



Safer Stronger Communities Committee

Borough of Sanctuary report for Safer Stronger Communities Scrutiny Committee

Date: 18th February 2021

Key decision: No.

Class: Part 1

Ward(s) affected: All

Contributors: Phil Baker, Borough of Sanctuary Programme Manager

Outline and recommendations

To report on the progress of our work as a Borough of Sanctuary to the Safer Stronger Communities Committee, and provide an update on our ongoing plans and objectives.

Our recommendation is to note the contents of this report.

Timeline of engagement and decision-making

Our commitment to becoming a Borough of Sanctuary was part of the Mayor's election manifesto in 2018. We publicly announced our plans at our Borough of Sanctuary Conference in June 2019, and the Borough of Sanctuary Strategy was formally approved by Mayor and Cabinet on the 11th November 2020.

The adoption of the Strategy was delayed due to Covid-19 pandemic, and was originally due to take place in March 2020.

1. Summary

- 1.1. Our Borough of Sanctuary Programme Manager has been in post since March 2020 and has been working towards the completion and adoption of the Strategy, building relationships with relevant Council services and local partners, and developing action plans with services to improve our service offer to refugees, asylum seekers and migrants in Lewisham.
- 1.2. The work was interrupted due to the impact of Covid-19 which delayed the adoption of the strategy, and brought additional pressures and priorities to both Council services and local partners. In addition, the Programme Manager was redeployed to the Lewisham Covid-19 Response Hub from April to June 2020.
- 1.3. However, during this time we were able to build relationships with a number of partners within the local voluntary and community sector and ensure that the needs of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants were considered in our Covid response. Since June 2019 we have completed the Strategy document, which has been adopted by Mayor and Cabinet, and we have commenced work on developing action plans with Council services to improve the support we provide to refugees, asylum and seekers and migrants, and developing our work with local partners to build community capacity to respond to local need.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1. To note the contents of this report.

3. Policy Context

- 3.1. In 2012 the UK government adopted what has become known as the "hostile environment" policy, which seeks to make life as difficult as possible for migrants in the UK in the hope this will have a deterrent effect on future migrants. This created a national policy framework which had a range of negative impacts on the migrant community.
- 3.2. The Borough of Sanctuary is the Council's response to this policy framework, and an attempt to mitigate its impact on migrants in the local community, as stated by the Cabinet Member for Democracy, Refugees and Accountability, Cllr Bonavia, in our Strategy document: "Our borough has a proud history of supporting refugees and migrants. The cruel concept of a "hostile environment" is anathema to us. Rather we

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celebrate and are strengthened by our diversity and the values we hold which enable and empower it”.

- 3.3. The commitment to becoming a Borough of Sanctuary is one of our key commitments in the Open Lewisham strand of our Corporate Priorities. As such it is a public commitment which all residents and staff should be aware of, and to which the Council is publicly accountable.

4. Background

- 4.1. Lewisham is home to a diverse population with a range of ethnicities and nationalities. Our aim as a Borough of Sanctuary is to ensure that the needs of all these residents are considered in the development and delivery of Council services, and that they are as open and accessible as possible.
- 4.2. The [Lewisham Observatory](#) website provides a range of data, information and research about the Borough. The [population](#) section provides information about the demographics of Lewisham. It shows that, as of 2019, 20.4% of Lewisham residents were non-UK nationals and 30.1% of residents were born outside of the UK. There are a wide range of nationalities living in the Borough with significant populations from the EU (12%), Sub Saharan Africa (2.6%) and Central and South America (1.6%).

5. Borough of Sanctuary: progress and actions

- 5.1. Listed below are a collection of the key areas of work we have engaged in as part of our Borough of Sanctuary objectives, setting out the progress we have made and the actions taken.

6. Borough of Sanctuary strategy passed at Mayor and Cabinet

- 6.1. On 11th November the Borough of Sanctuary Strategy was formally adopted by Mayor and Cabinet. Due to Covid-19 this was conducted at an online event. It included presentations from Rosario Guimba-Stewart of Lewisham Refugee and Migrant Network (LRMN) and Waeed, one of the refugees on our resettlement scheme, who spoke about the objectives of the Borough of Sanctuary and their personal experience of resettlement in Lewisham, respectively. We intend to hold an in person event in the future to welcome the families who arrived on our resettlement scheme, thank partners for their contribution and discuss our ongoing objectives.
- 6.2. In December 2020 we submitted our application to [City of Sanctuary](#) to be formally recognised as a Borough of Sanctuary. As part of the application process they will be approaching local refugee and community organisations to take their views on the work of the Council towards our objectives. We are currently awaiting the outcome of the application but we expect to be one of the first Boroughs to be accredited and this process should be completed in the coming months.

7. Refugee resettlement scheme

- 7.1. The Council has made a commitment to resettle 100 refugee families by 2022. Sadly, due to Covid-19 the Home Office paused the scheme in March 2020 and since then we have been unable to resettle further families.
- 7.2. However, we have repeatedly advocated for the scheme to be reopened and made clear to the Home Office that we stand ready and willing to resettle further families. In November 2020 we coordinated a letter written to the Home Secretary on behalf of London Councils, which pushed for the resettlement scheme to be reopened and helped to coordinate, and co-signed, a letter from Refugee Action seeking clarification on the future of refugee resettlement in the UK.

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- 7.3. As a result of the Council's advocacy, the Home Office have confirmed that they will restart the refugee resettlement programme and have advised us that 3 further families will soon be arriving in Lewisham. At present, the Home Office has only restarted the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) in order to resettle the remaining 232 families to meet their target of resettling 20,000 families by 2020. A new UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS) was due to start in 2020, but this has been paused pending a [Government review](#) of all resettlement. The Council continues to lobby Government to announce details of the new scheme and to recommence arrivals.
- 7.4. In December 2020, at the [Refugees Still Welcome Assembly 2020](#), hosted by Sponsor Refugees and Citizens UK, we were awarded Local Authority of the Year for "leading by example in refugee resettlement", and "galvanising other councils to follow suit".

8. Forest Hill Community sponsorship scheme

- 8.1. The Home Office also operates a Community Sponsorship Scheme to enable community groups ("Sponsors") to apply to accommodate and support refugees. Sponsors make an application to Home Office, detailing how they will support a family and help them to settle in the country, and they are able to apply to receive arrivals if approved. Lewisham Council can veto any application if it is unsatisfied with the sponsor's proposal.
- 8.2. We are supporting Forest Hill Sydenham Welcomes Refugees in their application to resettle one refugee family in the borough. Officers have reviewed the application and, pending minor amendments, are satisfied with the application. We are aiming to formally confirm our support for the group's application within the next month.

9. Lewisham Migration Forum (LMF)

- 9.1. The LMF was formed in 2018 to bring together statutory and local services working with migrants in Lewisham and work towards becoming a Borough of Sanctuary. The Borough of Sanctuary Programme Manager regularly attends these meetings, along with Cllr Bonavia and other Council officers as appropriate. The LMF has continued to meet regularly throughout 2020 and 2021, albeit virtually, to discuss a range of issues affecting this group of residents and work in partnership to address their needs. Over the course of this year the LMF has been a mechanism for groups to share how they have adapted to Covid-19 and update local partners on the services they are able to provide. It has also received presentations on issues such as NHS charges, the Doctors of the World (DOTW) [Safe Surgeries](#) initiative and the ongoing work to promote GP registration and promote uptake of Covid vaccinations.
- 9.2. In addition, the LMF has set up an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) working group, chaired by the Programme manager, to bring together experienced partners and develop plans improve the service offered within Lewisham. The LMF will set up additional area-specific working groups as required and is happy to take suggestions on areas that may be relevant. Further information on the LMF can be found [here](#).

10. Vaccination – Safe Surgeries initiative

- 10.1. We have worked in partnership with Lewisham and Southwark Clinical Commissioning Group, DOTW and Lewisham Refugee and Migrant Network (LRMN) to coordinate a letter to GP practices promoting the DOTW [Safe Surgeries](#) initiative and reinforcing the need for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants to be registered with the NHS in order to receive the Covid vaccine.
- 10.2. We will continue to work with all our local partners to promote access to healthcare and vaccinations for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants and, where possible, mitigate

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the barriers to access that exist.

11. Asylum accommodation

- 11.1. In August 2020 the Home Office opened an Initial Accommodation site for people in the asylum system in Lewisham. Since this opened the Council has held regular meetings with the Home Office and other stakeholders to monitor the support provided to residents at the centre, understand the challenges that they may be facing and coordinate solutions. As a result we have been able to bring partner organisations together to provide clothing, support and advice to residents at the centre. Where there are ongoing problems that cannot be resolved locally we have also advocated to the Home Office directly, writing to them on a number of issues in October 2020 and again in February 2021 to raise issues around the quality of food provided to residents.

12. City of Sanctuary Local Authority Network

- 12.1. In December 2020 the City of Sanctuary movement launched its Local Authority Network which brings together Local Authorities to share good practice and work in partnership to further the aims of the movement. The Council is a founder member and sits on the steering group for the network. Currently, Cllr Bonavia chairs the steering group and to date three meetings have been held, at which we agreed the terms of reference for the steering group, the award criteria and membership form for applicants, and developed a plan for ongoing actions and campaigns for the year.

13. Calling on Government to suspend NRPF restrictions

- 13.1. On 11th May 2020 the Council wrote a letter to the Home Secretary, signed by the Mayor and Cllrs Bonavia and Barnham, calling on her to suspend NRPF conditions during the Covid-19 pandemic.

14. Covid-19 online information hub

- 14.1. During the Covid-19 pandemic the Council created an online information hub for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants which provided information on the help and support available to them and health advice in a range of languages. We continue to update these resources regularly as new information and resources become available.

15. Training on service user experience

- 15.1. St Mary's School, Citizens UK, Project 17 and LRMN have worked with people with lived experience of the NRPF service to develop training for Council staff on the service user experience. This is designed to promote greater understanding, awareness and empathy among Officers. The first session is due to be delivered in March to staff in our NRPF team and we will then look to roll out similar training to other services.

16. London Must Act Campaign

- 16.1. We have been working closely with the London Must Act Campaign which is a chapter of Europe Must Act, a Europe-wide campaign with 23 chapters in the UK alone. In June 2020, Greece cut spending on a programme aimed at housing the most vulnerable people in the camps. This meant that many asylum seekers who had been placed in temporary accommodation are now left with no option but to return to the islands' camps. With winter progressing, and the grossly inadequate living conditions for people on the move living on the Greek islands, we have been working together with London Must Act to urge the UK Government to relocate these camp inhabitants. We are currently coordinating a letter with Lewisham MPs to send to the Minister to

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request emergency relocation for those stranded in the Greek islands using the UK's Refugee Resettlement Scheme.

17. Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC)

- 17.1. We are committed to welcoming an additional 100 child refugees over next 10 years as part of Safe Passage's Our Turn campaign. There are currently 43 UASC under the age of 18 in the Looked after Children's Service. There are 91 young people who have become UASC care leavers to Lewisham in the last rolling year. They were all formerly Looked After and were also classified as Asylum Seeking Children.
- 17.2. Lewisham has welcomed 29 UASC children from August 2020 to Jan 2021. The council has accommodated UASC children through the government voluntary national transfer scheme (NTS), referrals from Lewisham police and referrals from solicitors representing unaccompanied minors.
- 17.3. Lewisham has set up a specialist team of 3 UASC social workers and a group of generic personal advisors within the Leaving Care service to focus on ensuring UASC arriving in Lewisham receive support throughout their journey in care until they are ready to leave care. They are provided with assistance to get qualified legal support and a warm welcome to their new placement, as well as ensuring they are provided with access to interpreters and advocacy. They receive high quality care and support through provision of specialist and trained UASC social workers, and we work to ensure they are placed safely with culturally appropriate carers and placement providers.
- 17.4. Social workers and managers carry out Covid-19 risk assessments for UASC in our care and signpost those that require emotional and medical support. We follow NHS guidance by providing personal protective equipment (PPE) to staff and ensure children and young people are made aware of the need to wear masks and social distance. We also provide carers and placement providers with support on NHS guidance and monitor them to ensure the guidance is implemented and any UASC required to quarantine are supported appropriately.
- 17.5. The service works closely with Refugee Council to enable new arrivals to access counselling support and participate in social activities. The service has also linked with Coram's [Migrant Children's Project](#) to develop a bespoke advice service for Unaccompanied Minors and Care leavers in Lewisham. The project's advice line provides a high-level service to Lewisham social workers and can provide case reviews and guidance on the immigration process.
- 17.6. Lewisham has been successful in securing Home Office funding to support vulnerable community groups to apply for settled status. With effect from the August 2020, structured work has commenced to afford priority to UASC and children who are EU Nationals to be supported to secure settled status. As of 1 February 2021 there were 15 young people children looked after and care leavers earmarked to benefit from this funding.
- 17.7. **National Transfer Scheme (NTS)**
- 17.8. The NTS protocol was created in 2017 to enable the safe transfer of unaccompanied children from one Local Authority (the entry authority from which the unaccompanied child transfers) to another Local Authority (the receiving authority). Only unaccompanied children that meet the definition of a UASC, as set out in the Immigration Rules, are eligible to be referred to the NTS.
- 17.9. The transfer protocol was intended to ensure that unaccompanied children can access the services and support they need and was also a voluntary agreement made between Local Authorities in England to ensure a more even distribution of unaccompanied children across all Local Authorities. Challenges with the Home Office

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mechanisms for managing the volume of needs nationally meant that the London Local Authorities have agreed to revert to the Pan London rota until the NTS remedial adjustments are completed.

18. NHS charges

- 18.1. Lewisham and Greenwich NHS Trust commissioned an independent inquiry into NHS charging as a result of past problems identified. This inquiry began in January 2020 but was interrupted due to Covid-19 and reconvened in September 2020. Council representatives sit on this inquiry and in addition Cllr Bonavia has raised a number of issues with the NHS Trust, including NHS charges.

19. Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf

- 19.1. Assisted by the personal connections of Rob Keeling, a Lewisham resident and co-chair of the voluntary group Lewisham Refugee Welcome, the Council have connected with colleagues at our twinned borough of Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf in Berlin. As part of our Borough of Sanctuary work we held online meetings with counterparts in their Immigration Integration team to share our experience and good practice in supporting refugees and migrants. As a result we have agreed a framework for continued dialogue and to look at further opportunities for partnership working and the exchange of good practice. This document will be signed by the respective Mayors and form the basis for an ongoing relationship.

20. Removal of embedded Home Office worker

- 20.1. In April 2019 the Council removed the Home Office worker from our No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) service, instead using the NRPF connect system to carry out information checks and using the money saved to fund independent legal advice for NRPF applicants seeking emergency support. Further details can be found in this news [report](#).

21. Free School Meals

- 21.1. In October 2019 we passed a Council motion guaranteeing free school meals for children from households who have no recourse to public funds, further details can be found in this [press release](#).

22. Refusing to collaborate with the Home Office on new immigration rules on rough sleeping

- 22.1. In December 2020 the Council [announced](#) that it will not collaborate with the Home Office in enforcing new immigration rules that make rough sleeping a legal ground to cancel or refuse permission to stay in the UK. We will continue to support the Greater London Authority in lobbying the government to immediately reverse these changes.

23. Financial implications

- 23.1. There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

24. Legal implications

- 24.1. There are no specific legal implications arising

25. Equalities implications

- 25.1. The Equality Act 2010 (the Act) introduced a public sector equality duty (the equality

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duty or the duty)). It covers the following protected characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

- 25.2. In summary, the Council must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to:
- eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act.
 - advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
 - foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- 25.3. It is not an absolute requirement to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, victimisation or other prohibited conduct, or to promote equality of opportunity or foster good relations between persons who share a protected characteristic and those who do not. It is a duty to have due regard to the need to achieve the goals listed at 12.2 above.
- 25.4. The weight to be attached to the duty will be dependent on the nature of the decision and the circumstances in which it is made. This is a matter for the Mayor, bearing in mind the issues of relevance and proportionality. The Mayor must understand the impact or likely impact of the decision on those with protected characteristics who are potentially affected by the decision. The extent of the duty will necessarily vary from case to case and due regard is such regard as is appropriate in all the circumstances.
- 25.5. The Equality and Human Rights Commission has issued Technical Guidance on the Public Sector Equality Duty and statutory guidance entitled “Equality Act 2010 Services, Public Functions & Associations Statutory Code of Practice”. The Council must have regard to the statutory code in so far as it relates to the duty and attention is drawn to Chapter 11 which deals particularly with the equality duty. The Technical Guidance also covers what public authorities should do to meet the duty. This includes steps that are legally required, as well as recommended actions. The guidance does not have statutory force but nonetheless regard should be had to it, as failure to do so without compelling reason would be of evidential value. The [statutory code](#) and the [technical guidance](#) can be found on their website.
- 25.6. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) has previously issued five guides for public authorities in England giving advice on the equality duty:
- The essential guide to the public sector equality duty
 - Meeting the equality duty in policy and decision-making
 - Engagement and the equality duty: A guide for public authorities
 - Objectives and the equality duty. A guide for public authorities
 - Equality Information and the Equality Duty: A Guide for Public Authorities
- 25.7. The essential guide provides an overview of the equality duty requirements including the general equality duty, the specific duties and who they apply to. It covers what public authorities should do to meet the duty including steps that are legally required, as well as recommended actions. The other four documents provide more detailed guidance on key areas and advice on good practice. Further information and resources are available at:
- 25.8. <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/public-sector-equality-duty-guidance#h1>

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26. Climate change and environmental implications

- 26.1. Although there are no specific climate change implications in this report, it is recognised that there are likely to be longer term implications of climate change, on migration patterns, as parts of the world become less habitable.

27. Crime and disorder implications

- 27.1. There are no direct crime and disorder implications but the Council will work closely with the Police to respond to any hate crime that occurs against refugees and migrants in the borough.

28. Health and wellbeing implications

- 28.1. The health and wellbeing implications are contained in the main body of this report.

29. Background papers

- 29.1. Borough of Sanctuary Strategy, November 2020.
- 29.2. The Borough of Sanctuary Strategy document can be found in the footnote on the [Sanctuary](#) page of the Council website.

30. Glossary

- 30.1. There are some core concepts that this document centres on which need to have a common meaning across the Council. These are defined for the purpose of this document as set out below:

Term	Definition
An asylum seeker, or a person seeking asylum	An asylum seeker, or a person seeking asylum, is someone who has left their country of origin and formally applied for asylum but whose application has not yet been concluded, where asylum is protection or safety given by a government to people forced to leave their own countries for fear of persecution.
A refugee	In the UK, a person becomes a refugee when government agrees that their application for asylum meets this definition (taken from the Refugee Convention) and recognises them as a refugee. The other route for refugee status in the UK is to be accepted onto one of the dedicated resettlement schemes prior to arrival.
UASC	UASC stands for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and refers to children who are outside their country of origin seeking asylum, are separated from parents and relatives, and are not in the care of someone who is responsible for them in a guardianship role.
The Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme, Vulnerable Person's Resettlement Scheme, or the UK Resettlement Scheme	The Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme, Vulnerable Person's Resettlement Scheme (both up to 2020/21) or the UK Resettlement Scheme (expected to start 2021) refer to specific programmes where the Home Office and United Nations Human Rights Committee identify the most vulnerable refugees for resettlement. The refugee resettlement programme is how we refer to this programme in the Council, where we accept referrals to welcome and resettle these families.

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Term	Definition
A migrant	A migrant is someone who has moved from one country to another, not for reasons of asylum or refuge. Often the move is for work, education or to be with family. People may also move to alleviate significant hardships that arise from natural disasters, famine or extreme poverty.

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