

OXFORD CITY COUNCIL LOCAL AUTHORITY OF SANCTUARY NEEDS ASSESSMENT REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

This needs assessment explores the experiences of asylum seekers, refugees and vulnerable migrants who access Oxford City Council's services. It outlines the opportunities, challenges, gaps and barriers faced by this community, mapping out the most acute areas of support required and measuring the extent to which these needs are met by local services.

This research has been commissioned by Oxford City Council as part of its work towards becoming an accredited Local Authority of Sanctuary. This accreditation is awarded to municipalities which demonstrate tangible progress in learning, embedding and sharing the principles of welcome for sanctuary seekers in the local area. This research is part of the learning process which will serve as a building block for the council's Action Plan. These steps could not be taken at a more important time, as the landscape of support for refugees and asylum seekers has transformed over the last two years.

According to government statistics, in March 2021, there were 29 asylum seekers in receipt of government support in Oxford city. By March 2023, the number had increased to 272. This is in addition to the 34 refugees who arrived in Oxford via resettlement schemes in this period. This trend is mirrored in Oxfordshire as a whole, where the number of asylum seekers in receipt of support increased from 37 in March 2021 to 659 in March 2023, alongside the arrival of 87 resettled families since 2021, more than 2,000 Ukrainians, and British National Overseas passport-holders from Hong Kong, over the same period.

There is a large East Timorese community in Oxford and, as Portuguese nationals, this group were required to apply to the EU Settlement Scheme when Britain left the EU. Due to language, connectivity and other issues, some members of this group faced additional challenges when regularising their status and received support from Asylum Welcome. For this reason, the East Timorese community have been included in this needs assessment despite not falling strictly within the 'sanctuary seeker' definition.

The demographic changes seen in Oxford over the past few years are the result of a combination of national policy (the 'full dispersal' scheme and increased use of hotel accommodation) and external factors (e.g., the war in Ukraine, political unrest in Afghanistan and Hong Kong). This has required local authorities to not only respond to an increasing number of refugees and asylum seekers living in the local area, but to understand how the different immigration statuses these individuals hold affect their experiences and their entitlements.

METHODOLOGY

Sixty-six interviews were conducted between October and December 2023 with service users of Asylum Welcome, Iraqi Women Art and War, the Sudanese Community Group, the Ukraine support group at St. Michael's Church and the East Timorese Parents' Group. As research participants were approached through the above organisations, the data may not represent the experiences of the most isolated individuals who do not belong to any community groups or access support from charities. All interviews were conducted face-to-face, either in English or using an informal mode of translation, either one-to-one or in pairs.

A key aim of this research is to develop a picture of how the differing rights and entitlements accorded to groups with different immigration statuses impact their ability to access local services. To this end, we interviewed:

1. 27 asylum seekers who live in the asylum hotels or dispersal accommodation.
2. 10 people with refugee status.
3. 7 people on resettlement schemes (ARAP, ACRS or UKRS).
4. 8 Ukrainians on specific Ukraine visas.
5. 3 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
6. 4 EU migrants with indefinite leave to remain in the UK.
7. 5 naturalised British citizens.

These participants span eighteen different nationalities, of which Sudanese, Ukrainian, Afghan, Iranian and Eritrean are the most strongly represented. Two-thirds of respondents identified as male and one-third as female, with the majority falling within the 25-34 age category. While all participants have experience accessing services within the geographical remit of the city of Oxford, a small number, particularly those in hosting arrangements, reside in other Oxfordshire districts.

Thirty service providers have also contributed their experiences to this report, either through one-to-one interviews or by attending one of two group-based virtual interview sessions. These stakeholders have experience working with sanctuary seekers in Oxford in a range of contexts: faith-based; youth work; health and medical provision; education and employment support; hosting arrangements.

As Oxford City Council is not a unitary authority, some issues raised in the report fall within the remit of Oxfordshire County Council. A strict distinction has not been drawn here to understand better the full range of difficulties encountered within the Oxford community; the difficulty of understanding the split responsibilities of these two authorities can itself pose a challenge for sanctuary seekers.

In researching and writing this report, the role of Asylum Welcome been to collect and represent the views and expertise of sanctuary seekers and the stakeholder groups. The emphasis has been on coordination, rather than commentary, so that a range of voices and perspectives might be heard. Asylum Welcome looks forward to participating in future discussions on planning and implementation as one of the contributing organisations.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Most of Oxford's new residents find the city a beautiful, multicultural, and safe place. Oxford's reputation as a place of educational excellence is influential: the diversity of international students, the architecture of university buildings, the promotion of walking and cycling and the possibility of becoming part of the academic community are seen as advantages of the city.

Positive feedback was given on the availability of cultural activities, outdoor spaces, friendly communities and the support of local charities. Opportunities to participate in local sports teams, volunteering (for example, in charity shops), religious activities and music groups are seen as helpful in building social connections and making the best use of time, especially for people without the right to work.

The refugee-led community organisations in Oxford - including Syrcos, Syrian Sisters, the Iranian Association, the Sudanese Community Group, IAWAW, the East Timorese Community Group, and others - have a large impact on how sanctuary seekers experience the city. As one stakeholder notes, *"The people who do well are those with links to a religious or national group in the city who can help and who understand their experience."* We recommend that, as the Local Authority of Sanctuary work progresses, the council builds and maintains relationships with these groups.

The areas in which the greatest challenges are faced fall into four main categories: transport; health and wellbeing; education and employment; and accommodation. For each area, suggested improvements have been offered by the sanctuary-seeking communities themselves and by the service providers who work with these communities in Oxford.

There are some challenges that cut across all the above categories: knowing where to find clear and accessible information in a suitable format, for example, is an overarching theme. One participant asks:

*"Is it possible to visit somebody if I have questions about housing, education, **and** transport? You need to have one place where people can come and ask different questions. Information flows through a slow process even though people have stayed here for about 10 months or more. An information centre with every detail will be vital."*

Other barriers are specific to a particular group of sanctuary seekers. For example, those on the Homes for Ukraine scheme automatically have the right to work, whereas asylum claimants rarely do. This means that Ukrainian respondents have more to say about accessing the Jobcentre, whereas asylum seekers wish to discuss the mental health implications of being isolated and idle. While divided into sections for clarity, multiple barriers often apply simultaneously, compounding the difficulties of accessing services. For example, an asylum seeker might avoid seeking medical treatment *both* because they cannot afford public transport, *and* because they do not realise they are entitled to free medication.

TRANSPORT

The inaccessibility of public transport creates a barrier to all other services, even when those services themselves are free of charge. The preferred modes of transport for interviewees are taking the bus and cycling. Walking is an option for some who live in the city, but challenging for those who need to travel long distances, or who have disabilities, are pregnant or have young children. Just one interviewee, a British citizen who has been in Oxford for 11 years, has a car, but prefers to take the bus around Oxford.

1. PUBLIC TRANSPORT

The high cost of bus travel was cited as a major challenge by most service users who are not entitled to a bus pass. For those in receipt of asylum support, the cost of bus travel is particularly prohibitive. In December 2023, the daily allowance for asylum seekers was reduced to £1.27 a day (£8.89/w). A single bus ticket in Oxford is £2, a return is £4 and a day pass is £4.50. If an asylum seeker spent all their weekly allowance on bus travel, they could make a maximum of two return trips per week.

Some parents also struggle with the cost of bus travel for their children.

Unlike other cohorts, Ukrainian refugees are entitled to free bus travel for the first six months after arrival, through a County Council scheme. Some Ukrainians expressed difficulty finding information and applying for the pass, as there isn't a proper Ukrainian translation of the page, just a link to Google translation.

Other sanctuary seekers are aware of bus pass schemes they might be eligible for (e.g. through college) but they have struggled to access them.

"Getting £9 only doesn't allow you to travel. The daily ticket is £4.50 – you can only travel once a week."

"The bus pass is very expensive. A bus pass for the children would help a lot. Every day, the children need £5 each".

"I have asked for a bus pass but I couldn't find it. I asked the [County] council through the website. They haven't replied. It would be significant to get it. It will give me more opportunity to get a job and develop my career."

"I don't know how to get a bus pass. When I attended college, they told me I will get one, and they did not issue it. They did not contact me back after saying they will contact me."

"Once, on the bus, I tried to pay with coins. They said, 'I don't have time to count the money. You have to get off the bus'".

An Oxford GP echoed the concerns about the expense of bus travel, identifying a need for additional support *“specifically for vulnerable/disabled asylum seekers who have had claims for bus passes rejected by the council, despite UK residents being eligible for them.”* Asylum Welcome’s Sanctuary Hosting service provides free bus passes to its guests, as this is crucial to supporting the physical and psychological wellbeing of its service users: *“It’s important for people to be busy and have something they can put their mind to without thinking about their difficult situation. Public transport mitigates against that.”* For those living outside of central Oxford, the frequency of buses is also a problem. One host told us *“We have a bus once an hour into Oxford. To go anywhere else, you’ve got to go to Oxford first. The last bus back is 7pm.”*

2. CYCLING

Cycling is a popular mode of transport for service users. Cycling is easy and low-cost, and Oxford is a cycle-friendly city. Many service users express an interest in cycling, but are prevented by a number of factors:

1. **Cost:** the difficulty in affording a bike. The bicycle scheme Sanctuary Wheels is popular, though high demand means the waiting list is long.
2. **Maintenance:** Several interviewees also mention being limited by their bike being broken or needing maintenance.
3. **Distance:** Cycling is not always ideal for longer journeys or those with health conditions.
4. **Seasonal:** Some are afraid of cycling at night and in winter.

SUGGESTIONS

Expand the ‘Sanctuary Wheels’ scheme, or create other similar schemes, to reduce waiting times for a bike.

Organise accessible bike repair services or courses.

The ability to access Oxford’s e-scooters may help those with who cannot use a regular bike.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

Expand the free bus pass scheme offered to Ukrainians to sanctuary seekers receiving asylum support. See Wales Nation of Sanctuary scheme on this.

Create free transport option, such as a minibus, from the asylum hotel to the city centre.

Review the Ukrainian bus pass information page on the County Council website, involving service users, to improve user experience.

Ensure that asylum seekers are aware that transport to medical appointments can be reimbursed.

See ‘Wellbeing’ section for secondary impact of public transport costs.

“I have asked for a bicycle from AW; I am waiting. A bicycle will be the most helpful.”

“I have been provided with a bicycle that still needs fixing and I need to learn how.”

“I am tired of using bicycles because I have to travel for a longer journey to go to colleges and visit people.”

“In winter it is very difficult to use bicycles, so it would crucially change my experience with transport if I can get free bus passes.”

“If I have an electric cycle or a bus pass, I can volunteer more and meet more people.”

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

1. GENERAL PRACTICE

Fifty-three service users responded to questions about GP services. Of these, fifteen struggled to get an appointment, four experienced a lack of follow-up care, eleven struggled with communication, and four had a lack of trust in the service. The following barriers were identified:

1. **Getting an appointment:** Some respondents did not understand the system of phoning early in the morning to book an appointment; others found the online booking system confusing. The online system was inaccessible for those without smartphones.
2. **Lack of information:** Some respondents were not aware of the 999 and 111 numbers.
3. **Follow-ups and results:** Two respondents were told they required more treatment and then were never contacted. They did not know how to follow up.
4. **Communication:** Service users described struggles with communication over the phone, a lack of access to translators (in the dialects required, eg. Sudanese Arabic) and an inability to read the letters sent from the hospital.
5. **Trust:** Two service users commented that they preferred home remedies to visiting a GP.
6. **Lack of specialist support:** There is a need for specialised support for survivors of torture and SGBV. Although the Rose Clinic offers care for FGM, specialised support is only accessible in London.
7. **Medication:** Some respondents expect medicines, particularly antibiotics, to be more readily available; greater explanation would help here.
8. **Pharmacy:** One respondent was required to pay for his prescription even though he had an HC2 certificate.

SUGGESTIONS

Encourage GP practices to become 'safe surgeries', which commit to treat patients equally regardless of immigration status. See Lewisham council's initiative on this.

Develop an Integrated Health Service, which would be able to provide a care coordinator or a designated health care service.

Improving trust in local authorities with vulnerable communities will be important in increasing take-up of primary care services. Conducting outreach work in the community is thus vital.

Improving trust may also be achieved through assigning service users with primary care workers of similar cultural backgrounds.

Work with asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants to better formulate local health action, to ensure that they are culturally appropriate and accessible.

Encourage local practices to consider the accessibility of their services, re. the online appointment booking system, etc.

Refer to the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment undertaken by Southwark Council.

Influence change through the Health and Wellbeing Board

2. MENTAL HEALTH

Many interviewees reported needing mental health support. Seven have received formal mental health support from their GP; two reported a negative experience. One respondent accessed counselling from Refugee Resource. Meanwhile, six service users have opted to rely on family members, community groups, or a medical professional from their home country for this support. The main barriers to receiving mental health help are as follows:

1. **Communication:** Two service users noted the difficulties posed by language barriers, with one explaining that she struggles to talk about mental health issues with interpreters present. A third service user found phone appointments difficult, often missing the calls because they came from an unknown number.
2. **Technological issues:** One service user felt their mental state prevented them from receiving help in person, but they lack the appropriate technology to access help online.
3. **Access to information:** Six service users explicitly stated that they require mental health support but do not know how to access it.

A GP involved in the Oxford Refugee Health Initiative (ORHI), who has many patients in East Oxford who are asylum seekers and refugees, noted that sufficient support for PTSD and mental health issues are vital. They see the mental health consequences of the long waiting times for asylum applications on a regular basis, which triggers feelings of depression, hopelessness, and PTSD, often due to a lack of life structure.

Those working with Asylum Welcome also comment that older generations of Ukrainians struggle talking about loneliness and isolation, with stigma playing a large role, and men in particular not knowing where to access support.

The reasons cited for poor mental health among service users:

- Housing concerns, such as the stress of being relocated, or fear of eviction from the hotel.
- Length of the asylum process, and a lack of information provided regarding it.
- Financial limitations.
- Inability to see family members in their home countries.
- Not enough of a support network in Oxford.
- Social stigmatisation of asylum seekers.
- A lack of structure due to unemployment.

SUGGESTIONS

Offer mental health services which specialise in issues relating to those experiencing by asylum seekers, migrants, and refugees.

Liaise with local medical centres to ensure availability of interpreters. Consider establishing a system by which vulnerable patients are paired with a GP who speaks their language, if possible.

Ensure that mental health support can be accessed without a smart phone or computer. There must be alternatives available to online booking systems, and the existence of these must be communicated.

Advocate for increased access to mental health provision; explore with relevant charities.

3. DENTAL

Fifteen respondents reported being unable to visit the dentist. Of these, eight were unaware of local dentists or how to register, two found the registration process too difficult, and six identified cost as a barrier to dental care. One service user also commented that they needed to solve their other medical issues before they organised a dentist's appointment.

For those that have had dental care, other issues with the service were raised:

1. **Communication:** One young Iraqi female with refugee status, who was having her teeth pulled out, was not provided with a translator and thus did not know what was about to happen.
2. **Follow-up care and service quality:** No follow-up care and a lack of support from GPs for dental referrals were noted by two service users.
3. **Financial burden of dental health:** Some Ukrainians opt to get their dental work done in Ukraine due to the high cost in the UK.
4. **Organising an appointment:** Five service users referenced the waiting time for an appointment, with another resigned to forgo dental care, saying that getting an appointment is "mission impossible".
5. **H2C certificates:** One service user was made to pay for an appointment despite having an HC2 certificate, and another, experiencing a dental emergency, had to wait four months for a H2C certificate, and another four to obtain an appointment.

4. OPTICIANS

Of the thirty-seven service users who responded to questions about the opticians, nineteen had been to an appointment, sixteen had not, and one respondent was waiting for an appointment. For those who had attended an appointment, three did not have to pay, and one was wrongly required to pay. Three stated they were unable to find the relevant information to book an appointment.

SUGGESTIONS

Create accessible information regarding local free and low-cost dentists in a range of languages. These need to be produced in a variety of formats (i.e. both online and physical) to ensure access to information is possible regardless of technological access.

Provide information on dental procedures in a range of languages which can be provided to service users with low English literacy, in case an interpreter is not available.

Conduct outreach with local asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants, stressing the importance of routine dental care. Access will also be improved once other health issues can be handled, and better accessibility of GP services will likely correlate with improved dental care in some cases.

Liaise with local medical professionals to ensure they are aware of the law regarding primary health care access and entitlements provided through HC2 certificates.

Create information bank, incl. video and audio material to bridge the literacy gap (in relevant languages), for medical information.

5. WELLBEING

Maintaining wellbeing is necessary to combat poor mental and physical health, to increase opportunities for integration and to prevent isolation.

Leisure facilities: 32 respondents mentioned they would like to access the gym but are unable to; 15 explicitly stated that the cost is prohibitive. 50% of asylum seekers said they would access the gym if they could afford it. Some expressed disappointment that a previous initiative to provide free gym memberships at Blackbird Leys Leisure Centre did not come to fruition. Online registration is also a barrier for those without digital devices, as is the inability to use ARC cards as ID.

Sports: Walking, running, cycling and informal football teams are popular fitness activities. Some report a lack of equipment (eg. racquets) to be a limiting factor, and cost prohibits others from going swimming. The football sessions organised for hotel residents and for UASCs are spoken highly of.

Library: Parents appreciate the free children's activities organised at the library and free access to children's books. Some respondents go to the library to access the internet or to print out documents. Others are unaware of how to register for a library card or did not know that the library was free. One person said they did not have any ID so could not get a library card. The online library application is inaccessible for people without digital devices.

Museums: Respondents mentioned visiting the Ashmolean and the Pitt Rivers Museum. Those who have participated in the Multaka project have positive feedback. Participants are largely unaware of events put on at these venues; these events could be better communicated via channels most frequently used by sanctuary seekers. The cost of transport is the greatest barrier here.

"There are no free places to meet in the city centre, especially in the winter. In a coffee shop, you need to buy something to sit down."

"The problem is public transport for the museums." "Even though it's free entry, it's not easy with bus costs."

"I asked to get a free gym pass but they said it is impossible; they said I have to pay online. They told me if I cannot pay, I cannot get access."

"I don't know where to look for information about events, classes and services."

"For asylum seekers housed in hotels, the lack of opportunities is really boring and frustrating."

SUGGESTIONS

Extend the free access to leisure centres provided for Ukrainians and people experiencing homelessness to asylum seekers. Consult Wandsworth Council's free leisure provision for refugees.

Create free places to sit indoors in the city centre.

Assistance with the cost of transport would make free cultural and community activities accessible; consider special 'open day' events where transport cost is covered.

Arrange for the use of local football pitch for the asylum hotel football group; offer support with joining local football clubs.

Ensure refugees know about Move Together programme.

Religious activities: Respondents are largely positive about access to religious facilities, although a few mentioned that churches are not open every day, and that places to pray in the city centre are limited.

Accessibility: As well as cost, individuals cite long working hours, medical conditions and a lack of information as factors limiting their access to leisure and cultural activities. Some Ukrainian respondents noted the lack of studio space to continue their careers as professional artists.

6. SAFETY & DISCRIMINATION

A large majority of interviewees reported feeling safe in Oxford, including at night. Some compared the relative safety of Oxford to other UK cities they have lived in.

Safety: A few respondents mentioned incidents where individuals tried to enter the asylum accommodation. One person recalls an occasion when a person came into an asylum hotel with a knife shouting 'I want to kill everyone in this hotel.' Another person recalls being filmed through his hotel window.

Discrimination: Some respondents avoid disclosing their immigration status for fear of a negative reaction. Others report being made to feel unwelcome, such as when members of the public ask, 'What are you doing in my country?' One respondent recalls being wrongly accused of stealing.

Racism: A small number of respondents report receiving racist comments in shops and on the bus.

Police: In general, respondents view the police positively. Two respondents expressed a belief that the attitudes and approaches of police officers vary by individual, and therefore that treatment of issues can be inconsistent. One person reported that the police did not attend their asylum accommodation when called.

Encourage facilities to make exceptions to the ID requirements for asylum seekers.

Ensure that community centres have a suitable place to pray.

Provide discounted tickets to cinema, theatre, etc. perhaps during Refugee Week.

Libraries could provide books in Pashto, Dari, Arabic, Amharic and Tigrinya.

"There was British a guy outside the hotel filming us through my window. It makes me feel like I don't belong in the community."

"As long as you can hide your identity you are safe."

"When they know I am an asylum seeker their facial expression changes. They think that we are responsible for the economic crisis in the UK."

SUGGESTIONS

The council can counteract negative perceptions of refugees by telling 'good news stories' and actively celebrating diversity and the contributions of migrants to the city.

Provide information about what to do when incidents of racism occur; ensure that communities are aware that such behaviour is illegal.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

1. ESOL

About 35 service users mentioned studying English, with about a quarter including a positive statement about ESOL services and benefitting greatly from improved English language abilities. The five respondents who had been in the UK for more than five years spoke English fluently and did not require ESOL support. Many respondents commented on the importance of English for their futures, both with employment and education plans. However, 45% of those who mentioned ESOL expressed some dissatisfaction or barriers to access, as follows:

1. **Six-month delay:** Asylum claimants are not entitled to free, accredited ESOL provision until they have been in the asylum system for six months. Some respondents expressed confusion and disappointment at the delay, as they were keen to spend their time studying English.
2. **Waiting lists:** Several expressed frustrations with classes being full and needing to wait several months to access a class at their level.
3. **Application process:** A few interviewees mentioned challenges with complicated application processes for ESOL courses, and confusing eligibility requirements.
4. **Availability:** Some participants are studying online due to challenges of transportation, conflicts with shiftwork at their job, classes being full, or lack of childcare. Class schedules do not always consider the needs of families or of different religious groups.
5. **Childcare:** One female respondent proposed that childcare be available for ESOL students with small children.
6. **Quantity:** Others were disappointed because they wanted more hours per week of accredited ESOL classes (the usual provision is two or three half-days per week), or more time to practice speaking, as opposed to writing.

"[Studying English] forces me to engage in the community and prevents me being lazy. English gives me a future. Otherwise [I'd just] be staying in the hotel which would lead to a downward spiral."

"I would like to be a nurse but my language is a barrier. I'm looking for an English course but I can't find anything. I have shift rotations so I can't take a regular class. If my workplace had a permanent shift, I could do English classes."

SUGGESTIONS

Take an active role in the coordination of ESOL provision; encourage collaboration amongst ESOL providers.

More time for personalised English, especially for employment.

ESOL provided at asylum accommodation to resolve some childcare issues; ESOL provided where there are places for children to be during a class.

Explore how formal, accredited ESOL classes can be provided to asylum seekers during the first six months.

Flexible scheduling

More funding for a larger number of ESOL places and for a greater number of weeks.

Stakeholders criticised the lack of centralised coordination of ESOL provision, the short number of weeks per course, and an overemphasis on 'teaching to exams' (as funding is based on numbers passing exams). Three stakeholders contended that teachers should have more time to 'personalise' English to meet the needs of students, who may request more focus on spoken communication, or seek to learn specialised vocabulary required for their occupation or profession:

"[Some refugees] have many high qualifications – they are qualified but only need English in their specialisation – special terminology. This country needs doctors and nurses, they should have a course (free of charge) that would help professionals learn specialist terminology. There are English classes for lawyers, but they're not free of charge."

2.COLLEGE AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Only five service users mentioned current studies at college or university for anything other than English: two for IT skills, one for maths, one for GCSE and one for design. Service users mentioned barriers to higher education, including the high cost of transportation and of childcare, as well as the cost of tuition. Thirteen respondents had plans for further education, six of these at university level, and seven were seeking vocational or technical courses related to a particular occupation.

One respondent had taken advantage of adult education and free community education classes *"I am doing these courses because I want to continue my education and get a degree. That's why I want to go to university ASAP."*

Stakeholders mentioned the lack of clear information for refugees and asylum seekers about the UK higher education system, to help service users to understand processes and have realistic ambitions.

One educational provider also highlighted the intersecting challenge of education and low-wage jobs: *"The cost of education for certain categories that need to pay is a huge barrier. It is also a challenge, that post-18 years old, there's usually only part-time education, and that Universal Credit is so low."*

"I would love more time with the students: a longer number of weeks, and less focus on passing exams. And time to personalise the English that they need, in their personal situation. There isn't time to do that."

"We want to provide ESOL, but the funding isn't there. We are mostly trying to get people through exams. Men come to the college, and women can't because of childcare."

SUGGESTIONS

More support for young people with getting qualifications and certificates.

Clear information for service users about the UK higher education systems.

Increase awareness and support for transportation for accessing college and HE.

Increase publicity within refugee and asylum seeker communities of the Oxford-based universities' free offerings.

Encourage colleges to become 'Colleges of Sanctuary.'

Advocate for asylum seekers to pay domestic university fees, rather than international fees.

"There is zero chance to transfer qualifications from one country to another. [They should] think about a programme for people coming from other countries, such as an equivalence exam or course, to continue with study rather than starting from the beginning."

3. CHILDREN'S SCHOOLS AND CHILDCARE

Some parents are happy living in Oxford because of the experience their children are having at school. They describe the school system as very good for their children, and feel the schools communicate with them well. Some parents benefit from the School's Advocacy Programme, a joint venture between the City Council and Asylum Welcome. The fact that Oxford is a safe place for children to cycle and to explore outdoor spaces also shapes parents' positive experiences of the city.

Of the twelve service users who discussed participation in children's education, many had positive comments: their children enjoy school, feel welcome, love school and participate in after-school activities.

One respondent mentioned a problem getting a good interpreter to speak with the school; another had problems with bullying. Two mentioned not having enough money for school trips. One person had difficulties because new housing meant children were required to change schools.

Among survey respondents, there were ten families with young children. Of them, two said that the husband and wife jointly take care of the children. For refugees, especially mothers in Oxford on their own, childcare is described as very expensive, hard to find, and with long waiting lists. The lack of affordable childcare is a barrier for mothers' access to ESOL and employment.

RESPONDENTS' PREVIOUS OCCUPATIONS:

- > Truck driver
- > Car mechanic / car sales
- > Hospitality manager
- > Design and IT staff
- > Digital marketer
- > Accountant
- > Nurse
- > Chiropractor
- > Teacher
- > Football coach
- > Youth worker
- > Engineer

"I am really happy to be in Oxford, with such good schools for my son."

The one thing that would make my life easier is childcare for single mothers, or spaces where children could play while mothers study. It's very expensive, especially for childcare. I'm on a long waiting list for nursery. My friend waited one year. For children 2-3 years old it's very expensive. It was difficult to find English courses where I could take my child.

I'm not currently working. Previously I did accountancy for a shop in the Covered Market, and as barista in a coffee shop. I enjoyed it but needed to stop due to childcare.

SUGGESTIONS

Awareness by authorities that relocating refugee/AS families may disrupt children's schooling.

Clear and centralised information about childcare options available to asylum seekers, refugee communities and people with NRPF conditions.

Ensure that parents understand the early years nursery entitlements.

ESOL classes in locations where there is a place for children to be (see above, ESOL).

Explore the possibility of ESOL classes for parents linked to children's schools.

4. EMPLOYMENT

Of twenty-nine service users who responded specifically to questions about their employment, thirteen were still in the process of getting employment, eight were not yet able to start employment due to their immigration status, three mentioned challenges with a current or recent job, and four were settled in employment. The barriers include:

1. **Immigration status:** Most asylum seekers don't have the right to work. After one year of waiting for a decision on their claim, it is possible to apply for permission to work in 'shortage occupations', limiting what types of employment are available. The relationship between income and asylum support entitlements is unclear for this group.
2. **Lack of childcare:** The cost of childcare limits the availability for or hours of paid work, particularly for single parents.
3. **Training:** In particular, training in technical skills.
4. **Lack of technical English:** Three people mentioned that they were still studying the technical English required to resume a prior profession.
5. **Mental health challenges:** (see 'mental health')
6. **Digital access:** Devices and internet access are required to search and apply for paid work.
7. **Transport:** One respondent said that inadequate bus transport to where she was staying (outside of Oxford) limited her ability to get paid work.
8. **Employment rights:** One participant was required to work up to 60 hours per week; another had been terminated from her job while on maternity leave; another did not understand rights for parental leave; another had pay withheld for 3 months.

Stakeholders describe problems with employer scepticism and lack of flexibility to hire refugees; refugees not being able to get into apprenticeships and work experience opportunities; and the lack of job fairs with support for refugees. Hotels are not recognised as an address on the online form for the DVLA, so hotel residents cannot get a UK licence, which affects people's chances to get driving jobs. Refugees may be slotted into low-wage jobs with unstable hours, which then constrains their ability to secure rental housing. Refugees need assistance with CVs, job interviews and providing work references.

"I am desperate to work when I get the opportunity, to build a life for myself. I want to give back to the government, after they have provided housing and money to live on – I feel the obligation to give back."

SUGGESTIONS

Council and businesses that are contracted by the Council could introduce apprenticeships for sanctuary seekers.

Consider the accessibility of council's own employment practices – e.g. consider video submission rather than written cover letter (see Liverpool Council).

Intercultural and awareness training for employers, to understand rights to work attached to different statuses.

Create pathways to employment, especially in shortage occupations, eg., in-work buddy programmes; job fairs for refugees including translators. See Brighton & Hove Council's employability initiative.

Investment by large institutions (e.g. universities) to support refugees being hired.

Clear information about employment rights publicised to refugee communities.

Advocate for an equivalence measure for transferring qualifications obtained abroad; statement of comparability.

Ensure that work on employability is highlighted to Oxford Inclusive Economy Partnership and OXLEP

5. VOLUNTEERING

Unpaid work is a significant and meaningful occupation for many participants. Four responded that they were mainly involved in unpaid care work or caring for family. Thirty-nine respondents discussed volunteering, 92% of whom are involved in volunteer work (56%) or would like to volunteer (36%); only three said that they did not want to volunteer. Five with positive responses said they did not know how to access information about volunteering; most of these were asylum seekers. Eight (22%) mentioned barriers to volunteering:

1. **Transport:** The cost of bus transportation.
2. **Lack of childcare:** (see 'childcare').
3. **Communication:** Not having a digital device or internet access limits volunteer opportunities.
4. **Access:** *'I tried to enrol myself as a volunteer, but I was unable because they had procedures we were supposed to follow.'*
5. **References:** One volunteer recruiter required references the individual couldn't provide.
6. **English language** Four need to improve their English before beginning to volunteer.

Volunteering brings many benefits, especially for asylum seekers. Asylum seekers often told interviewers they like the *"sense of community and the chance to do something with my day."* Six said they would like to do more volunteering than their current positions, which tend to be with Asylum Welcome, food banks, churches, Open Door, Oxfam, or Refugee Resource, but also include community Cafes and a primary school library. At the same time, in stakeholder interviews, respondents from a university museum and a charity commented: *"We don't have enough volunteers to help with everything we'd like to do."*

Respondents are ambitious about their volunteering: Refugees who have been in Oxford for up to three years continue to volunteer, for example as interpreters, in nurseries, with Asylum Welcome and with the Hope charity supporting young people with mental health. Volunteering helps refugees understand workplace culture and norms in the UK, build their skills and acquire a work reference.

"I volunteer to make my English better. To attend social spaces."

"I have found English friends by volunteering."

"I want to get involved in some research activities. It could sharpen my mind."

"I am football coach but don't know where to access information about being a football coach volunteer."

"If they had volunteer opportunities, [I'd be a] health volunteer for the council. Because I want to become a nurse if I have an opportunity to study."

SUGGESTIONS

Information about volunteer opportunities to be made more accessible to asylum seekers and refugee communities, and better systematised.

Create a role to link refugees to, and increase opportunities for, volunteering with institutions and charities.

Work with voluntary organisations to arrange transport reimbursements for regular volunteers.

More support for refugees who are full-time carers.

6. JOBCENTRE

Service users had mixed experiences of the Jobcentre. Most were positive about Jobcentre assistance with applying for Universal Credit. Negative experiences appear to be correlated to refugees with higher education and job aspirations, and to women struggling to find childcare. Service users identified gaps in what they were offered:

1. They were not given support to develop a CV appropriate for the UK (e.g. with a personal statement, in Word).
2. Not helped to find employment in line with their professions.
3. Not given practice in interviewing.
4. Not provided with adequate translation.
5. Not told about child benefit.

Some respondents appreciated the Jobcentre support with getting a job. Several mentioned support of Asylum Welcome or Fedcap advisors to get employment. One stakeholder confirmed: “DWP support [is] hit and miss depending on the work coach.”

Of the Ukrainians interviewed, five out of seven had a negative experience; two were mostly positive. It appears that the Ukrainian refugees are more likely to be professionals or to have more formal education, and more of them are women, encountering difficulties finding childcare.

Twelve out of 14 women who had experience with the Jobcentre expressed disappointment with staff providing inadequate advice (not relevant to their experience or profession) or being insensitive (to childcare responsibilities). Several women had been to the Jobcentre but eventually found a job on their own, or via Asylum Welcome’s employment service. Two respondents appreciated Jobcentre assistance with getting Universal Credit.

“I used to go [to the Jobcentre] every 2-3 weeks but it's been a while that I didn't go. Sometimes, they call a translator over the phone. After many times, they try to communicate through Google Translate. Sometimes, because I speak a bit of English, I can communicate.”

“I didn't know about CV and job apps because I was self-employed previously. The Jobcentre doesn't check your CV.”

“The Jobcentre told me I need to look for work. I said I didn't have time because I am studying English 4 days a week and looking after kids. They said I can work in the afternoon, but I said I'm too busy with the kids.”

“The employment service should be tailored to the group of refugees. The staff need better training. They should ask more questions and try to understand the clients' qualifications and confirmation of degrees.”

SUGGESTIONS

More training for Jobcentre staff about the needs of refugees and the diverse situations of different groups.

For Ukrainians in particular, coaches could ask more questions to understand the clients' qualifications, provide guidance on CVs, and on interview questions.

ACCOMMODATION

1. ASYLUM ACCOMMODATION

Asylum seekers are entitled to accommodation provided by the Home Office if they prove they are destitute. An East Oxford hotel hosts several hundred asylum seekers. They express their difficulties as follows:

1. **Food:** Almost 90% of responses about hotel food were negative: poor quality; lack of freshness; unsuitable for dietary or cultural requirements.
2. **Location:** When paired with transport costs, many services and facilities are inaccessible, isolating those residing in the hotel.
3. **Safety and security:** Some respondents did not feel secure due to the temporariness of their accommodation. Meanwhile, *'some find and create problems...when all they really want is to build and establish a future here'*.
4. **Room sharing:** Most hotel residents are required to share a room. Lack of privacy was mentioned by half of asylum seekers. They report: *'there isn't enough space in my room'; 'I cannot move around'; 'you can't turn the lights on and off when you want.'*
5. **Transience:** Fear and uncertainty is a common theme associated with future housing arrangements. Several hotel residents are anxious about being sent to the Bibby Stockholm barge or Rwanda. Others fear what will happen after they receive a decision.
6. **Migrant Help:** Residents express dissatisfaction at the difficulty of accessing the Migrant Help helpline, and a lack of trust in MH's services.

"When you stay in the hotel it is bad but when you go out into the city it is nice."

"It's very stressful not to know when or where you'll be moved. This is what we fear the most."

"The longer they are stuck in the hotel, the harder it is."

SUGGESTIONS

Provide information about move-on to asylum seekers in the hotel in preparation for when they receive a decision on their asylum claim.

Introduce measures to combat isolation: access to leisure centers and different activities; bus passes; support finding volunteering, etc.

Share information about local foodbanks with hotel residents.

Support to speed up homelessness applications for sanctuary seekers.

Use risk assessments for care settings as a benchmark to ensure safeguarding of hotel residents (see: Waltham Forest Council on this).

HOMELESSNESS AND EVICTION

"The homelessness makes it not feel like a sanctuary. If homeless people got help and homes that would make it feel more like a sanctuary."

Respondents stated they would not know what to do if faced with homelessness or eviction – many felt they did not have enough information, not know where to access it, or even know who to contact for help. Of those who did know, dissatisfaction was expressed at the limited support received or lack of communication from services.

2. HOSTING

There are two main hosting arrangements in Oxford City: the Homes for Ukraine scheme and Sanctuary Hosting, an Asylum Welcome service. Responses to both are generally positive, but some challenges arise:

1. **Impermanence:** Hosting schemes are for a limited duration, and service users feel anxious about the looming end date.
2. **Host-guest relationships:** Some describe good relationships in which the dynamics function very well, while others communicate a detachment or disconnect from their hosts. There is an element of chance involved.

3. PRIVATE RENTAL

Refugees face many of the same difficulties as the rest of the city's residents when renting:

1. **Cost:** Lack of affordable housing has proved challenging, exacerbated by a lack of understanding and confusion surrounding council tax payments and Universal Credit.
2. **Competitive environment:** Landlords may be less willing to rent to refugees because of their difficulty in paying the deposit, providing guarantors, previous rental history, references from previous landlords, and bank statements. Due to the 'Hostile Environment' policy, landlords may fear being fined for renting to someone without permission to be in the UK.
3. **Misinformation about council housing:** Some are hesitant to begin looking for housing in the private rented sector because they believe a council house would be better for them. It is essential to communicate the way council housing works (priority need, local connection, etc.) so service users can understand why searching for PRS housing may be preferable.
4. **Accessibility:** Lack of digital devices, digital literacy and English language skills create additional barriers for house-hunting.
5. **Exploitation:** Vulnerability through lack of choice.

'I want to have a permanent address. I want to have a future.'

'We have two adults and three teenagers... seven people in the house and it is not a separate place... we don't have much privacy... it is noisy and cramped.'

SUGGESTIONS

Retain Single Occupancy council tax discount to encourage more hosts.

'I don't understand the system.'

'Information is not available.'

'I would not know where to go for help or assistance.'

SUGGESTIONS

Offer deposit and guarantor schemes to refugees looking for PRS housing.

Develop jargon-free explanations of council tax, bills, etc. in relevant languages.

Explore benevolent landlord scheme for sanctuary seekers.

Educate tenants on their rights, to avoid inhumane living conditions and exploitative landlords.

Teach practical skills like searching for housing online through Rightmove etc., booking appointments with landlords, what questions to ask.

Ensure translators are available for housing and Care Act assessments.

ENGAGING WITH OXFORD CITY COUNCIL

In response to a range of questions assessing service users' experiences of the council, five participants responded positively: three said they found a house because of the council, and two others described the council as helpful. Several themes emerged amongst the remaining respondents, as described below.

1. **Lack of awareness:** 25 people had either never heard of Oxford City Council or did not know its purpose. A number believed 'the council' to be synonymous with 'council housing.'
2. **Confused with Home Office:** Some participants expressed uncertainty about how responsibilities are divided between the Home Office and the local authority. There is also a general lack of awareness of the existence of Oxfordshire County Council and the way the two councils work alongside one another.
3. **Digital information:** Three participants found the council website unclear and difficult to use.
4. **Reliance on intermediaries:** Some service users are not comfortable contacting the council independently. Sixteen people reported that they rely on charities or case workers to contact the Council on their behalf, rather than approaching directly.
5. **Responsiveness:** Five service users had contacted the council about various issues but had not received a reply about their queries. *Note: due to confusion between Oxfordshire County Council and Oxford City Council, it is unclear which the service users are referring to here.*
6. **Language:** Suggestions were made regarding language access: offering access to a translator when getting in touch about council tax; translated leaflets distributed in public places; offer information in multiple languages on the council website.
7. **Expectation management:** A number of participants described being offered help but not receiving it: *"A guy came and I told him we need a place where we can lock out bikes. He said we will do it in a few months and he never came back and it never happened."* One Ukrainian participant said, *"I don't trust the council, because they said they would help me but did not."* A stakeholder also reinforced the idea that promises are sometimes unfulfilled, exacerbated by staff turnover and understaffing.
8. **Communications preferences:** When asked how they would prefer to be contacted by the council, most respondents prefer face-to-face, in-person appointments, to minimise language barriers. Seven people prefer email or text, so they can translate the messages with Google Translate. Eight people prefer to access information digitally or are able to contact the council online; seven have said they prefer a phone call. Only four people said they would prefer post as a means of communicating with the council.

WHAT DOES SANCTUARY LOOK LIKE?

“Sanctuary is sharing resources, and it is two-way. We need to realise the talent that people we support have, and appreciate that.”

We asked participants what ‘sanctuary’ meant to them, and what they would hope for from a Local Authority of Sanctuary. The answers expressed a range of ideas:

1. Centre people with lived experience

Sanctuary seekers are part of the solution: they need to be given a space in professional environments, with relevant training provided. Consider a community advisory board. Trial more inclusive job applications and embed a trauma-informed approach. Some examples from other organisations:

- a. *Multaka prioritises employing people with lived experience of seeking asylum and has successfully implemented a community advisory board.*
- b. *Host Abingdon approach long-term service users to take on volunteer roles, such as running training sessions for new volunteers. This ensures that the voices of people with lived experience are included in the organisation, whilst helping to deliver a client-led service.*
- c. *Palladium is operating a pilot scheme where they facilitate attendance at service user forums with childcare, translation services, remuneration and flexible scheduling.*
- d. *Refugee Education UK has tried to improve young people’s ability to advocate and advise the service by prioritising clear channels of feedback and giving clear information on the structure of the organisation.*

2. Take the lead in collaboration

Some stakeholders wish to see the council become a central reference point for multi-agency work. For example, overseeing ESOL provision to ensure no duplication or gaps in service delivery. There is a desire for the council to produce a clear, up-to-date guide on what different organisations do to support sanctuary seekers, to identify what is missing and work together to meet those needs. One education provider stated:

“It would be interesting to see an initiative ‘from above’ that helps people/actors collaborate, and exchange information. Inter-agency collaboration helps remove barriers. It can’t be the initiative of only one charity. It needs an inter-agency strategy, to see the gaps, and work together to fill the gaps.”

The Homeless Alliance was mentioned as an example of how effective collaboration can improve service provision. One stakeholder remarked that the *“Homeless Alliance is a real shift”* in how funds are distributed more effectively, whilst another highlighted the *“good lines of communication with the police and local councils.”*

3. Ensure information is accessible

A lack of resources in relevant languages has a knock-on effect for both clients and service providers; participants suggest creating an accessible bank of information covering greatest areas of need in appropriate languages, plus audio and video

materials to address literacy gaps. This information resource would address the above key areas: health and mental health; access to community facilities including leisure and cultural centres; education and ESOL; employment and volunteer opportunities; housing options. It could include 'orientations' for new arrivals in Oxford, like the orientation sessions provided to UASCs. Stakeholders recommend using WhatsApp broadcasts to communicate with the sanctuary-seeking community.

4. Expand support for integration

Respondents experience difficulties meeting 'local people'. One reflects that, *"socialising spots and places of interaction would make it more of a city of sanctuary"*.

5. Take pride in sanctuary status

Take the lead in positive messaging; celebrate Refugee Week and local success stories. "Be brave" and speak out against anti-refugee rhetoric, both locally and nationally. Contribute to supportive discourse at both a local and national level.

"I would hope the council would provide more service and integration support, break down barriers, advocate for asylum seekers both nationally and locally. Also, they could provide positive news stories which are often lost, to see the possibility of what asylums seekers and refugees can give to a community."

6. Grow the sanctuary movement

Learn from, collaborate with and support other nearby councils of sanctuary. Embrace opportunities to work alongside other institutions of sanctuary (eg. the University of Oxford) and encourage other institutions – schools, colleges, faith groups – to consider embarking on the sanctuary process.

7. Involve senior leadership

One participant mentioned the importance of senior leadership at the council demonstrating commitment to this process.

8. Work proactively

Address issues faced by refugee communities before they reach crisis point. For example, provide information and guidance in accessing accommodation – be it temporary or private – before they become street homeless.

9. Engage with suppliers

Work with suppliers to provide opportunities for sanctuary seekers, both in employment and in access to their facilities.

10. Work with frontline council staff

Provide training for, but also listen to and learn from, frontline council staff (eg. housing officers, customer service) in how they could better be serving the sanctuary-seeking community.

CONCLUSION

The service providers referenced in this report know well that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to addressing the needs of sanctuary seekers. The labels used here – refugee, asylum seeker, etc. – are collective terms that bring together an extremely diverse group of individuals. The people that fall into these categories share an immigration status which impacts the way they exist in our communities, and the way they are treated by those communities. Yet sanctuary seekers come from vastly different backgrounds, cultures, levels of education and experience, needs and aspirations. There is no archetypal refugee, so it is essential to consider the support that individuals require on a case-by-case basis.

Bearing that in mind, certain themes and challenges have come to light: unaffordable public transport; lack of understanding around healthcare systems; poverty-induced isolation; inadequate ESOL provision; an inaccessible job market; limited housing options; and barriers to digital access. We recognise that Oxford City Council does not have the ability to influence change equally on each of these issues, so we encourage a response which considers what is possible in each area. Where an issue relates to awareness and accessibility of the council itself, such as ensuring services are culturally sensitive and practice is trauma-informed, there may be more scope for adaptation.

Where council-contracted services such as leisure facilities are concerned, it may be possible to explore pilot programmes. Supporting Ukrainians and unaccompanied children will involve working collaboratively with the County Council. In areas such as healthcare, a commitment to meeting the needs of asylum seekers may take the form of influencing and information provision. For asylum accommodation, this may mean engaging with Migrant Help, Clearsprings or the Home Office, to identify issues, advocate for residents, and understand their challenges.

Where service providers have identified limitations and fragmentation within current provision, the council might consider the possibility of a coordination role. This could prove useful for identifying gaps, sharing resources, and facilitating multiagency collaboration, which would address issues before they reach crisis point. Becoming a central point of reference might include producing a database on volunteer opportunities for asylum seekers, legal aid information, local ESOL provision, benevolent landlords or grassroots initiatives which emerge from sanctuary-seeking communities themselves.

The 100 interviews that form the basis of this report reveal significant gaps in the delivery of a coordinated and strategic service for asylum seekers and refugees, alongside key areas of good practice. Information is often partial or inaccessible to service users because of language or digital barriers. To create material improvements in the quality of current services and in people's lives, we encourage the council to develop both a short-term and a long-term plan, that supports people in their current situations but also considers the pathways that would guide sanctuary seekers into stable living situations. This would require a joined-up and innovative approach that treats refugees as unique individuals whilst recognising and fully understanding the challenging environment in which they live.