# WRITTEN STATEMENT

# BY

# THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

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| **TITLE**  | **Celebrating Refugee Week 2020** |
| **DATE**  | **17 June 2020** |
| **BY** | **Deputy Minister and Chief Whip** |

This week we mark Refugee Week, an annual festival of events to celebrate the valuable contributions made by people seeking sanctuary in the UK. These celebrations bring together people from all backgrounds to create better understanding between communities and promote integration. This year has seen many challenges, from EU withdrawal, to the more recent COVIID 19 pandemic.

During the pandemic we have encouraged local authorities to provide accommodation to anyone who needs it, regardless of their immigration status. This is not only the moral solution, but makes good public health sense. As the pandemic starts to subside, we will look towards more sustainable outcomes for these individuals. This will be in partnership with local authorities and the Welsh Refugee Coalition. Irrespective of a person’s immigration status, asking for help will not affect their asylum claim, and their information will not be shared. We need to continue to remind people seeking sanctuary that the NHS is free in Wales, all medical services are still available to you and will be free of charge.

Refugee doctors have formed an important part of the Welsh response to the COVID 19 pandemic. The Welsh Government-funded Wales Asylum Seeking and Refugee Doctors (WARD) Group, has been supporting refugee doctors to have their existing medical qualifications recognised and find employment in the NHS for over 15 years. This scheme is estimated to have supported refugees to use their skills and feel part of society in Wales, saving countless lives in the process. We recognise that cultural exchange and learning is a two-way process, and that people from different backgrounds have much to share and learn from each other.

The theme for Refugee Week 2020 is ‘Imagine the potential of Wales as a true Nation of Sanctuary’. This is a fitting theme for our nation, as Wales has enjoyed a long history of welcoming refugees, and we continue to value and benefit from their skills, entrepreneurial spirit and the sharing of their cultures.

This Refugee Week we reiterate our ambition to make Wales a nation of sanctuary. It has been just over a year since we launched our ‘Nation of Sanctuary – Refugee and Asylum Seeker Plan’, which is driving forward this ambition for Wales. In this time, despite the challenges we have seen in 2019 and early 2020, we have continued to see progress in our actions for the plan.

Some key achievements have included;

* Launch of our [Sanctuary website](https://gov.wales/sanctuary) in November 2019 which translates information to all languages. We have provided Public Health Wales and Doctors of the World Information on Covid-19 on our website which has meant vital information is easily accessible in all languages.
* Extended the Welsh Refugee Council-led Asylum Rights Programme and Move On projects to continue to provide a service until at least March 2021;
* Implemented the ReStart project, which created English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and Employability Hubs for refugees in Cardiff, Swansea, Newport and Wrexham. By April 2020 we had seen 276 refugees participate in the project. Of these refugees, 165 received opportunities to attend ESOL classes, and 209 received employability intervention.
* We have also been granted an additional year of funding for the ReStart: Refugee Integration project, which will now continue until December 2021. We have published research on the employment prospects for refugees in Wales, available at: <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2020-03/refugee-employment-and-skills-support-study.pdf>
* Continued support to ensure access to legal advice for people seeking sanctuary, as well as work to ensure the sustainability of those delivering this advice. Asylum Justice has been using Welsh Government funding, £50,000 in 2020-21, to secure more sustainable funding from grant funders, whilst also addressing a backlog in asylum appeals and ‘fresh claims’.
* We have provided £30,000 in 2020-21 for the Welsh Refugee Council to deliver hate crime awareness amongst people seeking sanctuary, as part of our Hate Crime Minority Communities Grant; pre-lockdown 127 delegates attended hate crime awareness sessions, with 13 sessions to be delivered when safe to do so;
* New statutory anti-bullying guidance was published in late 2019. The Welsh Government expects schools to record all incidents of bullying, outlining the specific types of bullying, including bullying around the protected characteristics. The Welsh Government expects schools to monitor processes regularly;
* Higher Education Funding Council for Wales undertook a consultation which closed in late February 2020 to identify improvements which can be made to support people seeking sanctuary in higher education;
* A range of training opportunities and guidance documents have been produced over the last 6 months to support social workers and foster carers who are looking after young people seeking asylum. The Welsh Government has been lobbying the UK Government to retain Family Reunion Rights after EU Withdrawal;
* Allowing groups representing refugees and asylum seekers to be entitled to free entry to CADW sites across Wales.
* Not all people seeking sanctuary are allowed to work and many find themselves at risk of destitution. We have continued to explore opportunities to reduce this risk and mitigate the impact of destitution experienced by these individuals. The Discretionary Assistance Fund can be accessed by any sanctuary seeker if they are experiencing destitution. As of 10 March 2020, 143 asylum seekers had accessed this form of funding.

We have made good progress towards becoming a Nation of Sanctuary by working with Local Authorities, Local Health Boards, Public Health Wales, the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership, the Welsh Local Government Association, the Welsh Refugee Coalition and other key stakeholders to improve the lives of people seeking sanctuary in Wales.

An update of our work since the plan was published in January 2019 can be found here:

[https://gov.wales/refugee-and-asylum-seeker-plan-nation-sanctuary-progress-report-2020](https://eur01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fgov.wales%2Frefugee-and-asylum-seeker-plan-nation-sanctuary-progress-report-2020&data=02%7C01%7CCerys.Davies034%40gov.wales%7Cbb2e5e0720be460c12bf08d811f45f6e%7Ca2cc36c592804ae78887d06dab89216b%7C0%7C0%7C637279088560093413&sdata=6TVb2tCjrsCtXdNMgFTsLuEje%2BUCA2fWhW3l6vx%2BI9U%3D&reserved=0)

Our ambitious ‘Restart: Refugee Integration Project’ was officially launched on 20 June 2019. Refugees who participated in the project, received a holistic assessment of their needs, skills and desires. These assessments were followed by bespoke support to aid integration within the four dispersal clusters in Wales. The project provides support to improve language tuition, employment support, mentoring, qualification recognition, knowledge of rights and entitlements and more, which all contribute to integration within Wales.

In just under a year, participants have received more complex and thorough interactions with their caseworkers; particularly with those who have qualifications from their country of origin. One recent case study has shown how dedicated support helped a refugee with a Masters in Microbiology from their home country to have this qualification recognised in the UK. They are now receiving advanced English language tuition to help them to apply for an Institute of Biomedical Science degree. The refugee reported that without the college they were not feeling hopeful of their future, they now feel excited about planning for their career pathway. This the hope we are creating in Wales.

We recognise that many refused asylum seekers do not have access to good quality legal advice. This can undermine their ability to regularise their status. This may include a fresh asylum claim or a voluntary return to their country of origin. We have commissioned research (due to be published in the summer) to look into options to support such individuals. This is a complex issue which cannot be resolved hastily but we are making good progress. We also make sure these individuals have a roof over their heads at such a critical time, which gives them time to explore their options.

We are pleased that ‘Clearsprings Ready Homes’ has agreed to end forced room sharing of unrelated adults in asylum accommodation, which was one of the Welsh Government’s key asks for the new system. We are also pleased that residents are able to raise complaints about accommodation through the Asylum, Issue Reporting and Eligibility provider, ‘Migrant Help’, rather than through the accommodation provider. We continue to monitor these arrangements and urge greater data sharing and transparency to improve public confidence in the asylum system.

We continue to work hard to seek changes to the asylum system which will improve the well-being of asylum seekers, community cohesion and our ability as a Devolved Administration to make effective policy interventions to support these members of our community.

Since the launch of the plan, I have contacted key partners to raise awareness of the Plan and to gather the support we require to make Wales truly a nation of sanctuary. I have written to all Local Authorities and Local Health Boards in Wales, with responses that have been positive and demonstrate a commitment to work with us towards our shared goal. I have also met with the Welsh Refugee Coalition to discuss how we can work together on the implementation of the plan.

I am encouraged by the manner in which some sectors have responded to our challenge. In February 2020, I visited Swansea to see how the colleges and Universities in the area are working towards accreditation as places of Sanctuary. I wholeheartedly endorse this and encourage other sectors to follow suit. Our work over the coming months will focus on the private sector and housing organisations but I hope other sectors will pick up the baton and work with us on this vision.

In April 2019, I spoke about the Plan at the Sanctuary in the Senedd event. The event marked the significant milestone of Wales’s welcoming over 1,000 refugees under the Syrian Resettlement Programme and the Vulnerable Children’s Resettlement Scheme. A milestone that was only achieved with the hard work of partners across Wales. To date we have welcomed 1400 refugees under the resettlement schemes.

When Refugee Week started in 1998, one of its key aims was to tackle negative portrayals of refugees and asylum seekers in the media. It is clear that events such as Refugee Week and Sanctuary in the Senedd also provide a valuable opportunity to counter the dehumanisation of refugees and asylum seekers. It is vital that people seeking sanctuary continue to have opportunities to share their views and experiences.

The pandemic has been a stark reminder that we cannot ignore crises which occur on the other side of the planet. The impact and human consequences of these events will ultimately be felt here too. In relation to Covid-19, the impact has been swift and heartbreaking. When any form of crisis happens around the globe, we have a duty to support those who need to flee and seek refuge. But crucially, these individuals - from staffing our NHS, to packing home delivery parcels, running takeaway food businesses and much more. Many of the Refugee Week events this year will make reference to John Lennon’s song ‘Imagine’ which he wrote during the Vietnam war in 1971, urging people to live in unity with the final line for the World to be living as one. Never have these words been more relevant in our World today and this is exactly what we want for Wales, for our country to be welcoming and to support people to rebuild their lives here, for the benefit of all.