welcoming** work, is required in order to facilitate opportunities for social contact as a way of tackling increasing suspicion towards newcomers and enabling people to recognise our common humanity. One example could be **befriending projects**, such as that operating in Swansea, which should be developed and cultivated in each dispersal city.
- To support **self-advocacy**, the Welsh Government should encourage its funded third sector infrastructure bodies to work more effectively with newly established refugee and asylum seeker support groups.
- **Volunteering** programmes should be made more accessible to or targeted towards refugees and asylum-seekers, as successful examples in Swansea show, enabling them to make a full and valued contribution to local communities and their recovery.
- **Community work** should build on existing community cohesion work in the four dispersal areas. The Welsh Government could launch a competitive fund to support local action, co-ordinated through the local authorities but in partnership with Coalition members and other third sector parties in each city.

Delivery

Many of these issues are addressed in the Welsh Government's Nation of Sanctuary Delivery Plan. This however lacks clear targets, outcome measures or resourcing beyond the initial phase. We recommend this should be revised to have clear, focused, priorities reflecting those above and that these should be clearly funded. In all of these areas, public investment will see a return, both in terms of rising contributions to the labour market and society but also in lower long term demands on the public safety net.