

City of Sanctuary – a UK initiative for hospitality

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It is often argued that in the UK the dispersal of asylum seekers has led to increased social tensions and threats to 'community cohesion'. This article challenges this view by showing how a local social movement is encouraging cities to be proud of their status as potential sanctuaries.

Since the decision in 1999 to disperse asylum seekers to a number of towns and cities across the UK, it has been argued that British cities have offered an indifferent and often hostile response to those in need of refuge. Yet this overlooks a range of daily acts of welcome offered across these dispersal sites. Highlighting and celebrating such positive examples of welcome is the aim of the City of Sanctuary movement. This movement not only offers a chance for individuals and groups to challenge the way the asylum debate is framed in the UK but is also concerned with creating a culture in which the virtues of welcome and hospitality are valued and through which asylum seekers and refugees are free to make a full contribution to their cities and to engage with local communities.

The City of Sanctuary movement originated in Sheffield in the north of England in 2005 and began with a group of people organising a series of local community meetings to garner support for the idea, with local businesses, organisations and community groups being asked to support a resolution stating that they "welcome asylum seekers and refugees".

In 2007 Sheffield became the UK's first official City of Sanctuary when the City Council agreed to support the movement. A manifesto was drawn up, outlining key areas of concern for asylum seekers and refugees in the city, and was adopted by the Council in February 2009. In November 2009 Sheffield celebrated the signing of its 100th supporting organisation.

Since 2007, the movement has grown into a network of fifteen towns and cities currently working towards City of Sanctuary status.¹ The precise dynamics of the initiative and the activities undertaken are different in each locality due to the grassroots nature of this work but there are a number of key characteristics that distinguish the movement.

Firstly, the movement emphasises the contributions asylum seekers and refugees have made to British cities, along with the role British citizens can play in welcoming these new arrivals. For example, the Sheffield group has invited people to suggest practical ways for welcoming refugees,² whilst the 'Building Sanctuary in Swansea' exhibition showed writing and images to highlight how refugees and asylum seekers have contributed to the city.

Secondly, it creates opportunities for local communities to meet and form relationships with those seeking sanctuary by staging a range of events to enable asylum seekers and refugees to communicate their experiences to different audiences. These include a 'Stories of Sanctuary' event in Bradford and a blogging workshop and training with local radio stations in Sheffield. Alongside this, the movement establishes events where local communities and asylum seekers and refugees can interact on an informal basis, such as a traditional British dance and a music concert in Sheffield.

Thirdly, it aims to offer a positive vision of hospitality within local communities, and in doing so



Sheffield City Council launch, UK, September 2007.

City of Sanctuary

hopes to build cities which are proud to be welcoming.³

The movement has published a handbook with advice on how to establish a City of Sanctuary group and why now, more than ever, is the time to challenge the popular denigration of sanctuary.⁴

Challenges

There are a number of challenges to be faced in establishing a City of Sanctuary. Firstly, it is important to note that such a model will not work in all cities. Such an initiative must be embedded in the local community, rooted in local concerns and local commitments. In Bolton and Leeds, both major dispersal cities, citizens decided this was not a route they wanted to follow, for political and cultural reasons particular to each city.

Secondly, there is an intangibility to the demands of the movement which can at times be challenging to communicate and translate into practical actions. Being for a culture of hospitality demands careful thought as to how such a culture might be promoted, developed and sustained. In Sheffield this process was achieved partly through the manifesto put to the council after consultation with a variety of refugee groups and charities. Yet it also

came about through creative means of getting Sheffield's citizens to think again about asylum – through printed drinks mats distributed in cafes and pubs which question myths about refugees, and through signs which businesses display to demonstrate their support.

Linked to this concern is a final challenge for the movement, that of its idealistic nature as defining a vision of a better future for dispersal towns and cities. A City of Sanctuary is identified as a place that is not only more welcoming to newcomers but also one which benefits from their contributions to create a more vibrant place, which is more inclusive of all its residents. This has led to criticism that the City of Sanctuary movement is unrealistic in its vision. In response, we would argue that a City of Sanctuary is not an end point to be reached but rather it is the process of promoting hospitality which is important. It is this process that enables local communities to make small acts of welcome and which may engender a shift in broader discussions of asylum at a national level. For example, in Sheffield the City Council's Sustainable Communities Panel has publicly recommended a change in central government policy over asylum seekers' right to work in the UK.

Reclaiming hospitality

Cities can never offer sanctuary in its fullest sense until there is a shift in government policy away from placing many individuals, including children, in detention, deporting others back to repressive regimes, and consigning some to destitution on Britain's streets. The City of Sanctuary movement presents one opportunity to change the attitudes which engender such national policies, through encouraging cities to stand up for the rights of asylum seekers in their own policies and through allowing an alternative account of asylum to emerge from local acts of welcome.

This is an account

which values a tradition of hospitality not as a commodity to be traded by governments but as a virtue to be celebrated.

"It's brilliant work. It's bringing together locals and foreigners and saying look, we're human beings and we can live together, we have a lot to share and we can work together to make our city a better place for all of us."
(Georgian refugee, Sheffield)

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1. As of November 2009 there are City of Sanctuary groups established in Bradford, Bristol, Chester, Coventry, Derby, Huddersfield, Hull, Ipswich, Leicester, London, Nottingham, Oxford, Sheffield, Swansea and Wakefield.

2. The City of Sanctuary 'inspirations' page highlights these offers of help. See <http://www.cityofsanctuary.com/inspiration>.

3. See City of Sanctuary film at <http://www.cityofsanctuary.org/film>

4. Barnett, C and Bhogal, I (2009) *Becoming a City of Sanctuary: a practical handbook with inspiring examples*, Ripon, Plug and Tap. <http://www.cityofsanctuary.org/book>