

Swansea

Pioneering the sanctuary movement in Wales and the UK.

Table of Contents

1. Abstract & Takeaways

2. Local background and context

3. Selected local approaches

3.1 The communal reception of new arrivals:

The “Welcome to Swansea” mentoring scheme

3.2 Sanctuary in Lockdown and the protection of social rights:

ASPEN card support through Swansea Council

4. Advocacy and network activities

1. Abstract & Takeaways

Key Takeaways:

1

Funded staff members ensured more consistent collaboration between different civil society groups and the local authority.

2

Discursive positioning as a welcoming city: The recognition as the UK's second official City of Sanctuary in June 2010, became an occasion for civic pride.

3

A strong cultural and national Welsh identity coexists with intercultural openness.

What is unique about the city?

A culture of hospitality: As the second city in the UK to become a City of Sanctuary, Swansea is a sanctuary pioneer in both the UK and Wales. The local civil society led sanctuary movement has a long record of promoting a culture of hospitality for refugees and asylum seekers.

What are the key factors?

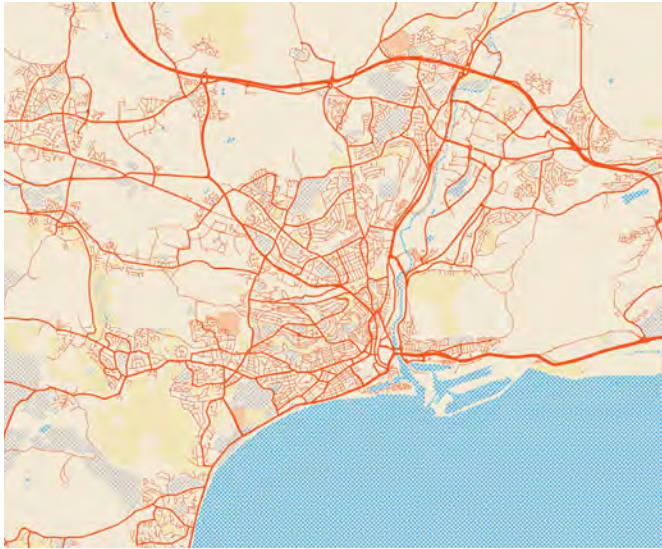
A civil society focused on impacts: Swansea achieved City of Sanctuary status with the support of over a hundred local groups, and a unanimous resolution of support from the city council in 2010. This made it the first sanctuary city in Wales, and the local movement went on to play a central role in lobbying the Welsh government to declare Wales as the world's first Nation of Sanctuary. Swansea City of Sanctuary was the first within the national network to secure independent funding for paid staff members: two full-time members and one part-time member over three years. This has enabled the group to have a strong bearing on local authority policies.

What are the most outstanding results so far?

Advancing social rights for migrants: Swansea has pioneered social opportunities for migrants in the city, and helped advance their social rights. Recently, the local council helped top up asylum seekers' food scheme cards during the COVID-19 pandemic. This marked the first time local funds were used to supplement UK Home Office payments.

Political activities and advocacy beyond the city level?

The Welsh action plan to “monitor and seek to mitigate the worst effects of UK Government welfare reforms” has helped Swansea to indirectly challenge the normative framing of the UK government’s “hostile environment” policy.



Population

247,000

Location/ region

Swansea, or 'Abertawe' in Welsh, is a city in South Wales in the United Kingdom, and the second largest city in the devolved nation of Wales

Mayor (party)

Mark Child (Labour)

2. Local background and context

Swansea's local migration and inclusion policies stand as an exemplary case of pro-migrant urban politics in the UK. This is reflected in the institutionalisation of welcoming practices in the city. It is also evident in the cooperation between the city administration and civil society groups, which have collectively positioned themselves against UK central government austerity politics.

UK government-implemented austerity measures led to a situation in which local authorities were forced to make large cuts to their budgets, including to the professional refugee sector. In addition, contracts for providing accommodation for asylum seekers were subject to competitive tender, leading to a reduction in the public sector's role. Although private providers were evident from 2010, the City and County of Swansea's Asylum Team and Housing Options Services was one of the main providers of accommodation for asylum seekers until 2012. This local team would also cover a range of other activities associated with 'welcoming': meeting people, showing them around, and following up if there were problems.

Collaboration between local authorities and civil society

When the local authority lost its remaining contracts in 2012, civil society had to fill the gap where formal welcoming activities were no longer evident. This led to a new mentoring initiative, called Welcome to Swansea (see section below). While the City of Sanctuary movement first set up the scheme, its organisation and operation has since been actively supported through funding and administrative means by Swansea Council. This also makes it an exemplary approach for how local authorities and civil society can respond to diminishing state support for migrants following economic crisis.

The Swansea City of Sanctuary group was also the first within the national network to secure funding for three staff members for three full years (two full time, one part time), based on a [Big Lottery grant](#). This facilitated a more consistent collaboration between different civil society groups and the local authority, with the City of Sanctuary network providing a key link between civil society and the council. Alyson Pugh, a Labour councillor from Swansea, reiterates that: “There is a working group between the council and City of Sanctuary, we are working very closely together” (Interview, December 2020). Moreover, links between the City and County of Swansea, the Welsh Government and the Welsh Refugee Council were built with civil society organisations through alliances such as the Swansea Refugee and Asylum Seeker Advocacy Forum. Funded by the Welsh Government, this highlights how Wales’s institutionally devolved context and Swansea’s progressive local migration and inclusion policies complement each other.

However, in addition to these exemplary instances of collaboration, civil society groups have also pointed out room for improvement. In their commentary submitted for the Welsh Assembly’s first policy report on refugees and asylum seekers, the City of Sanctuary movement remarked that on refugee resettlement, some groups in Wales unfortunately experienced low engagement from local authorities. It also stated that: “Professionals and agencies can sometimes appear to discourage rather than facilitate the contribution of voluntary individuals and groups. Yet, as [the local authority] has repeatedly stressed, the goodwill and involvement of the community is crucial for the settlement programme to be successful”.

Despite these shortcomings, examples such as the Swansea Refugee and Asylum Seeker Advocacy Forum highlight the significant role Swansea has played as a city in advancing the protection of refugee social rights. The following sections focus on two collaborative initiatives between civil society groups and the local authority that challenge the hostile policies advanced by central government. These include the ‘Welcome to Swansea’ scheme and an initiative providing direct funding for school meals to asylum seekers in the city.

3. Selected local approaches

3.1 The communal reception of new arrivals: The “Welcome to Swansea” mentoring scheme

A project in Swansea that shows how welcoming practices are institutionalised in collaboration between local authorities and civil society, the ‘Welcome to Swansea’ mentoring scheme is important in mitigating the effects of UK policies associated with the ‘hostile environment’ (see section on UK migration policies).

The Wales Cities of Sanctuary project pioneered this initiative, funded by a Big Lottery Grant between 2015 and 2018, and run in partnership with the charity Displaced People in Action (DPIA) in Cardiff. The scheme is now called ‘[A Better Welcome to Swansea](#)’. It continues to run through a partnership between Swansea City of Sanctuary and the Swansea Council of Voluntary Services, funded by the National Lottery.

Encouraging active participation in day-to-day activities

The mentoring scheme facilitates the meeting of volunteers and scheme participants – mostly newly dispersed asylum seekers – and provides practical support to alleviate experiences of isolation during the initial arrival period. The aim of the scheme is to “promote integration between asylum seekers and refugees and people in local Swansea communities” and to support and encourage participants to develop knowledge and confidence. This involves encouraging active participation in day-to-day activities in the city. Mentoring activities are wide-ranging, but typically include: explaining and showing bus routes as well as access to services or safe places in town to meet, bringing newcomers to the library, helping them with administrative procedures, or socialising.

Through these activities, the scheme increases a new asylum seeker’s knowledge and familiarity of the Swansea area. A mentor supports the asylum seeker when they are referred to the project. The volunteer mentors are recruited and trained by the Swansea City of Sanctuary movement through an integration officer, and then matched with the mentees. Their shared work is a short-term intervention, consisting usually of two to eight sessions or meetings, depending on the participant’s needs assessment. This allows dispersed asylum seekers to ‘find their feet’ in their new community. The scheme has about 40 to 50 mentors, and about 120 mentees in a year.

Local Administration supporting Civil Society

The [Intercultural Cities report](#) on Swansea by a Council of Europe experts team highlights how the Swansea Council supported the local City

of Sanctuary movement to run this scheme. For example, the official Migration, Asylum Seeker and Refugee coordinator of Swansea Council is, according to a local councillor, heavily involved in the project (Interview, December 2020). Importantly, this collaboration goes beyond administrative or financial support. It begins with institutions such as the city's Central Clinic working together with the council, and referring new asylum seekers to Swansea City of Sanctuary so the scheme can support them. The mentoring scheme is similar to that of the previous asylum seeker support team, which was part of Swansea Council prior to the privatisation of asylum housing contracts. The fact that those welcoming activities continue to take place constitutes an important mitigation to the 'hostile environment' the UK Home Office has created for asylum seekers and refugees, and a challenge to the process of privatising social housing.

Empowerment through self-organisation

The local authority and civil society's challenge to the UK hostile environment is twofold. First, it works to prevent and counter the social isolation that asylum seekers are forced into as part of the hostile environment, such as through restrictions on their ability to work, travel, access legal support for their cases, training or higher education, among other things. Second, it has also facilitated self-organisation, collaboration and assistance between new arrivals and asylum seekers who have been present in the city for longer. Indeed, the scheme's mentors largely involve a mix of retired individuals with a non-migrant background from the local community and asylum-seeking volunteers who have previously been participants in the program. Notably, a greater number of former participants in the scheme are mentors in comparison to those who are not. This indicates that the scheme is not only successful in its aim to facilitate the integration between people of different migration or non-migration backgrounds in local communities, but also opens the potential for self-organisation between asylum seekers to challenge their isolation, creating a politics of empowerment rather than dependency.

3.2 Sanctuary in Lockdown and the protection of social rights: ASPEN card support through Swansea Council

The Council significantly improved access to free school meals by replacing a complicated voucher system with funds to top up asylum seekers' ASPEN cards. What seems like a minor change improved the life of many families during the pandemic and served as a model for other payments, such as school uniform grants.

A hostile and patronising environment

Even before the profound changes that the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown in all parts of the United Kingdom brought to almost everyone's lives, asylum seekers and refugees were

already struggling in a ‘hostile environment’ that reached in into smallest and most mundane elements of day-to-day life. Dispersed asylum seekers are housed in poor and often shared accommodation, while waiting for an outcome on their applications for refugee status. During this time, they are provided with just over £5 per person per day to live on.

Moreover, financial support for asylum seekers is no longer provided in cash, but as a form of weekly credit via a debit card - the ASPEN (Asylum Support Enablement) card. The credit on the ASPEN card can only be spent in specified shops, and only during the week for which the funds are designated. The Home Office introduced this so asylum seekers on Section 95 and Section 4¹ support would only be able to buy essentials in shops that accept Visa debit cards. Note that Section 4 claimants cannot use the card to withdraw cash. Furthermore, the limitations of this form of support had serious effects on those reliant on their ASPEN cards during lockdown. This is due to the lockdown rendering it particularly difficult for the children of asylum seeker families to access free school meals.

A round table with all relevant stakeholders

Since mid-March 2020, Swansea City of Sanctuary have held regular Zoom meetings to bring together those involved in supporting asylum seekers and refugees from across the city. The managing committee consulted key supporting organisations, and subsequently set up the *Swansea Covid19 Asylum Seekers/Refugee Service Provider’s Forum*. The regular zoom meetings include representation from Swansea Council. Swansea Council’s Local Area Coordinators also worked together with activists, volunteers and the Swansea Council for Voluntary Services to support asylum seekers and refugees in need during lockdown. One local councillor describes how “as soon as we know things would alter in March, these meetings became daily, constantly.” In the same interview, the councillor reiterates that for the local authority “food poverty was the main priority straight away” (Interview, December 2020).

¹ Box 1: Asylum seekers can apply for support for the period during which their asylum application and any subsequent appeal is being considered. This is often referred to as Section 95 support (defined in Section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999). The application can be made for subsistence and accommodation or for subsistence only. An asylum seeker who has no dependent children at the time of a final refusal decision will have their support terminated 21 days after the decision. They may then be eligible for Section 4 support (defined in Section 4 of the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act), but this is only given to people meeting one of a small number of tightly defined conditions. These include demonstrating willingness to leave the UK, having a medical reason not to travel, or being unable to travel because there is no safe route of return. The person must also be destitute or about to become destitute (source: British Refugee Council, November 2018)

Improving access to free school meal allowances

The Co-Chair of Swansea City of Sanctuary describes the forum’s biggest achievement as the adding of payment for school meals to ASPEN cards: “Following feedback on problems for asylum seekers without bank accounts in accessing the voucher scheme that was planned as an alternative to meal packages, the Council has persuaded the Home Office to top up asylum seekers’ ASPEN cards with equivalent funds from the Council’s budget- a first in Wales!” This council initiative came about based on a close collaboration with civil society. A local councillor explains that the Swansea Council for Voluntary services “were absolutely key in the work with Covid.” Based on knowledge gained through this collaboration, the Migration, Refugee and Asylum Coordinator from Swansea Council negotiated with the Home Office and private accommodation providers and were: “quickly able to sort out the ASPEN card with the free school meal allowance.” This is described as making “such

an enormous difference for families. It was huge” (Interview, December 2020). Importantly, this system was also duplicated to support refugees and asylum seekers through other grants. The councillor explains: “They then went on to do the same for the school uniform grants, to put them onto the ASPEN cards. And there were period poverty grants as well. They used the same system to continue that. Honestly, it has been live-saving, really” (Interview, December 2020).

4. Advocacy and network activities

Swansea is an important case in the UK, because it found creative answers to the challenge of migration in times of economic deprivation. The coexistence of an intercultural approach with a strong cultural and national Welsh identity enabled Swansea’s positioning as a city that is proud of creating a welcoming environment for migrants.

Intercultural solidarity in times of economic deprivation

Swansea, the second largest city in Wales, faces economic deprivation exacerbated by a decade of austerity measures and the uncertainties involved with Brexit. It has, at the same time, seen a significant increase in its migrant population in the last ten years. Civil society groups and city authorities have addressed the tensions arising in this context in innovative ways, with Swansea particularly notable in the coexistence of an intercultural approach, with a strong cultural and national Welsh identity. This refers to defining the Welsh nation within the United Kingdom as not just a region of a larger sovereign state, but as a distinct and separate nation-state with elements of its own political sovereignty and sense of identity. This renders Swansea an important case highlighting the potential advancement of urban and (sub)-national forms of solidarity and sanctuary alongside one another.

Discursive positioning as a welcoming city

The discursive positioning of Swansea as a ‘welcoming place’ has long been embedded in local discourses and was influential in advancing its application as a city of sanctuary. The first support networks emerged in 2000 as a reaction to the national dispersal scheme, with Swansea being announced as a new dispersal city for asylum seekers. Activists from grassroots networks initiated the formal process to become a City of Sanctuary by setting up a steering group in June 2008. The steering group included two local councillors, who lobbied the City and County of Swansea with the effect of a unanimous resolution of support being passed by the council in December 2008. One of those councillors was Swansea Labour group leader David Phillips, who stated in an article of the South Wales Evening Post: “It is about offering a positive vision of

our city. Swansea is a very welcoming and friendly city and in its own small way, cosmopolitan.” Swansea became the UK’s second official City of Sanctuary in June 2010, followed by a delegation of the movement presenting the City of Sanctuary certificate to the Lord Mayor at a Council meeting on 19 September 2010.

Civic pride and a culture of hospitality

In their application, the Swansea movement emphasised its hope to use the national recognition as an occasion for civic pride. The way the campaign and status affected the pride of people in their city, beyond official statements, become clear when the founder of a Welsh disability charity wrote a newspaper commentary in 2015, stating how: “... people who have all left their possessions behind and have found a safe haven, a place where they can sleep without fear of their persecutors coming at night and that place is Swansea. What a great reputation to have!” In July 2020, Swansea Council and City of Sanctuary publicly celebrated the anniversary of this status together with the unveiling of a flower display of the movement’s logo at the council building, with asylum seekers, the Lord Mayor and activists being present. However, this was not limited to the city alone, but also endorsed by Assembly Members from Senedd Cymru (the Welsh Assembly) such as John Griffiths for Newport East. This civic pride was made evident at the national level when the Welsh government under former First Minister Carwyn Jones backed the bid for Wales to become a Nation of Sanctuary. This discursive positioning also set the scene for a Welsh government emergency summit in response to the European ‘refugee crisis’ in September 2015. Therefore, an April 2017 policy report by the National Assembly of Wales “I used to be someone”- Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Wales, recommended that the Welsh government should work towards this status by building a culture of hospitality and welcome for refugees and asylum seekers—also on a regional and national level.

Towards a nation of sanctuary

The Nation of Sanctuary commitment is also a resource that enables the city to have a greater bearing on centralised state policies. Indeed, that Wales was on the path to become the first Nation of Sanctuary was accepted and formalised in July 2017, when over one hundred people from organisations across Wales met on the invitation of Swansea City of Sanctuary to discuss what a Nation of Sanctuary would look like in reality, and how the Welsh Government could enact their recommendations. The influence of lobbying by urban civil society groups is evident in the naming of the devolved Government’s new refugee and asylum seeker action plan in 2019 as ‘Nation of Sanctuary.’ Moreover, the shared advancement of urban and national forms of sanctuary has also enabled Swansea to indirectly challenge state policies and discourse, through the Welsh action plan to “monitor and seek to mitigate the worst effects of UK Government welfare reforms.” This element of mitigation has been essential for the discursive positioning of Wales in relation to UK-wide migration policies, which has been made possible by a strong and pioneering movement in Swansea.

The **Moving Cities** project provides an in-depth research of 28 progressive, solidarity-based cities and their strategies in Europe, exploring their most inspiring and successful local approaches to their migration policies.

Moving Cities is a project from Seebrücke, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung and Heinrich Böll Stiftung, funded by Robert Bosch Stiftung and Stiftungsfond Zivileseenotrettung and supported by many more initiatives.

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