

COLCHESTER CITY COUNCIL

City of Sanctuary Strategy



Colchester
City Council



City of
Sanctuary



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Forewords

Cllr David King, Leader of Colchester City Council

We are pleased to be a diverse home for many communities, who can thrive better together. Proud to be a university city, with thousands of students from around the world, some of whom will stay on and make this home. Proud to be a garrison city, with elite forces from across the Commonwealth. And proud to be a City of Sanctuary. A place of safety and welcome, many communities in one. A city that, as set out in this Strategy, helps support those in need, including those marginalised and those who have fled war and oppression, from Afghanistan to Ukraine and beyond.

Cllr Kemal Çufoğlu Migrant Champion

Colchester is home to UK's first Human Rights Centre (University of Essex) and has a proud history of providing a safe and welcoming refuge to those escaping persecution and a warm embrace to everyone with big hopes and dreams. Our city was recently awarded Compassionate City status with the motto that Colchester is all about people coming together to support one another with compassion and kindness. Earlier last year, Colchester became the first city in Essex to receive 4 King's Awards for Voluntary Service. Three out of 4 of the recipients were migrant-led organisations, including RAMA, African Families in the UK and the University of Essex Students' Union. Our migrant residents and community representatives are keeping Colchester's community spirit ablaze, and as a migrant councillor and as a proud Essex Human Rights Centre alumnus and first-generation migrant councillor, I feel motivated, proud and inspired by our wonderful and diverse communities' achievements, humility, and love.



Introduction

Colchester has over 2000 years of history welcoming different migrant communities and people seeking sanctuary including refugees, those seeking asylum and those with an insecure status.

Modern-day Colchester is a new city, one of the fastest growing in the country. It occupies the site of Camulodunum, the first major city in Roman Britain and its first capital. Between 1550 and 1600 it absorbed large numbers of weavers and cloth makers from Flanders.

The first permanent military garrison in Colchester was established by Legio XX Valeria Victrix in AD 43, following the Roman conquest of Britain. Colchester remains a garrison city, with soldiers drawn from many parts of the commonwealth, including many Gurkhas, who have settled in Colchester.

The 2021 census shows that Colchester is the 3rd most ethnically diverse area in Essex, behind only Harlow and Epping Forest. This diversity is likely to grow as people continue to seek refuge, or move towards established ethnic communities, as illustrated below:

Ethnic group			
			% increase since 2011 census
White	159,306	92%	+ 11.1%
Mixed	3152	1.8%	+ 76.1%
Asai or Asian British	6355	3.7%	+ 141.1%
Black or Black British	2575	1.5%	+225.1%
Other (inc Arabic)	1686	1.0%	+ 131.9%

6.9% of the population said English was not their main language.

3.3% of Colchester households have no-one in their household that uses English as their main language.

The city has diverse ethnic community groups including African Families in the UK, the Chinese Association, Colchester Indian Association, Nepalese Society, Bangladeshi Women's Association and the Colchester Caribbean Group, to name a few.

These and others have joined together to form the Colchester Diverse Communities Network. Then there are our growing Ukrainian, Hong Kong, Afghan and Syrian communities.

Colchester is fully committed to giving a warm welcome to everyone. We are proud of the diversity within our city and will continue to build a welcoming environment for people who want to make Colchester their home.

Migration of all forms has enriched the culture of Colchester, bringing energy and skills to help create a stronger city for us all. This spirit of welcome and support is shown by all political parties. In July 2017, after successfully welcoming 12 Syrian families under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme, a motion was overwhelmingly passed by the Council to declare itself a Borough of Sanctuary and to sign up to the City of Sanctuary principles.

The motion stated that, to strengthen its commitment to those who face the ordeal of being separated from their families and home, 'this council pledges to:

- continue to do all in its power to welcome and assist refugees and all those forced to seek sanctuary in our Borough
- ensure services and resources are accessible, including by signposting, translation and advocacy
- acknowledge the pledges of institutions, businesses, individuals and families across Colchester.'

This motion was strengthened in October 2022 with the Council joining and becoming an active member of the City of Sanctuary Local Authorities Network and committing to becoming an awarded member.

This is to be achieved by working with those with lived experience of migration and displacement, with our communities, and with statutory partners. To create a safe and supportive and welcoming place, where people new to the city are valued, can thrive, rebuild lives, build new and join existing communities and can make choices for themselves and their families.

What is sanctuary?

In the context of migration, sanctuary means when someone arrives in a safe place after fleeing their home due to violence or persecution or may continue to seek sanctuary due to continuing insecure status in their new home. This person or family might be, but is not limited to being:

- an asylum-seeker
- a resettled refugee
- someone who has been sponsored, like people arriving from Ukraine
- Colchester residents who have lived, worked or contributed for years but experience insecurity, discrimination and hardship because of insecure or irregular immigration status including those facing ongoing hardship for example because of Windrush
- children and young people in the care of Essex County Council who live in Colchester but who have insecure immigration status
- women who have fled violence and abuse in their home country or are at high risk of violence because their immigration status is insecure or subject to no recourse to public funds restrictions



Definitions

Sanctuary seekers: A broad term used through this document to refer to refugees, asylum seekers and migrants with varied immigration status.

A person seeking asylum: A person seeking asylum is someone who has left their country of origin “from fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, social group, or political opinion” and formally applied for asylum in another country and is awaiting a decision on whether they will be granted refugee status. They tend to arrive in the UK by irregular routes.

In the UK, a person becomes a refugee when government agrees that an individual who has applied for asylum meets the definition in the Refugee Convention. At this point they will ‘recognise’ that person as a refugee and issue them with refugee status documentation.

Refugees: Are people outside their country of origin because of fear of persecution, conflict, violence, or other circumstances that have seriously disturbed public order, and who, as a result, require ‘international protection’.

A refugee has permission from the government to stay in the UK. Usually, refugees in the UK are given five years’ leave to remain. They must then apply for further leave, although their status as a refugee is not limited to five years. They are maybe a person who was an asylum seeker and granted refugee status or they may have arrived in the UK under several government schemes.

Migrant: Migrants may move across international borders to improve their lives by finding work, or in some cases for education, family reunion, or other reasons. People may also move to alleviate significant hardships that arise from natural disasters, famine, or extreme poverty. Those who leave their countries for these reasons would not usually be considered refugees under international law. Unlike refugees who cannot safely return home, people who are migrants can return to their home country. If they choose to return home, they will continue to receive the protection of their government. For individual governments, this distinction is important, and countries deal with migrants under their own immigration laws and processes. There are a variety of visas, routes and reasons that migrants can use to live in the UK. This applies to migrants from inside and outside the EU and can

include for work or for study, indefinitely or for a set period. Whilst there are many migrants who are in the UK legally, there are also some who do not have a legal right to be in the UK and are therefore excluded from welfare, housing and employment.

Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) – The immigration status people usually get once they have lived in the UK for either 5 or 10 years with a visa. This is a visa that is valid indefinitely (although people with ILR can lose it if they are outside the UK for 2 years continuously). Once you have had ILR for a year, you can apply for British citizenship. People with ILR can access benefits.

No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) – this is a restriction placed on most migrants in the UK. People with NRPF are not allowed to access benefits. It also means that it is more difficult to access other forms of support, for example government help with bills.

Section 17 – Section 17 refers to Section 17 of the Children Act 1989. It places a general duty on local authorities to promote and safeguard the welfare of children in need. It is the legislation according to which families with children can be provided with financial and other support, even if they have NRPF.

Refused asylum applicant - A person whose asylum application has been unsuccessful and who has no other claim for protection awaiting a decision. Some people who have their case refused voluntarily return home, others are forcibly returned.

The Windrush Generation: - Are those who arrived in the UK from Caribbean countries between 1948 and 1973. Many took up jobs in employment sectors affected by Britain's post-war labour shortage. The name 'Windrush' derives from the 'HMT Empire Windrush' ship which brought one of the first large groups of Caribbean people to the UK in 1948.

A person with lived experience: In the context of this strategy, is someone who has experienced migrating to or seeking sanctuary in the UK. The person's experiences give them a knowledge and understanding of the challenges of migrating to the UK, and specifically Colchester, that others do not.



Afghan Bridging / Interim accommodation: Includes all accommodation procured by the Home Office for the purpose of providing temporary accommodation for those brought over to the UK because of events in Afghanistan/Operation Pitting following the fall of Kabul in August 2021.

Section 95: Financial and/or accommodation support provided by the Home Office's National Asylum Support Service (NASS) for asylum seekers who are destitute while they wait for a decision on their asylum claim.

Section 98: Provision of emergency accommodation and assistance for destitute asylum seekers who have applied for NASS section 95 support.

Contingency IAC/ Hotel: Initial accommodation opened since 2019 under the new Asylum Accommodation and Support Services Contracts (AASC), usually in repurposed hotels, barracks or hostels.

Dispersal accommodation: Primarily self-catering accommodation, provided under Section 95 of the 1999 Immigration Act, designed for long-term stays until a decision is made on an asylum case.

Move-on period: When a person receives a positive decision on their asylum claim, they are given a short amount of time to 'move on' from their asylum accommodation, which means finding somewhere new to live, and claiming benefits before finding a job. This time is called the 'move-on period'. The move-on period can be incredibly stressful for people who have often been stuck in the asylum system for a long time. There is a high risk of homelessness and destitution during this time.

Our City of Sanctuary Vision and Values

Vision

Our vision for Colchester as a City of Sanctuary is that Colchester will be a place that welcomes, supports and celebrates asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants. To fulfil this vision, we

- Commit to creating a culture of empathy, understanding and inclusion across the city.
- Will promote the rights and welfare of all people seeking sanctuary and protection by bringing communities together to address the issues that matter to them.
- Recognise the very critical role of our voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations in realising this vision and the support they offer to our migrant populations.
- We will work in strong collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders, VCS organisations and statutory partners to ensure there is a co-ordinated and proactive response to the needs and welfare of asylum seekers, refugees and migrants living in our city.
- We commit to amplifying the voices of people with lived experiences to ensure their voice influences change at local, regional and national levels.

Values

We are committed to following the City of Sanctuary (CoS) values:

Welcome - Refugees find sanctuary and compassion in the communities where they settle.

Inclusivity - We welcome and respect people from all backgrounds, place value on diversity and are committed to equality. Those seeking sanctuary are recognised as individuals with different characteristics, needs and aspirations and are treated fairly. Everyone in Colchester, regardless of the immigration status, should benefit from integration.

Openness - We are committed to a culture of working collaboratively across the City of Sanctuary networks and in partnership with others.

Participation - We work with people seeking sanctuary and value and recognise the contribution of all. We aspire to ensure that people seeking sanctuary are involved in all decision making at all levels and are supported to become leaders in the organisation, networks, and the wider movement.

Inspiring - We work with enthusiasm and positivity and are determined to surpass what has already been achieved to welcome refugees and people seeking sanctuary.

Integrity - We aspire to high standards of honesty and behaviour, and always to act in the interests of people seeking sanctuary.

Collaboration – Stakeholders work together in strong and sustainable partnerships recognising each other's strengths.

Opportunity – Those seeking sanctuary can rebuild their lives, fulfil their aspirations and make contributions to the communities where they live.

Our Sanctuary Seeking Population

People can come to the UK for many different reasons and the rules that govern people's rights to enter, or stay, are complex. Some examples of the different circumstances of people seeking safety or new beginnings in Colchester include residents who:

- are seeking asylum and protection in the UK as they fear persecution in their home country, including children or young people who are also seeking protection but are separated from their parents or carers
- have been granted refugee status after their asylum claim has been successful
- have fled conflict or war in their home countries and who have arrived by refugee resettlement schemes like:
 - [Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Schemes](#) (VPRS)
 - [Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme](#) (ACRS)
 - [Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy](#) (ARAP)
- have been sponsored by community groups or other residents, such as the Homes for Ukraine scheme or Community Sponsorship
- have lived in the community for years and have a visa to stay but experience hardship and discrimination because their immigration status does not allow them to claim benefits
- have faced ongoing hardship and discrimination because of the Windrush scandal and hostile environment policies
- may have experienced trafficking or modern-day slavery before or after their arrival to the UK
- have joined their family members in the UK
- have moved to Colchester to seek new opportunities such as a job or to study for a qualification.



Over several years, the Council has worked in partnership with statutory partners and the voluntary, community and faith sectors to support those in Colchester seeking refuge.

Colchester received its first cohort of refugees during 2014 and 2015, through the Afghan Interpreters Ex-Gratia scheme – welcoming 57 individuals including wives and children. Many of these families are still in Colchester.

60 individuals have been supported through the Syrian Refugee Schemes and 22 families through the recent Afghan relocation schemes.

In addition, Colchester became an asylum dispersal area in December 2022 and currently has over 300 bedspaces. Between 2023 and 2024 it twice hosted an asylum contingency hotel.

Colchester has welcomed 387 Ukrainian guests, more than any other area in Essex and now has over 300 Hong Kong nationals.

Other migrant populations

Colchester is home to Essex University with students from more than 140 countries. A third of students are from outside the UK - 12.8% are from the European Union and 21.5% are from other countries.



According to the 2021 census the migrant populations of more than 500 residents	
African unspecified	1944
Chinese	1834
White and Asian (unspecified)	1659
Romanian	1546
Nigerian	1527
Polish	1438
White and Black Caribbean	1428
Nepali (includes Gurkha)	1069
White and Black African	982
Caribbean	959
Filipino	925
Bangladeshi, British Bangladeshi	767
Pakistani or British Pakistani	743
Arab	731
Other Eastern European	615
Sri Lankan	531
Ghanaian	505

Challenges

The integration of those seeking sanctuary is a complex, multi-layered process. It can depend upon a broad range of factors including access to resources like education and health care, opportunities for work and leisure as well as much wider concepts such as being able to mix socially.

Successful integration helps people to realise their full potential. It makes it easier for them to access services, reduces educational and health inequalities, helps them to find jobs and, fundamentally, underpins social cohesion and community empowerment.

The Government's Integrated Communities Strategy set out a vision for integration and defined this as 'communities where people, whatever their background, live, work, learn and socialise together, based on shared rights, responsibilities and opportunities'. The report treats integration as a multi-directional process involving multiple changes from both incoming and diverse host communities. The approach adopted is based on the following principles:

- Integration is multi-dimensional – depending on multiple factors encompassing access to resources and opportunities as well as social mixing.
- Integration is multi-directional – involving adjustments by everyone in society.
- Integration depends on everyone taking responsibility for their own contribution including newcomers, receiving communities and government at all levels.
- Integration is context-specific and needs to be understood and planned in relation to its particular context and within a bespoke timeframe.

As well as the numerous barriers faced by sanctuary seekers themselves to rebuilding their lives in Colchester, the work to embed our commitment as a City of Sanctuary takes place in a challenging environment exacerbated by global, national, and localised pressures.

Employment

Those seeking sanctuary bring a wealth of skills and experience with them but face barriers to accessing employment. One factor is the relative lack of recognition of the skills, qualifications, and work experience that they bring with them. Language, the lack of understanding of UK job markets, and poor health are also major barriers.

Refugees also face discrimination and lack of equal opportunities and in work and often engage in employment below their skills and qualification levels and with little chance of progression to their desired occupations. Women and young people (including those leaving care), face additional barriers, including different cultural and gender norms.

Employers and businesses are often unaware of the employment rights and entitlements of different categories of immigration status and have little understanding of the skills and experience that refugees bring.

Specific barriers include:

- limited knowledge of English
- lack of recognition of qualifications
- poor physical and mental health
- limited education and training opportunities
- lack of meaningful volunteering and work experience.

All the above can lead to frustration and loss of status, and can exacerbate mental health issues. This is particularly the case for asylum seekers, who are usually not allowed to work and have little to no access to employability support and training. Refugees often arrive with expectations that they will find work and become self-sufficient quickly but realise that they face numerous barriers to achieving it. This also makes refugees and asylum seekers more vulnerable to labour exploitation, trafficking, and modern slavery.

Housing

Housing demand, affordability, availability and suitability remain core challenges in most communities across the UK and are acutely felt within Colchester.

The cost-of-living crisis has further exacerbated poverty and homelessness. Like other local authorities across the country, Colchester's housing waiting lists are extensive, and affordable private sector accommodation is scarce.

Rents in Colchester are fast becoming unaffordable even for those who are working. For those on benefits, Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates have not kept up with spiralling rents meaning many are faced with a choice of moving into accommodation that they struggle to afford, moving into low quality housing or risking homelessness.

Individuals transitioning out of asylum accommodation after obtaining refugee status often experience homelessness due to unaffordable housing options in the private rented sector and a lack of social housing.

Most asylum bedspaces in Colchester are occupied by single men. When granted their status they find that they are not eligible for social housing as they do not meet the requirement for priority need. In addition, currently, for refugees under 35, LHA rate entitlement is capped at the lower 'shared accommodation' rate. This is a key driver in homelessness for newly granted refugees under 35, as it places the majority of privately rented properties out of reach.

Many of the Afghan families arriving on the ARAP and ACRS schemes are large families, some with up to 7, 8 or 9 individuals. These families have a 5 or 6-bedroom need. Not only is there a distinct lack of these properties on the private rented housing market, but rents are also unaffordable with families often benefit capped. Waiting lists for social housing register for 4-bed houses in Colchester is over 4 years.

Additionally, family reunification can lead to heightened housing pressures caused by overcrowding in current homes, often requiring a move to temporary housing to accommodate family joiners.

For Ukrainians, the breakdown of hosting arrangements and reductions in thank-you payments related to the Ukraine Extension Scheme may bring about an increase in numbers presenting as homeless. Barriers to accessing the private rented sector are the same for this cohort: affordability, lack of a guarantor and in addition for some the length of time left on their current visas. Single females also find it difficult to access homeless support as they do not meet the conditions for priority need.

Local councils need to commission stock for all their homeless households and find that they are competing with asylum housing providers who can procure at a slightly higher rate, leaving them no choice other than to place homeless households in more affordable locations, outside their districts or boroughs.



Health

Refugees and asylum seekers are often particularly in need of health support. The physical after-effects of war and torture, stress-related mental health problems, depression and malnutrition impact their ability to rebuild their lives. People seeking sanctuary experience a range of health inequalities compared to the general population. Access to health services is a major issue for these populations, because of language barriers, difficulty navigating the health, welfare and education systems, and fear of immigration enforcement by statutory services.

Refugees and asylum seekers can have complex health needs. These may be influenced by experiences prior to leaving their home country, during transit or after arrival in the UK.

Common health challenges include:

- untreated communicable diseases
- poorly controlled chronic conditions
- maternity care
- mental health and specialist support needs.

Some health and wellbeing issues such as disability, FGM, sexual health and mental health may be sensitive, or even taboo, subjects for refugees in their countries of origin, which has an impact on their understanding of, and access to, services. Refugees and asylum seekers with disabilities face specific barriers in accessing appropriate services, support and accommodation. In particular, the asylum support system does not always have the capacity or flexibility to meet their needs.

Limited specialist and culturally sensitive services such as mental health support, and lack of and cost of interpretation services in both primary and secondary care, can cause excessive wait times that can lead to crises or breakdowns.

In addition, although all refugees and asylum seekers are fully entitled to free NHS care, in practice they face barriers to registration due to lack of recognised ID documents, navigating bureaucracy, and understanding health information due to limited or no

English language. Many are digitally excluded, don't have mobile phones (or if they do, they cannot afford top-up credit) or access to the internet; all of which are instrumental in accessing health services and information.

The asylum system itself, with people being moved at short notice from one type of accommodation to another or a different area, can lead delays in or at worst no transfer of care from one health body to another. GP services are often unaware that their new patient is a refugee or asylum seeker and therefore they are not flagged for additional support.

Specific barriers include

- fear and mistrust of authority
- lack of supportive networks such as family and friends
- language, especially lack of good quality interpretation in some services
- lack of information about health care system and how to access them
- services are not culturally sensitive, or trauma informed
- stigma due to different cultural norms and understanding.



Cost-of-living crisis and funding pressures

Current inflation levels and the wider impacts of the cost-of-living crisis are placing immense pressure on the operating budgets of local authorities, voluntary and community sector services. This presents both challenges not only the local populations but also for people seeking sanctuary whose own everyday costs are increasing against limited incomes.

Those in dispersed asylum accommodation get £49.18 each to pay for food, clothing and toiletries. Pregnant women get an extra £5.25, and there are extra payments for each child under 1 (£9.50) and children between the age of 1 and 3 (£9.50). Many rely on foodbanks.

Many people in receipt of asylum support locally lose entitlement to their NASS financial assistance and/or accommodation within 28 days or less after being granted refugee status by the Home Office. This adds additional financial burdens as it can take up to 5 weeks to receive benefits. With the introduction of e-visas this move-on period has been extended to 56 days, in line with current homelessness legislation but this is only a trial period until June 2025, and we are waiting to see if this extension will remain.

Large Afghan families also struggle: families are benefit capped, employment can be difficult to find due to language barriers, and rents are unaffordable. Families struggle with budgeting, many having spent months in hotels with no expenses for food, rent or utilities, meaning money received through benefits could be used for luxuries or sent home to Afghanistan. Central government does provide funding to allow local authorities to top up rents for these families, however this can mean when funding runs out the families are left in unaffordable accommodation and at risk of homelessness.

At a national level, there is limited government funding available for work in this area.

Making social connections

The whole journey to seek sanctuary involves the loss of home, family and friends. Rebuilding a life in a new country depends on being able to make meaningful connections and relationships in new communities. This can involve knowing rights and responsibilities in the UK, access to legal advice and developing trust in authorities such as the police.

Most refugees who arrive under resettlement schemes come in family groups, while a significant proportion of asylum seekers are also families. Refugee families integrating into life in the UK need to be supported to understand their rights and responsibilities regarding issues such as safeguarding children, gender equality, LGBTQI+ rights, and domestic abuse. Norms in the UK may be different from those in their countries of origin.

Access to education is crucial for the integration of refugee children and young people as soon as possible after arrival in the UK. They can face several challenges due to their experiences of forced migration, including breaks in formal education or no previous schooling experience. A significant number of refugee children also have mental health issues such as depression and posttraumatic stress disorder.

Building connections with others, whether from the same refugee community or with people from different backgrounds, is crucial. However, refugees and asylum seekers experience barriers in developing these connections, such as the low levels of financial support that asylum seekers access. These are exacerbated by 'hostile environment' policies that result, among other things, in negative perceptions of refugees and asylum seekers in the media.

Barriers to making meaningful relationships include

- instability of immigration status
- lack of English language
- cultural differences and lack of knowledge or rights and responsibilities
- lack of meaningful, sustainable contact with people of other backgrounds
- negative public perception of refugees and asylum seekers
- fear of engaging with authorities especially the police
- hostile environment immigration and asylum policies.

Access to ESOL

Learning English is key for integration and for refugees to be able to live independently in the UK. Access to English language provision (known as 'English for Speakers of Other Languages' – ESOL) is often a priority for refugees on arrival, especially as English language proficiency is usually a prerequisite for study and employment. However, learning English is also important to enable refugees to settle in the new community and get by in daily life: to make friends, ask for help, go shopping, book an appointment with a GP, or discuss their children's education with a teacher.

However, refugees can face several barriers in accessing ESOL provision, including restrictions on eligibility for some in the asylum system. Some areas have limited English provision, and formal provision can be daunting for refugees with little or no prior experience of education or limited literacy. Additionally, lack of accessible childcare prevents some carers, especially women, from attending ESOL sessions.

Colchester has a wide range of English language provision available for refugees including formal, informal, accredited, unaccredited, class-based, community settings, one-to-one support and conversational opportunities. However, there are still gaps in provision and a need for more ESOL provision overall.



Interpretation

Many people seeking sanctuary require additional language and communication support, and it is crucial that service providers use good quality and professional interpreting and translation services. The cost of such services is cited as a barrier by some providers but not providing them can increase disadvantage and isolation in refugee communities and is a major barrier to accessing services. There are several negative impacts of providing poor or no interpreting, especially in safeguarding and healthcare contexts.

Digital Inclusion

Digital inclusion is key to communication, especially with the increasing reliance on online service provision. Refugees and asylum seekers often have limited digital skills on arrival in the UK and may also lack digital devices or connectivity at home. It is crucial refugees are supported to develop their digital skills and access digital devices as soon as possible, so they can access online services and support for their integration. Additionally, these skills and connectivity are important for refugees and asylum seekers to maintain relationships with friends, family, and communities.

NRPF - No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)

NRPF is an immigration condition usually imposed when a person has been issued leave to enter or remain for a temporary purpose, such as to visit, study or work. The NRPF condition excludes people from accessing most state benefits and services, including Universal Credit, Child Benefit, and social housing. In the case of people seeking sanctuary and those with insecure status, NRPF causes significant hardship affecting their health, education, housing, and access to universal services such as support for domestic abuse or when experiencing homelessness.

Only those eligible through local authority statutory duties due to safeguarding children, disability, mental health condition or illness can access any support.

In the case of people seeking sanctuary and those with insecure status, NRPF creates severe risks of destitution and exploitation within the immigration process. Being a two-tier local authority, Colchester has limited means to help those with NRPF, with adult and child social services being the responsibility of Essex County Council.

Funding

At a national level, there is limited government funding available for work in this area and current price increases are placing immense pressures on the operating budgets of the local authority and voluntary and community sector services.

Additional pressures occur when funding streams for each resettlement scheme vary in the amount of funding available, length of the scheme and lack of clarity on continuation of funding beyond the initial funding period. This makes it difficult for councils to be able to commission services and issue contracts.

Two-tier authorities have additional challenges with some funding going direct to tier one authorities. For example, Homes for Ukraine funding is claimed by Essex County Council and Colchester must claim funding in arrears. Essex also receives funding for the Afghan resettlement schemes.

There is no funding from central government to support those with NRPF.

Fluctuating and increasing asylum-seeker population

Since 2012 the government has outsourced responsibility for providing people seeking asylum with accommodation to private contractors. Clearsprings Ready Homes (CRH) provides asylum-seeker accommodation in Colchester.

This leaves Colchester City Council with very little influence on how and where asylum seekers will be housed. This has led to a concentrations of dispersed asylum accommodation in some of the most deprived wards. We have limited powers to influence asylum accommodation standards despite the impacts that poorly managed/overcrowded accommodation has on residents and local communities.

Our Home Office target for procurement of dispersed asylum accommodation has risen since 2023 meaning CRH is once again procuring more bed spaces in Colchester. Historically this has been houses of multiple occupancy housing single males. However, CRH is now procuring family houses, again in our more deprived areas. This increases the pressure on local schools and health services. In addition, these families will more than likely have a priority need in terms of housing should they present as homeless once they receive their refugee status.

The population is a transient one with some staying on Colchester for only a few months, others can be resident for many years. Once a person is moved out of their accommodation another resident will move in. The process of support and integration begins again.

Colchester has also been heavily impacted by the opening of the Wethersfield Initial Accommodation site in the neighbouring district of Braintree. The site houses 800 single males and runs a bus service to Colchester twice a day. All our VCS organisations have reported an increase in demand for services that is intensifying the additional strain on them due to increased numbers in dispersal accommodation. These VSC organisations are unable to access additional funding from Braintree Council or the Home Office to support this cohort.

National policy and global instability

The unpredictability that comes with international events and crises means that there have been and will likely continue to be unexpected surges in the numbers of people seeking sanctuary globally.

At a national level, sudden and changing national policy and funding streams directly affect the resources and level of support available to different groups. This effectively creates a patchwork of entitlements leading to challenges of equity for all migrants and people seeking sanctuary.

Local authorities often find themselves having to respond rapidly to Home Office policies, with little notice: the setting up of asylum contingency hotels, Afghan bridging hotels and the Homes for Ukraine Scheme being examples. Colchester is lucky to have dedicated and experienced VCS organisations that can support these vulnerable residents.

Inclusion and representation in workforce and political arena

Although Colchester is the third most ethnically diverse city in Essex there is a lack of representation of these communities in the workforce and in the political arena. It was only in the 2024 elections that 2 councillors from ethnic minority backgrounds were elected as ward councillors. The majority of Colchester City Council's workforce is White/ English/ Irish. This lack of representation within both the political arena and workforce means that there is little lived experience to draw upon when writing policies and delivering services.

Our progress

Resettlement team

Originally one member of staff, working alongside Essex County Council (ECC) and Essex Integration, was responsible for overseeing the Syrian and Afghan Resettlement schemes, dedicating between 0.5 to 2 days a week to the work. With the launch of the Homes for Ukraine (H4U) scheme and the increasing number of asylum seekers in our region a new a dedicated team of two was formed to address complex social issues such as homelessness, asylum support and resettlement. Working alongside local VCS agencies and other support organisations they have been able to implement the following.

Partnership-Driven Solutions working closely with partners across the Colchester system—including local authorities, charities, and community organisations—to provide vital resources, capacity, and support. Our efforts have blurred the lines between organisations, fostering a seamless and trusted network of support delivering comprehensive care and solutions for those in need. A key example of this would be our work with RAMA ([Refugee, Asylum Seeker & Migrant Action](#)) and [Essex Integration](#) who we now work with for their expertise and experience not as organisational partners but extended members of each other's teams.

Emergency response & crisis management: Our team is a critical emergency response unit, coordinating with partners to address urgent situations involving:

- Homelessness interventions: offering immediate support and longer-term solutions.
- Rematching for displaced individuals: facilitating reassignments for refugees and asylum seekers
- e-Visa support: assisting individuals in navigating complex immigration processes, ensuring timely and efficient outcomes.

Our interventions and support are successful due to our partnership approach with each organisation using its assets, strengths and experience to provide solutions. The asset-based approach is something we embrace as a local authority and through our resettlement work it's clear to see its benefit and impact.

Building system-wide support capacity: To enhance the effectiveness of our collective efforts, we established the *Resettlement Support Group*, a monthly forum that brought together key stakeholders to coordinate support and share resources. This group has now been renamed and repurposed as the City of Sanctuary Forum.

Ringfenced post supporting integration work: Going beyond basic resettlement needs, we provide comprehensive integration support to help individuals thrive in their new communities. This includes but is not limited to a new “Job Club” which provides a platform for those resettled in Colchester to learn and develop employability skills with the aim of becoming employed and self-sustaining with our communities.

Coordinated funding: By collaborating with partners, we've identified and created funding routes that maximize the impact of resources, ensuring the best possible outcomes for those affected. This includes us working with key partners and stakeholders to provide capacity and resources with asylum funding the Home Office has provided.

City of Sanctuary – advocacy & best practice. Our team has been a driving force in Colchester's *City of Sanctuary* initiative, advocating policies and practices that uphold dignity, inclusion, and empowerment for refugees and asylum seekers. Highlights of our work include:

- Facilitating the right to vote for refugees and other migrants ensuring their voices are heard in local decision-making.
- Sharing best practices with neighbouring local authorities, including Tendring and Braintree, and offering guidance and support as they begin to implement similar initiatives.
- Our advocacy and support have transformed lives for people whose successful integration and contribution to the community now serve as a model for others across the region.

A consistent lifeline for those in need: We have established a consistent, compassionate, and effective support mechanism for some of the most vulnerable members of our community. Whether through emergency response, long-term resettlement, or systemic advocacy, we remain committed to ensuring that no one is left behind.

Through our collaborative approach, we have built not just a team, but a community of care—a testament to the power of partnership, innovation, and empathy in addressing the most complex social challenges.

Resettlement schemes

Comprehensive support is provided to new residents arriving in the city through resettlement schemes including individuals we have welcomed through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (SVRS), the Afghan Relocations and Resettlement Policy (ARAP) and the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS). We have also supported one Afghan family and their sponsorship group to be resettled through the Community Sponsorship scheme and are working with another group hoping to welcome a family through the Communities for Afghans Scheme. Since 2022, hosts and families across the borough have welcomed 387 Ukrainian nationals through the Homes for Ukraine Scheme.

Afghanistan Locally Employed Staff Ex-Gratia Scheme

Between September 2014 and March 2016 Colchester welcomed 57 individuals including wives and children, under the Afghanistan locally employed staff Ex-Gratia Scheme. The council commissioned Fresh Beginnings, a local charity who had experience of integrating a similar group of translators from Iraq to provide the operational support, sourcing of accommodation and integration support.

Many of these families are still in Colchester.

Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme & Vulnerable Person's Resettlement Scheme

Working in partnership with Essex County Council and one of our key VCS organisations, Essex Integration, Colchester Council participated in both the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) and the [Vulnerable Person's Resettlement Scheme](#) (VPRS). The council, working with philanthropic landlords willing to accept LHA rates as rent, welcomed 60 individuals under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (SVPRS) and a further 5 under the VPRS - a total of 15 families, with the latest individuals arriving in June 2021.

Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) and Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP)

A total of 22 families have been welcomed under these two schemes. Working closely with Essex Integration, Essex County Council and Colchester Borough Homes a mixture of support was provided, depending on each family's situation. This included wraparound support while in a bridging hotel, integration support for families housed in Colchester, homeless support for those in temporary accommodation, and intensive casework to assist in finding accommodation.

Colchester acquired 12 properties through the Local Authority Housing Fund Rounds 1 and 2 which were used to house some of the families.

Afghan Bridging Hotels

Colchester has been home to two Home Office Afghan Bridging Hotels, the first one opening in August 2021 in closing in Jan 2022. This was mobilised in rapid response, to provide support to individuals who had been rescued from Afghanistan as part of Operation Pitting in 2021. A total 9 families, 40 people were housed at the hotel. Working with ECC, public health, NHS, Essex Integration and other key voluntary sector organisations and faith groups a co-ordinated wraparound support system was put in place. This included provision of clothing, access to benefits, GP registration, school places, ESOL, local orientation, social activities and supporting the families into private rented accommodation, offered by philanthropic landlords willing to accept LHA rates as rent.

The council worked closely with the MOD for the 5 and a half months the hotel was open and secured 10 properties for the families that were left at the hotel on its closure, the rest going to families from a nearby hotel in Chelmsford. These families continued to be supported by Essex Integration.

The second hotel opened in September 2022 and closed in August 2023. Lessons learnt, and working relationships built during the opening of the first hotel meant that support for these families was in place quickly ensuring that people's practical needs were met, and residents were able to access advice, support, and advocacy services from a range of providers.

33 families (222 people) were still accommodated at the hotel when its closure was announced in May 2023. Of these 26 were supported through intensive casework into private rented or social housing across the country. 7 families presented themselves as homeless to the council. The casework continued, and all families have now been supported into either private rented or social housing.

Community sponsorship & Communities for Afghans

The resettlement team have supported two community groups in housing Afghan families. The first under the Community Sponsorship scheme and the second through the Communities for Afghans scheme.



Homes for Ukraine

Colchester has welcomed more Ukrainian guests than any other council in Essex. Soon after the scheme was launched Colchester City Council commissioned the Refugee, Asylum seeker and Migrant Agency (RAMA) to work alongside them in supporting both hosts and guests.

RAMA provide caseworker support, and translation services to both guest and hosts, including home visits on arrival of the guest facilitating hosting agreements and discussions around house rules etc, delivering the £200 welcome payment, support with accessing benefits, school places and ESOL lessons, helping to access the private rented sector and with rematching. Support has also been given with making homeless applications should rematching not be available. Thanks to the intensive rematching support offered by RAMA and the resettlement team, very few families have been housed in temporary accommodation. RAMA are now offering guests support with applying for the Ukraine extension scheme.

Homes for Ukraine funding has also been used to:

- provide all guests with the Flash Academy ESOL app to assist with learning English
- payment of first month's rent and deposit when moving into private rented accommodation
- events around Ukraine Independence Day, marking the anniversary of the start of the war and Eurovision
- commission of iCarp and Underdog Crew to provide activities and mental health support for families.

Asylum

Dispersal accommodation.

Colchester became a dispersal area for those seeking asylum in December 2022. The Home Office contractor in the region is Clearsprings Ready Homes (CRH). The vast majority are single men housed in houses of multiple occupancy. Recently CRH has started to procure family homes. Using funding provided by the Home Office, the Council funds two caseworkers and an interpreter at RAMA who work specifically with this cohort.

Home Office policy is that those in receipt of asylum support cease to be entitled to Home Office accommodation and financial support 28 days after notification of the granting of refugee status. This is called the move-on period and represents a rapid change in circumstances for people who may not have been in the UK for long, are unfamiliar with the systems, may have limited English language ability and who have not had access to employment and savings. The delays in accessing benefits add to this and leave many destitute and homeless.

Although this 28-day move-on period has been extended to 56 days until June 2025 and has been welcomed by many organisations that have been pushing for an extension, its success will depend on the implementation of the eVisa rollout, which is vital for people to be able to prove their immigration status. There have been many problems with the rollout, including banks not recognising eVisas as a valid form of identification.

Working with RAMA and using Home Office funding, newly granted refugees are given a £200 bursary. Funding also covers destitution payments agreed by RAMA caseworkers should they be needed.

The Council and the VCS groups are working together, aiming to ensure that newly granted refugees are supported into mainstream accommodation. Using Home Office funding, the Council will pay first month's rent and deposit if affordable private rented accommodation is found. Communities and Sanctuary Seekers Together (CAST), based in Southend, also provides supported accommodation for newly granted refugees and is offered an incentive to take refugees referred by RAMA.

The partnership is working so well that CAST has now opened a house in Colchester with more in the pipeline.

Home Office funding is also used to fund several VCS and faith groups that support asylum seekers in Colchester ensuring that the pressure of increased numbers and amount of support needed is not placed unduly on one organisation. It also ensures that their support for these vulnerable residents is acknowledged.

Contingency Accommodation

A hotel on the outskirts of Colchester has twice been used as asylum contingency accommodation. The hotel was isolated, close to a major A road and had no outdoor space except for a car park. Experience gained while working in the Afghan bridging hotels meant that again support was quickly put in place. RAMA was able to offer casework, health colleagues provided onsite support, and a daily minibus was organised to bring the men into Colchester. Home Office funding was provided for table tennis and basketball equipment, free membership at a local gym, and days out were organised. The local community welcomed the residents and organised a number of community-led activities including a BBQ, funded through the Council, where the men cooked and shared traditional foods from their countries with residents so they could get to know each other. Men were welcomed into local football teams and two played cricket for Colchester.

Migrant Champion Councillor

In 2024 Cllr Kemal Çufoğlu was elected to Colchester City Council as Green Party ward councillor of Castle Ward. Cllr Çufoğlu came to Colchester from Cyprus in 2012 to study law at Essex University. He is a graduate of the MPower Political Leader project run by the Migrant Democracy Project and became the first young Green, first EU migrant and first West/Asian/Middle Eastern to be elected to Colchester Council. Cllr Kemal provides a strong voice for all migrant groups in Colchester, is a member of the Migrant Champions network and sits on Colchester's City of Sanctuary Forum. His first 'Green' motion to full council was around residency voting rights was passed in December 2024. Colchester became the first local council in Essex to call for the extension of the voting franchise.

To this date, he has been interviewed by PÚBLICO PT (Portugal) and received invitations to numerous local, national and European level meetings as a speaker, including

- Rock Against Racism (Colchester Arts Centre), “No to Racism, Inaugurate the Resistance” (Trade Union Council – Colchester, and Stand Up to Racism – Colchester),
- “MPower Information Session for New Migrant Leaders” (Migrant Democracy Project),
- “Local politics, migrant justice and the transnational far right: Perspectives from the UK and Europe” (Migrant Champions Network),
- “Be A Councillor - Migrants Make The Difference” (Local Government Association's “Be A Councillor Campaign and Program” and Migrant Democracy Project).

Digital Access

Colchester's Digital Access Support Team have supported migrants, refugees and asylum seekers with a digital champion training programme, providing individuals with training, support, employability skills and, where possible, volunteering opportunities within the community. The programme equips them with additional skills that can help in securing employment should they receive their refugee status. As digital champions they can share their knowledge within their community, upskilling those around them.

Migrant Hub

A new migrant hub was established in September 2024 in partnership with the Salvation Army, who act as the host, including Colchester City Council, RAMA, Care for Calais, Essex Integration and the Boys and Men's CIC. The hub, which is open every Friday, offers a warm space, employment advice, access to training courses, ESOL, eVisa support, and SIM cards to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. New partners will be joining in 2025 including the Housing Solutions team from Colchester Borough Homes and there are plans around holding specific health awareness activities and talks. Quarterly meetings are held which also include representatives from Braintree Council as many who use the hub are from the Wethersfield initial accommodation site.

City of Sanctuary Forum

The Colchester City of Sanctuary Forum (CCSF) maintains a membership of voluntary, community, public sector organisations working to support those seeking sanctuary in Colchester, as well as residents with lived experience. Members may oversee or offer front-line support to residents and organisations.

The Forum reports into Colchester City Councils leadership team, the ONE Colchester Delivery Board and or Health and Wellbeing Board when appropriate. The forum contributes to and develops strategic actions and priorities, as required.

The primary focus of the Colchester Sanctuary Forum is to co-ordinate the production and delivery of Colchester's City of Sanctuary strategy action plan which will seek to improve equity of access to support for all sanctuary seekers and raise the voices of people with lived experience. The action plan's aim will be to set out the priority issues faced by sanctuary seekers and an outline of how we hope to address these. As part of this, VCS partners, the Council and other representatives will have responsibility to deliver actions and projects from time to time. The intention is that if/when there is consensus that the Forum is self-sufficient, Colchester City Council will relinquish chair position. Following this, the Chair and Vice Chair positions will be elected on a bi-annual basis with at least one role being fulfilled by a member with lived experience.

Work placements and Job Club

Colchester City Council's Integration Support Officer runs a monthly Job Club, hosted by RAMA, for refugees and anyone seeking asylum in Colchester, the aim being to get people ready for work. Each month focuses on different aspects of getting ready for work in the UK. Whilst those seeking asylum are waiting for their decision from the Home Office, the aim is to get them in the best possible position with a CV, English lessons, work experience and much more. The Integration Support Officer works alongside other organisations like Essex Integration and RAMA, STEP, Salvation Army Employment Advisors and Together We Grow. One-to-one sessions are offered at the Migrant Hub every Friday. Financial support is offered, in terms of

bus fares, transport to attend Employment Fairs and interview expenses. Members have attended mock interviews run by Colchester City Council's Human Resources team. Senior leadership have agreed to a one-day work shadowing scheme within several council departments. It is hoped that this will roll out to businesses in Colchester.

The Resettlement Team currently host the director of the Boys and Men's UK CIC on a one day a week secondment to assist specifically around its City of Sanctuary work offering vital lived experience advice.

Colchester Against Modern Slavery (CAMS)

CAMS is a community partnership initiated by the Safer Colchester Partnership. It works towards a slavery-free community within the city of Colchester and surrounding areas.

CAMS comprises over 25 partner organisations including charities, faith groups, local authority, law enforcement and community groups. As a partnership it appreciates the unique quality and power of local knowledge, relationships and assets to bring an end to modern slavery and human trafficking.

Work focuses on:

- raising awareness
- training
- safeguarding, referral pathways and survivor care
- gathering intelligence
- disruption

A member of the Resettlement Team sits on the CAMS Awareness working group.

Regional and national meetings

The Resettlement Team plays an active role in a number of regional and national meetings:

- RLAN
- East of England Full Governance dispersal board
- CAMS
- Tackling Asylum Seeker, Refugee and Migrant Hate Crime and Harassment roundtable
- Communities for Afghans Engagement Forum
- Essex Migrant Action Forum
- Essex Country Council Refugee Task Force
- Integrated Health and Housing Working Group
- East of England Asylum and Refugee Reference Group
- HFU: District/ECC Operational Group
- Forum for tackling anti-asylum activism
- East of England Resettlement and Ukraine Meeting
- City of Sanctuary Local Authority Network

Needs analysis / University Research

Close working relationships with University of Essex Migration Studies Department has led to a master's student carrying out a needs analysis of migrant groups in Colchester as a final year dissertation. That work highlights the multiple challenges facing different groups. A multilingual questionnaire, based on the [Homes Office Indices of Integration](#) was used to understand the needs and barriers to integration. The results showed that there are significant differences in the needs of migrants based on their country of origin as well as their socio-economic backgrounds. Common challenges facing migrant groups in general were also identified. Through the analysis of the data extracted from the questionnaires, the main findings can be summarized as follows:

Housing affordability, language barriers, understanding the health system and qualification accreditation were among the most significant challenges faced by migrants in general. However, language barriers emerged as the key challenge for Afghan migrants, while challenges for those from Ukraine concentrated on access to work force and how to get their qualifications recognized in the UK.

Essex University's community action clinic enables students to work together for a 'client' organisation to produce research that is useful for the organisation. A small group of students are currently working on research investigating what makes migrant groups feel welcomed in Colchester.

Welcome packs

Each new arrival into asylum dispersal accommodation receives a 'Welcome to Colchester' pack through the post. The pack has been translated in five languages, Arabic, Pashto, Farsi, Kurdish Sorani and Urdu, with more translations in the pipeline. The pack includes information on:

- Local refugee and asylum services
- National services
- Health and wellbeing, including access to NHS services, mental health support, drug and alcohol support and domestic violence
- Modern slavery
- Public transport
- Waste and recycling
- Learning English
- Getting ready for work
- Emergency services
- Advice for families including education, roles of schools regarding safeguarding children, disciplining children and keeping children safe
- Fire safety

A 'Congratulations on getting your status' pack is planned for the near future which will include guidance on housing, eVisas, banking and employment.

eVisas

The team have run a number of eVisa support sessions both on weekends and evenings and have regular eVisa support at the Migrant Hub every Friday. RAMA have run sessions in collaboration with GYROS (Great Yarmouth Refugee Outreach & Support) for more complex cases such as the Nepalese community.

Mental health support

Both asylum and Homes for Ukraine funding has been used to provide mental health support for these cohorts. Together We Grow work with asylum seekers through access to therapeutic and educational horticulture, providing talking therapy, access to nature and gardening, healthy food and cooking using vegetables from the garden as well as access to employment advice. Two 10-week rolling programmes are held with one specifically for the LGBTQ+ asylum population. Many continue to volunteer at the garden.

iCarp and the Underdog Crew have been commissioned to provide support for Ukrainian families and children, with iCarp providing talking therapy and green exercise and the Underdog Crew providing activities for children including theatre, music, wilderness trips.

Working closely with RAMA and the NHS Suffolk and North East Essex Integrated Care Board and using Home Office funding we are investigating providing specialist mental health support for RAMA's clients. The Haven Project has been commissioned to provide support for those with more complex needs.

Action for the future

What we want to do?

We are ambitious in developing our city further in becoming a City of Sanctuary. This will need involvement and contributions from all stakeholders so we can achieve our vision. Including: -

Colchester City Council: We want officers and members to have a clear understanding of the challenges those seeking sanctuary must overcome and feel able to adapt and develop services to meet the needs of those seeking sanctuary. We will also work with the wider system including health to improve outcomes for those seeking sanctuary.

Voluntary and community sector: We want groups to contribute their wealth of experience and expertise to our shared vision. In turn we will help build and support local capacity to support the needs of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants.

Community: We want residents to feel informed about the realities of forced migration and sanctuary seekers and how to support if they wish.

Sanctuary Seekers: We want those seeking sanctuary to feel welcomed and that their immigration status does not limit their access to services and to feel they are heard and valued as part of our community.

Who will do this?

We will use the Colchester City of Sanctuary Forum to improve access to support for all sanctuary seekers and raise the voices of people with lived experience. This multi-agency group will help shape, deliver and monitor our action plan. This will run alongside a risk register which will also monitor progress.

How will we do this?

A detailed and evolving action plan will be developed by the Colchester City of Sanctuary Forum, identifying the specific actions required, who is responsible, and timeframes involved which will be monitored to evidence the impact of the action plan. The action plan will set out to strengthen our current partnership framework, supporting people seeking sanctuary across the city. It will improve the co-ordination for the delivery of services aimed at supporting our sanctuary-seekers, improving their experiences of living in Colchester. The action plan will be constructed around the following themes and actions.

Work Together

We will work together to make Colchester a place of safety, support, and opportunity for those seeking sanctuary - embedding a collective message of welcome and kindness, promoting integration and community cohesion. We will:

Continue to develop relationships with the Home Office, asylum accommodation providers, Strategic Migration Partnership striking a balance of accountability and constructive collaboration. We will continue to lobby for improvements to asylum accommodation and safeguarding of those placed in Colchester.

Work to ensure people seeking sanctuary are involved in decision making processes.

Support community development and foster good community relations, rejecting all forms of discrimination and hate crime.

Work across our services to take practical steps wherever we can to mitigate disadvantages related to being a refugee, asylum seeker or migrant.

Ensure refugees have access to timely and good quality housing support and advocacy services, including information about housing options rights and responsibilities.

Ensure asylum accommodation meets local authority standards and local stakeholders can monitor effectively both procurement and compliance.

Ensure refugees and asylum seekers housed in more remote locations or in contingency/ interim accommodation can access services through various forms of provision or have support with transport if needed.

Ensure refugees and asylum seekers are aware of their rights and responsibilities in the UK regarding issues such as safeguarding children and domestic abuse and have access to culturally sensitive advice and support services.

Encourage service providers to ensure that all relevant staff are adequately trained on the needs of refugees and asylum seekers, and that training is regularly updated.

Encourage refugees and sanctuary seekers to take part in the democratic processes.

Ensure the Council's continued engagement with City of Sanctuary, supporting their campaigns and contributing to taking their work forward. Support other groups to join the movement.

Celebrate

We will work with communities to build relationships, support each other, and celebrate the culture, diversity, and contributions of those seeking sanctuary, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers and amplify their voices and experiences to shape positive change. We will:

Recognise and celebrate the diversity that strengthens our city.

Continue to work with and develop relationships with our diverse community groups.

Ensure that Colchester, through its local neighbourhoods, social and community setting and local media, provides a welcoming environment to refugees and asylum seekers.

Aim for refugees and asylum seekers to have sustainable connections with people from all backgrounds and have regular access to meaningful opportunities to interact with others.

Aim for refugees to feel safe, develop trusting relationships with the police and other authorities, and be confident about reporting crime, especially hate crime.

Ensure that the culture, leisure, and sports sectors in the city are actively engaged in the integration of refugees through the provision of safe, accessible, and welcoming activities.

Challenge the negative perceptions and misleading narratives of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in media through facts and positive stories of integration.

Challenge and question policy change at regional and national level that supports the rights and needs of asylum seekers, refugees and migrants.

Organise, facilitate and promote events through the year that celebrate culture and diversity especially around Refugee Week.

Embed sanctuary in services

We will increase the knowledge of all Council staff, community partners and residents so that everyone is aware of issues facing the refugee, migrant and asylum-seeking community and that those in front-facing roles know how best to support residents. We will ensure that Council services and local agencies adapt and develop services that are shaped by the needs and experiences of sanctuary seekers and provide opportunities for their positive development. We will review existing support available to people with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) and UASCs specifically, ensure entitlements are effectively communicated across all local services as well as learning from best practice in other Local Authorities. We will:

Ensure plans to specifically address hate crime against asylum seekers and refugees are incorporated in our work to create a safer city.

Incorporate the needs of refugees and asylum seekers into the local housing strategy Implementation Plans and into the Homeless Prevention Strategy.

Work with providers of the night shelter accommodation in the city to monitor numbers of refugee and asylum-seeking individuals and families in emergency and homelessness provision.

Ensure services are accessible to refugees and migrants, eg ensuring all staff know how to access interpreting services.

Provide training for staff and members based on the lived experience of sanctuary seekers, to enable them to understand the particular needs of and barriers faced by these groups.

Keep the voluntary and community sector informed on progress and seek advice on where key services are not inclusive or informed and facilitate training and learning opportunities.

Work with the Colchester Against Modern Slavery Partnership to keep informed and support statements to tackle modern slavery, access training to identify the signs of modern slavery and be aware of services that partners can signpost individuals to across the city that support victims of modern slavery.

Include reference to sanctuary seekers in housing and homelessness strategies.

Review the existing No Recourse to Public Funds support and consider best practice from other councils.

Embed sanctuary in services continued

Review how sanctuary seekers can be included in the Council's equality and impact assessments, so their needs are considered when policies and services are changed.

Investigate how to break down barriers and increase knowledge around the political systems to increase participation.

Tailored and bespoke support

We will build and support capacity within the voluntary sector to meet the needs of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants; and foster collaboration and coordination between different local agencies to enable the provision of effective specialist community-based support with the flexibility to meet the changing needs of asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants in Colchester, including those with no recourse to public funds. We will aim to ensure that:

The refugee voluntary and community sector in Colchester has access to sustainable funding that enables it to develop and retain knowledge and expertise in refugee integration.

Key stakeholders in the public and private sectors are aware of the strengths of the refugee VCS, and engage effectively with the sector.

Colchester City has strong and empowered Refugee Community Organisations that effectively represent refugee communities.

Colchester's VCS provides meaningful volunteering opportunities for refugees, asylum seekers, and people from other backgrounds who want to contribute to integration.

We support VCS to provide culturally specific activities and programmes which promote integration.

Health and wellbeing

We will work with health partners to enable and ensure access to health services for people who are asylum seekers, refugees and migrants. This is particularly concerning primary care services, advice and support to prevent the development of more acute, long-term mental health conditions. Our aim is that:

Refugees and asylum seekers are screened as soon as possible after arrival, have access to emergency treatment and immunisations and are supported to register with a local GP.

Refugees and asylum seekers including more vulnerable groups such as women and people with disabilities know their rights, understand how the NHS and social care works in the region and can access suitable services.

Refugees and asylum seekers have access to good quality mental health and wellbeing services that meet their needs including wellbeing groups and activities.

All health and wellbeing services provide good quality professional interpreting and translating services following NHS guidelines.

Refugees and asylum seekers have access to health promotion and awareness services and providers are actively engaged in eliminating health inequalities.

We work with ICB to continue to encourage GP surgeries to sign up to the Safer Surgeries initiative, which means they will be welcoming to people irrespective of their immigration status.

We use available funding in innovative ways to support health and wellbeing of those seeking sanctuary.

Building skills

We will enhance opportunities for migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers to utilise and develop their skills, to access opportunities to support themselves and their families which contributes to the social and economic wellbeing of the city. We will:

Undertake a mapping service of ESOL provision and identify gaps in services. Review any additional commissioning required and use funding where appropriate to support.

Ensure the skills, qualifications and work experience of refugees and asylum seekers are assessed and recognised at the earliest opportunity.

Ensure refugees and asylum seekers have access to a range of ESOL provision that is suitable to their individual needs and aspirations, including informal learning opportunities.

Encourage services and organisations to provide suitable, good quality and professional interpreting and translation services, including translated resources in accessible format.

Develop volunteering opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers.



