

A Westminster Welcome

The strategy for people seeking
sanctuary in our Borough



Lived Experience Foreword

When we first arrived in the UK, everything was new and uncertain, but we soon felt supported by many organisations working under the Council. We received help in every essential area of life - we were introduced to our local GP for healthcare, my son was quickly enrolled in school, and we were given access to counselling and emotional support whenever needed.

Council staff and community workers visited regularly to check on our wellbeing and make sure we were safe. Because of the difficulties we faced before leaving Iran, this care and understanding meant a great deal to us. We were also introduced to volunteering opportunities, which helped us adapt more quickly, build confidence, and develop new skills. The advice and guidance we received about life after gaining residence have also been very valuable.

Through the Council, we were referred to a college to improve my English and take part in community activities.

“Westminster has truly shown us what it means to be a welcoming and caring borough - a place that values safety, inclusion, and human dignity for everyone.”

A father of a family who was placed in accommodation in Westminster whilst seeking sanctuary.



The Leader's Foreword

I am incredibly proud that Westminster is a city shaped by its diversity, with 45% of the residents who form our community coming from a global majority background. It is part of what makes our city great and we are steadfastly committed to ensuring that everyone feels welcome. This commitment forms the basis of our 2022 Fairer Westminster Strategy: to ensure that everyone, regardless of circumstance, has the opportunity to thrive.

This strategy builds upon our previous work of providing sanctuary for those fleeing persecution, such as our Homes for Ukraine and Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme. I want to personally thank our conscientious and dedicated officers and communities, who have stood up to support those navigating the trauma of displacement and welcomed them with open arms to ensure they receive the support they need whilst they are in Westminster. This is a tradition we intend to continue with this strategy.

We are all too aware that the current political climate has exacerbated the difficulty and hardship faced by those seeking asylum. We recognise the challenges and complexities involved with seeking sanctuary and that these people are already some of the most vulnerable in our society. We know that our city has been enriched by different cultures and ways of life and that Westminster would not be the same without their invaluable contribution to our society. We thank our amazing voluntary sector organisations and community groups who help us look after those in need.

It is Westminster City Council's promise that we will listen to communities, and work in partnership with displaced peoples to ensure a compassionate and trauma-informed response, rooted in the lived experience of asylum seekers and refugees whilst they are living or placed in our borough.



CLlr Adam Hug, Leader, Westminster City Council



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Community, voluntary organisations and faith groups

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Introduction

We are committed to creating a Fairer Westminster where everyone can thrive, feel included, safe, and supported. This strategy draws on existing successes, and sets commitments for the future, to ensure that this is achieved for all people seeking sanctuary in our borough.

In 2023, we passed a full council motion to join the City of Sanctuary Local Authority Network, with the intention to apply for the full Council of Sanctuary Award. This strategy will form a part of Westminster City Council's Sanctuary Award application, to affirm our ambition for inclusivity, solidarity with, and compassion for people seeking sanctuary.

We know that those best placed to develop this strategy are the people with lived experience. This strategy has been informed by reviewing existing engagement with people seeking sanctuary as well as direct engagement with those with lived experience. We have also engaged with statutory partners, local voluntary and community groups and faith organisations, who provide vital support and services to Westminster's sanctuary seekers.

We are committed to working collaboratively as a Council of Sanctuary to foster welcome and promote national policy and local changes to best support those seeking sanctuary.



Our History of Welcome

Historically, Westminster has welcomed many asylum seekers, refugees and migrants. As of 2024, Westminster had the highest rate of international migration in England, with more than 20,000 Westminster residents arriving over the past two years, making up 10% of the borough's population.

We are proud of the diversity of our borough. According to the 2021 Census:

45%

of our residents are from global majority backgrounds.

26%

of residents do not have English as their main language.

34%

of residents hold a non-UK passport.

65%

of our residents hold a religion, with 37% of residents as Christian and 20% as Muslim.

85

languages are spoken in our borough.



Vision & Aims

This strategy has been created during a time of uncertainty and change, as opinions differ and national policy develops.

Our vision, aims and commitments will anchor Westminster City Council's activity in a changing landscape.

Our vision is to create a Fairer Westminster, where everyone can thrive.

This vision aligns with the central City of Sanctuary UK principles, of working in an **inclusive, open, participatory, and inspiring** way, with **integrity**. We commit to working in this way.

Inclusive: We welcome and respect people from all backgrounds, place the highest value on diversity and are committed to equality.

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

Participatory: We work with people seeking sanctuary and value and recognise the contribution of all. We aspire to ensure people seeking sanctuary are involved in all decision making 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. We act as a catalyst for change by being open to new and innovative ideas, sharing knowledge and working in partnership.

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

This strategy will deliver our shared vision by proactively welcoming sanctuary seekers in Westminster, ensuring they can access holistic support and feel safe in our borough.

This aim will be realised through four central commitments of:



Community and Collaboration



Health and Wellbeing



Housing and Accommodation



Learning and Employment

These commitments will be explored in full on page 31.



This shared vision aligns with wider Council work and strategies, including:

Fairer Westminster Strategy



Fairer Economy Plan

Homelessness and
Rough Sleeping Strategy

Voluntary and Community
Sector Investment Strategy

Ending Modern Slavery Strategy

Community Equality Strategy

Community Participation Charter

Children and Young People's Plan

Safer Westminster Partnership Strategy

Health and Wellbeing Strategy

#2035 Programme



Listening and Learning

As part of our journey to become a Fairer Westminster, we know we need to ensure the voices of our communities, especially those who are underrepresented, are heard and translated into positive action. This is particularly important for this strategy, as often the needs and opinions of people seeking sanctuary are overlooked.

People with lived experience are the experts for this strategy. The way we work, and the vision we are striving for has to be shaped by these people. To prevent people with lived experience from being 'forced representatives', we have also spoken to the professionals and services that support people seeking sanctuary, to hear their insights.

To develop the strategy and action plan, we have engaged with:

- Ukrainian refugees supported by the Homes for Ukraine Programme
- People seeking asylum and placed in Westminster by the Home Office
- People with lived experience working with City of Sanctuary UK
- Teams involved in the Afghan resettlement programme
- The Ukrainian Response Team, who delivers Westminster's Homes for Ukraine programme
- Family Navigators who worked with asylum seeking and refugee families
- Social Workers working with Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children
- Public Health teams involved in past and present support for people seeking sanctuary
- The Resilience team, involved in initial responses to supporting people seeking sanctuary
- The Community Safety Team and our Modern Slavery Exploitation Co-Ordinator
- Teams within Economy & Skills, involved in coordinating business and social enterprise support to people seeking sanctuary
- Community and voluntary organisations who are supporting or have supported sanctuary populations in Westminster
- London Councils and the London Strategic Migration Partnership, who help to coordinate the strategic regional response.

We would like to express our deepest thanks to all who have provided insights, explained their practices and shared their experiences. These have been instrumental in shaping this strategy and action plan.



Ways of Working

To deliver our vision, aims and commitments, certain approaches to work will be vital. By upholding the principles of **openness and transparency**, **collaboration and partnership** and **diversity and inclusion**, we create the best chance for success.

Collaboration and partnership

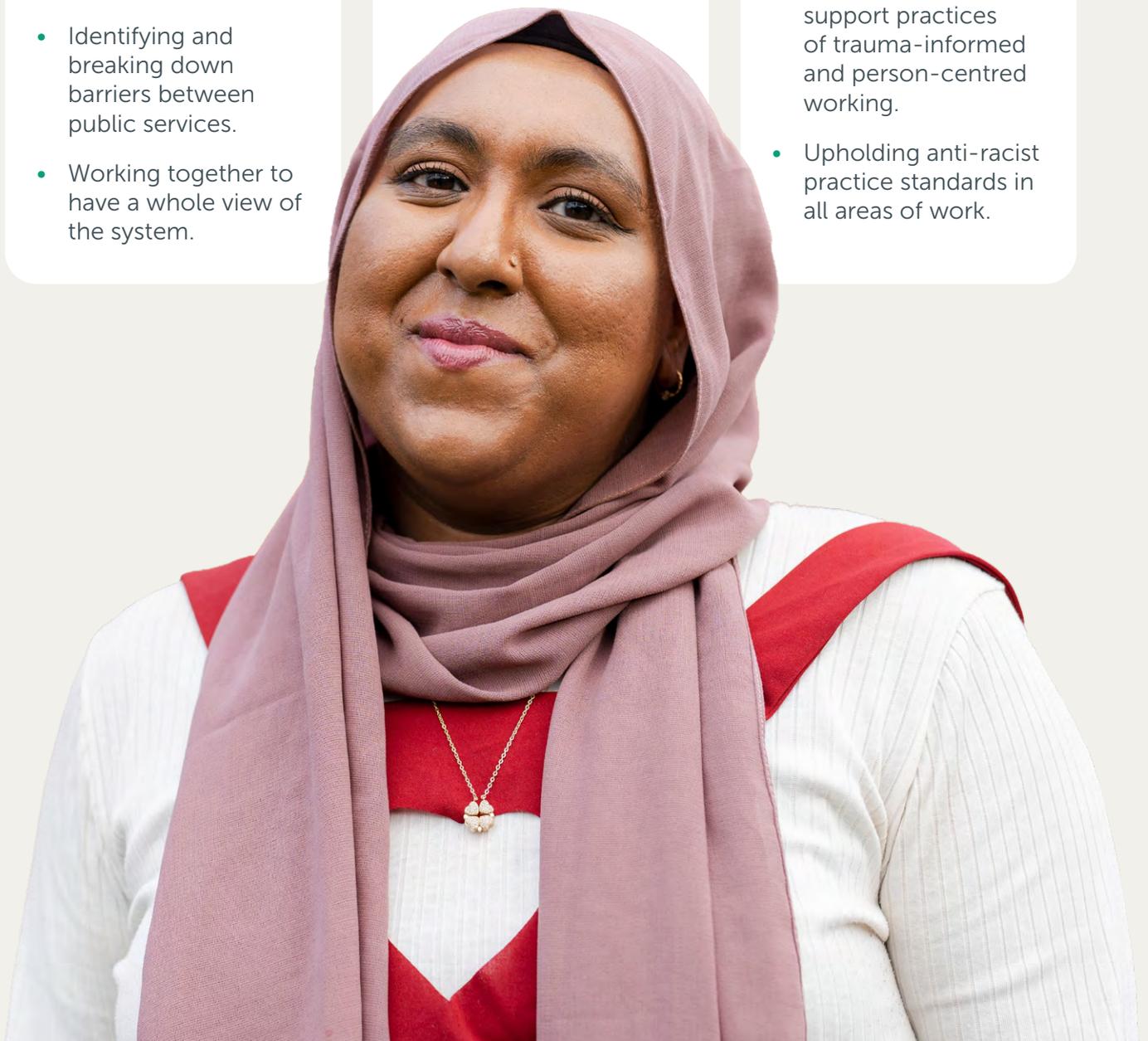
- Working with other Local Authorities to learn and co-deliver.
- Making the best use of the resources, skills and expertise across Westminster.
- Taking decisions in partnership to work effectively and align services.
- Identifying and breaking down barriers between public services.
- Working together to have a whole view of the system.

Openness and transparency

- Co-producing insights to understand how we can be most effective.
- Communicating the reasons for our decisions.
- Inviting scrutiny and challenge.

Diversity and inclusion

- Ensuring our work is accessible to all.
- Working to reduce the disproportionate and intersecting impact on women, LGBTQI+ people, people with disabilities and people from Global Majority groups.
- Embedding inclusive support practices of trauma-informed and person-centred working.
- Upholding anti-racist practice standards in all areas of work.



Our Sanctuary Seeking Population

Who is a sanctuary seeker?

The interchangeable terms of 'people seeking sanctuary' and 'sanctuary seeker' used in this strategy are intended to capture the range of people who move to Westminster as a refugee, asylum seeker or other vulnerable migrant.

People may come to the UK for many different reasons and the rules that govern people's rights to enter or settle are complex. In Westminster, there are a range of different circumstances and backgrounds for people who move or are placed into the borough.

This includes residents who:

- Are seeking asylum and protection in the UK as they fear persecution in their home country.
- Are children or young people 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 government refugee schemes like the Afghan Resettlement Programmes.
- Have been hosted by community groups or other residents, as seen in the Homes for Ukraine scheme.
- Have entered the UK with restricted visa types, such as a Domestic Overseas Worker visa or Student visa, with no recourse to public funds and then have had to seek sanctuary due to danger.
- Have lived in the community for years and have a visa to stay but experience hardship because they have no recourse to public funds.
- Have faced ongoing hardship and discrimination because of the Windrush scandal and/or hostile policies.
- Have experienced trafficking or modern-day slavery before, during or after their arrival to the UK.
- Join their family members in the UK.

It is also important to note that those with a refugee or settled immigration status can work in the UK and access social housing, whereas asylum seekers, or those with no recourse to public funds have restricted rights to work, cannot access social housing or claim any benefits.



Populations and support, in numbers



Our Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC)

as of October 2025:

35 UASC in Westminster, and 208 former UASC Care Leavers are being supported.

35% of our referrals to the Council are children of Syrian descent, and 17% are of Eritrean descent.

The top 5 languages of our UASC, present and former, are Arabic, Tigrinya, Oromo, Pashto and Amharic.



Afghan Resettlement Programmes

Between September 2021 and March 2022, a 'Bridging Hotel' hosted 775 Afghan refugees, including 374 children.

We have supported 50 families to settle into accommodation in London and elsewhere in the UK.



Homes for Ukraine

Since 2022, 1,211 Ukrainian guests have arrived in Westminster.

As of October 2025, 174 guests are currently living with a sponsor, and 30 Ukrainians are living in temporary or social housing in Westminster.



Contingency Accommodation

We hosted people seeking sanctuary in hotels in the borough between 2021 to 2024. At the height, in 2023, there were eight 'contingency hotels' open in Westminster, with 934 adults and 214 children seeking sanctuary via the asylum process.



The Context

There are a range of factors that require consideration to ensure that a culture and practice of welcome is maintained in Westminster and to acknowledge that people seeking sanctuary may have faced and continue to face multiple intersecting forms of discrimination.

Supporting people seeking sanctuary in Westminster interacts with challenges ranging from the international to the local, including:

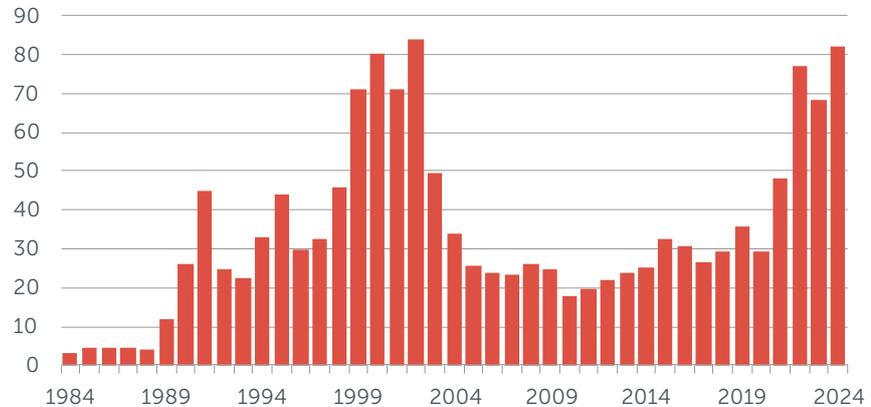
International Conflict and Uncertainty

In an interconnected world, geopolitical events can impact communities near and far. Recent increases in people seeking sanctuary have been impacted by global crises and conflict. The UK Government has responded to the conflicts in Afghanistan and Ukraine through establishing resettlement schemes, whilst in other nations, those who flee to the UK have to rely on the asylum process. The number of people seeking asylum fluctuates year-on-year, meaning work in this area often has to be responsive, rather than planned.

Worsening global situations, such as climate change, are also expected to force more people from around the world to seek safety elsewhere, with more extreme weather and disasters.

Asylum applications in the UK

Thousands, annual figures for main applicants only



Source: Home Office Immigration Statistics, year ending December 2024, tables Asy_D01 and Asy_D02 via House of Commons Library (2025) Asylum statistics report.



Policy Changes

Though people seeking sanctuary will move into or be placed in local communities, immigration policies are determined by the UK Government, rather than local authorities. The Home Office decides who can live in the UK and manage accommodation and centralised support for asylum seekers.

Local authorities often have little influence on the placement of accommodation for people seeking asylum in their area, which are often managed by subcontractors working for the government. These sites are set up rapidly, with little opportunity for input or engagement. Recently, much of this contingency accommodation has been in the form of hotels. This environment has exacerbated concerns relating to sanctuary seekers' mental health, safety, educational attainment, and practical needs. This has led to local organisations and local authorities stepping in to provide support and campaign for adequate standards to be met.

Unfortunately, despite the context of a more interconnected world, opinions towards sanctuary seekers are polarised in the UK and abroad. Hostility towards sanctuary seekers has come to the forefront in the UK in protests, riots and violence. Anti-migration sentiments create a culture of fear and put pressure on decision-makers to exclude people seeking sanctuary.

Anti-immigration protests are sometimes held in Westminster, due to its central location. In September 2025, over 100,000 protesters gathered in Westminster, with at least 25 protesters arrested, and 26 police officers injured. This hostility can be particularly distressing for people seeking sanctuary in our borough, as indirect and direct threats of violence are made towards these communities.

A 2023 survey by the University of Oxford's Migration Observatory found that 37% of respondents believed that the system for applying for refugee status should be made more difficult.



Housing Crisis

Housing affordability, availability and suitability remain core challenges in most communities across the UK and are acutely felt within London, with Westminster being one of the most expensive boroughs to live in.

The state of housing in London has been exacerbated by the cost of living crisis. The rising costs of essentials such as food and energy have left Londoners, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, struggling to afford rising private rents. Social housing and temporary housing can also be difficult to access, as demand significantly outweighs supply in London.

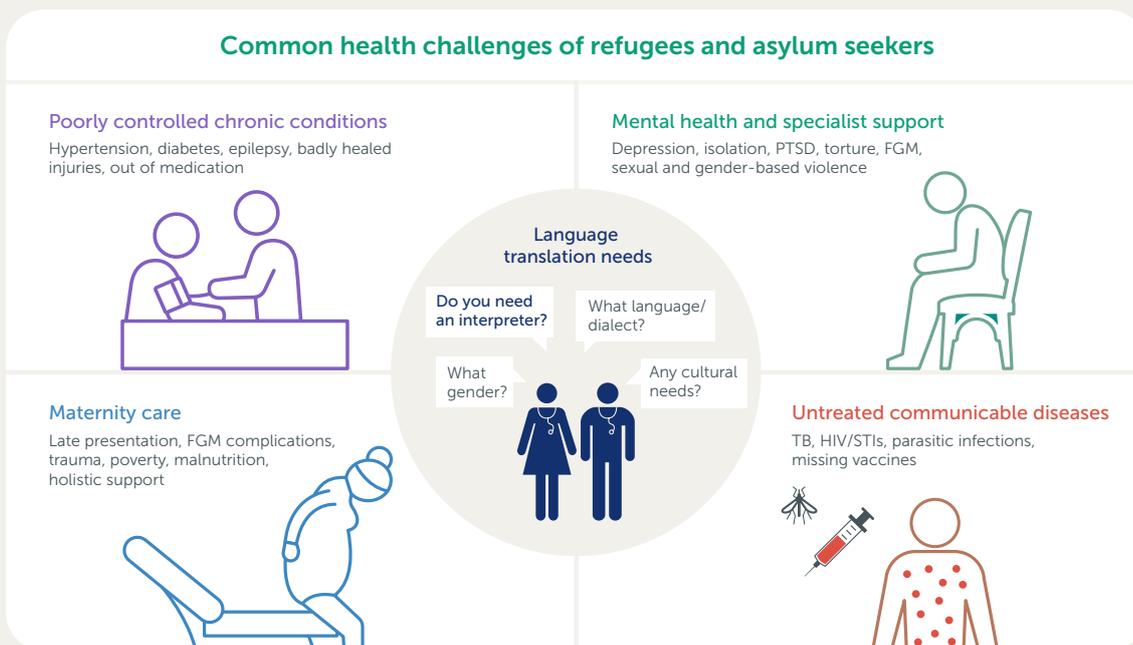
Due to their limited access to funds, people seeking sanctuary can have particular difficulty with securing housing. This means that sanctuary seekers can have a transitory experience with Westminster, entering and staying in the borough, but having to settle elsewhere due to a lack of options to be in our borough.

In Westminster, around 6,000 households are on the Housing Register, whilst there are 700 social lets each year. As of 2024, an estimated 31,000 households across Westminster are identified as particularly at risk to the rises in the cost of living.

Health Inequalities

People seeking sanctuary experience a range of structural health inequalities compared to the general population. Access to health services is a major issue for these populations, because of language barriers, requests for proof of address, difficulty in navigating systems and fear of immigration enforcement by statutory services if they provide identification.

Limited specialist and culturally sensitive services, such as around mental health support, causes excessive wait times that can lead to crisis or breakdowns.



Source: British Medical Association (2025) 'Unique health challenges for refugees and asylum seekers'

Access to Legal Advice

Legal Advice is crucial for sanctuary seekers to understand their rights and for gaining status. However, access to free, high quality immigration advice is significantly limited due to the lack of availability within accredited organisations.

Cuts to legal aid, a free provision, has created a crisis situation. Many private practice solicitors have given up legal aid work and organisations have folded due to financial pressure. This has created extreme pressure on the not-for-profit legal providers which far exceeds their capacity, meaning cases often have to be turned away.

Justice Together found that in England and Wales in 2025, there is a deficit of at least 57% between legal aid provision and eligible legal aid need.

No Recourse to Public Funds

No Recourse to Public Funds (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. Under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, 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, NRPF can cause significant hardship, that affects health, education, housing, and access to services.

Technically, people with NRPF are only eligible to access local authority support under statutory duties such as safeguarding children, disability, mental health conditions or illness. Due to the insecure status of people with NRPF, delivering support and identifying needs can be more complex, as people seeking sanctuary can have a lack of awareness, a fear, and/or a lack of resources to advocate for support.

It is important to note that local authorities often have greater responsibilities for people with NRPF, beyond their statutory duties, due to intersecting vulnerability. For example, if a family presents as homeless, with NRPF, they are not entitled to access temporary accommodation nor social housing. Yet, Children's Services will step in to fulfil their duties to safeguard and protect children, which in this case could mean supporting a temporary housing application to alleviate their homelessness.

There is no funding from central government to support local government to fulfil its duties towards people with NRPF, nor acknowledgement that that support usually goes beyond the remits of their usual duties. If families, and people more broadly, seeking sanctuary were on visas with recourse to public funds, they would be able to legally access public services, such as housing services, which would prevent unnecessary burden on certain services, such as Children's Services and Adult Social Care.

At the end of 2024, around 3.6 million people in the UK held visas that would usually have an NRPF condition. The exact figure is unknown, as the UK Government does not record how many visas with NRPF are granted.



Modern Slavery

Modern slavery is an umbrella term, referring to exploitation including forced labour, sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation and domestic servitude. People seeking sanctuary in the UK can be more vulnerable to modern slavery, either through using irregular routes to enter the UK, and/or the impact of living with an unstable immigration status.

As 'legal' routes can be difficult to access, people seeking sanctuary can be forced to take irregular routes to enter the UK, including using people smugglers to cross borders. People smuggling itself is not a form of modern slavery. However, people who are smuggled are at heightened risk of exploitation as they try to evade authorities. Smuggling and trafficking can be intersecting issues, as sometimes people being trafficked to the UK are smuggled across borders. Not all people who are trafficked are smuggled, and not all people who are smuggled are trafficked. If someone has been trafficked to the UK, they are eligible for potential support through the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), if referred by a first responder organisation, like a local authority.

Due to its central location and prosperity, Westminster has higher rates of modern slavery than many other areas of the UK. Modern slavery risks faced locally include the exploitation of domestic workers who enter the UK with their employers on the Overseas Domestic Worker visa. Many of the employers travel from wealthy countries to visit Westminster for holidays, shopping and medical treatment. Although many domestic workers brought to Westminster are treated with dignity and respect, there is also a significant cohort of domestic workers who are exploited in the country of original employment, and when they are in London. The Overseas Domestic Worker visa terms make it difficult for domestic workers to leave their employer if they are being exploited and stops them from personally accessing public funds. Many domestic workers are not aware of their rights, and it isn't until they encounter support that they realise they are entitled to protection.

Women (including transgender women) and a smaller number of men come from a wide variety of countries to work in the sex industry in Westminster. It is important to note that not everyone in the sex industry is exploited, and choice or perception of choice is a key aspect to identify if sex work is exploitative. However, some people working in the sex industry want to leave exploitative situations. This can be made more difficult if a person has an irregular immigration status, as they can lack access to support services and alternative job opportunities, and/or a fear of reporting their experiences to authorities.

More information about modern slavery, our approach, and commitment to ending modern slavery, can be found in our [Strategy for a Coordinated Community Response 2021-2026](#).

Between July 2018 to March 2024, The Passage Modern Slavery Service in Westminster received 204 referrals, with 69% of people referred having no recourse to public funds.



Building on Success

Our commitment to welcome has been upheld in various ways over recent years. However, the support we can provide varies due to national policy, such as the opening and closing of accommodation for people seeking asylum in our borough. Nevertheless, as Government schemes emerge, we have been, and will continue to be, committed to providing the best possible support to sanctuary seekers, accounting for various needs and addressing intersecting discrimination.

In Westminster, services adapt to provide support that responds to presenting need. There are many examples of best practice across the Council and within our local voluntary, faith and community organisations, for people seeking sanctuary in different demographics.

Below are some examples of our successful work to support sanctuary seekers over recent years:

Ukrainian Response

Our **Ukrainian Response Team (URT)** have continued to evolve their offer since the start of the Government's Homes for Ukraine programme, to best meet the needs of Ukrainians resettling in Westminster. Since 2022, we have welcomed 1,211 refugees via the Homes for Ukraine Programme.

The URT's work ensures that Ukrainian guests have a safe and welcoming environment in Westminster, and can access the support they need to integrate, learn and work. To deliver support, we collaborate closely with partners such as the **Centre for Anxiety, Stress and Trauma (CAST)** to provide mental health screening and support for new arrivals. **St. Mary's Ukrainian School** also works with us to facilitate mental health screenings and support for children and young people. The URT also screen sponsor applications and provide ongoing welfare support for sponsors and guests once they arrive in Westminster.



The **Westminster Employment Service** (WES) has also been involved in supporting our Ukrainian refugees, to promote pathways into employment, education and training. WES works in partnership with local providers, employers, and strategic networks to deliver a joined-up offer for people in Westminster. Work also focuses on ensuring that national and local employment initiatives are connected and accessible to refugees. Recently, we have created the **Learning, Employment and Progression programme** (LEAP), which helps Ukrainian refugees with CV writing and job applications, volunteering, work opportunities and understanding UK workplace culture. This complements the five year government-funded **Connect to Work** employment support programme for people in Westminster. This support can be tailored for participants throughout the programme, to support sustainable skills development, employment outcomes and independence. WES works to ensure that national and local employment initiatives are connected and accessible to refugees.

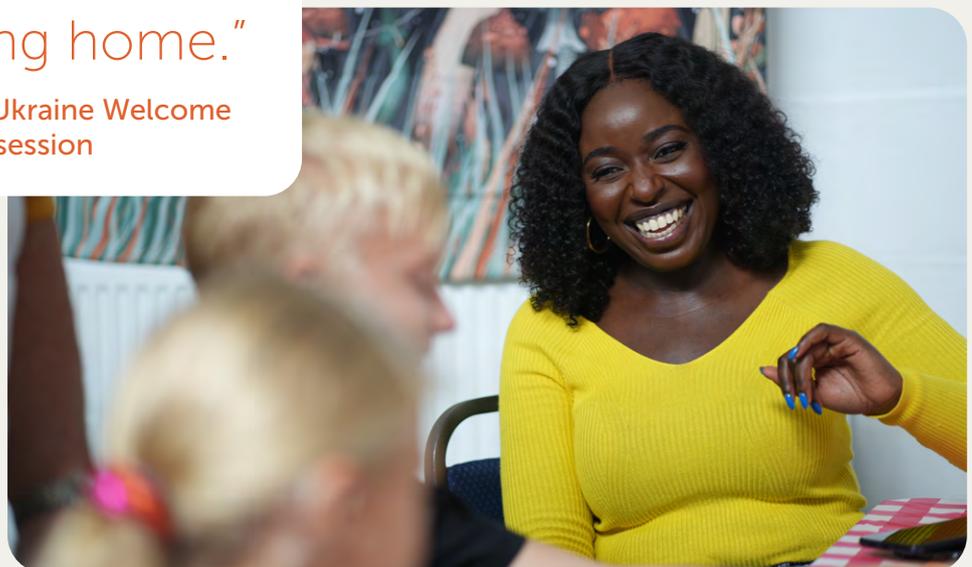
This work is also notably supported by the **Ukrainian Welcome Centre** (UWC). The Centre provides support for the nation's Ukrainian refugee population, but as it is situated in Westminster, we have worked with them to provide activities and targeted support.

The UWC provides a safe, friendly and empathetic space, providing a range of activities five days a week, including advice, English lessons and therapeutic and cultural activities. In partnership with Westminster **Age UK**, weekly sessions are run for Ukrainians over 50 to combat loneliness, promote integration and support them to become more active.

Further drop-in sessions and events are also provided at the Centre, to assist with the transition to independent living, deliver creative activities and provide volunteering opportunities.

“When I come to the Ukrainian Welcome Centre, it feels like I am coming home.”

Ukrainian guest at a Ukraine Welcome Centre engagement session



Afghan Resettlement

In September 2021, the Government stood up a 'bridging hotel' in Westminster to support those fleeing Afghanistan. The hotel was home to a total of 775 people and closed in March 2022. To support those living in the hotel, we developed a **'one stop shop' within the hotel**, that supported refugees with **GP registration, school admissions and uniforms, accessing work**, and other support, based on individual needs. This service was staffed by a multi-disciplinary team who were based in the hotel seven days a week.

To support the arrival of refugees, the **Social Value and Corporate Social Responsibility Teams** mobilised to put together an emergency appeal to local businesses, through Westminster's **Responsible Business Network**, to provide essential items for refugees as they arrived and settled into Westminster.

We worked with the Home Office and refugees to support their move-on to independent accommodation; providing tenancy guidance, rent guarantee and top-ups from Home Office funding. We successfully supported 50 families to access long term housing and to move-on from the hotel.

We are pleased to have supported eight families to remain living in Westminster, who have access to a bespoke support offer from the **Single Homeless Project**, who are a commissioned Westminster service, and each family is linked in with a support worker. The support worker delivers tailored support for issues related to landlord liaison and navigation of our education, health and benefit systems. Our current key worker is an Afghan woman, which has helped reduce barriers to access, such as language and cultural norms.

To further support resettlement, we will be utilising the **Local Authority Housing Fund**, a designated Afghan support grant from the Greater London Authority, to purchase six family-sized properties. This is an additional supply to provide safe and suitable housing for our Afghan families who are unable to secure their own housing in Westminster.



Support in and around Contingency Hotels

In 2023, the Home Office began to use hotels in Westminster to house people seeking asylum. These were known as 'contingency hotels'. For families and individuals, being in these hotels, especially as many are placed for an elongated period of time, is very challenging. Across the country, hotels often have quality issues with beds, food and support offers. These experiences can be (re)traumatising and can create a sense of isolation and distress.

In partnership with dedicated local organisations, we worked hard to support people in hotels in Westminster. Over the years that the contingency hotels were open, we developed a wraparound offer for people to access support, find opportunities and feel welcome in Westminster.

Many people living in the hotels were families with children, who were supported by two dedicated **Family Navigators** who supported with **school enrolments, ESOL classes, connection to support groups and activities, access to dentists and GPs** and emotional support for families living in really tough situations. For further support, our Family Navigators proactively linked our families with our Family Hubs, which provided more opportunities for support such as mental health, parenting and family learning, to make community connections and to access activities run for children.

Fears of impacting asylum claims often means that people seeking sanctuary do not speak out or challenge maltreatment or injustices. Exacerbating this, often people seeking sanctuary that do raise concerns are not listened to or dismissed completely. Our Navigators worked to build trust with families and would action and escalate complaints as necessary, such as those on nutrition, room quality and breastfeeding support.

The Family Navigators worked with a **Health Coordinator** to provide health advice, and supply vitamins for children to promote nutrition. A hotel menu audit was carried out by our **Public Health** team, in collaboration with the **Change4Life service**, in response to concerns around infant diet, weight loss, and the health and wellbeing of those living in the hotel. This provided nutrition advice for adults and children, and the findings were shared with the Home Office.



"The Family Navigators were a key support in making me feel safe as a single mum."

Mother supported by the Family Navigators when in a Westminster contingency hotel.

A skilled network of community organisations supported the work of our Family Navigators and Health Coordinator. To support those not part of a family group, **Unfold** delivered support through mentoring, training and advocacy. This helped with providing a sense of belonging, through trips to museums, galleries and parks, and assisting with any issues that arose in the hotel. Unfold also facilitated a **women's group** and **coordinated regular meetings with local groups and charities**, the Council and the Home Office to share information, join up services and offers, and provide a forum for concerns for those organisations supporting people seeking asylum.

Local businesses were also mobilised through our **Social Value and Corporate Social Responsibility Teams**, connecting companies with frontline organisations to expand access to volunteering, provide pro-bono advice and bring together technology, clothing and other essential donations which supported the families in Westminster's contingency hotels.

The network of community organisations also helped to bridge gaps in the provision at the hotels. This included hot meals and cooking services from local groups including **The Abbey Centre** and the **Cardinal Hume Centre**, with these services helping people and families to eat and make food they enjoyed. More targeted support for families was provided by **Little Village**, through supplying prams, baby clothing and other donations, **Dream Arts**, through creative therapy programmes, provided individual and group family therapy, and **St Vincent's Family Project**, providing a crèche and after-school club. The **Westbourne Park Baptist Church** also provided holiday clubs for children within the hotels, alongside a regular meal service.

The compassion of those across Westminster was central in supporting people within our contingency hotels. The history of migration and diversity that is central in our borough meant that residents assisted people seeking sanctuary with shared languages and clothes and resource donations. This culture of welcome is one that we seek to foster and maintain for all in our borough.



Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children

Though some children seeking sanctuary arrive in Westminster with their families, many enter without their parents, meaning they are taken into the care of the local authority. These children are known as unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC). Once they turn 18, they become known as a former UASC, as a Care Leaver.

Due to the unique characteristics of Westminster, we have had a long history of supporting UASC. This means that we have a holistic and developed offer to best meet their needs. Our latest **Ofsted** report noted that *"Children's needs, including those of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, are well understood"* and *"Many care leavers, including former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, have made significant progress in their education and careers."*

To support young people to resolve their asylum claim, our senior leaders have worked with the Home Office to reduce asylum decision waiting times, with 80 cases in 2022, reducing to 11 cases in 2025. We refer UASC who have extended family who they would like to regain contact with to our **Lifelong Links service** to try to reconnect them. Local data indicates that these reconnections contribute to improved emotional wellbeing through a stronger sense of identity.

We recently redesigned our services to create a dedicated **UASC and former UASC Care Leaver Team**. This means that children will continue to receive support from their social worker as they grow up. We know that this reduces the need for children and young people to re-tell their stories, which can include trauma within the context of seeking sanctuary.



Libraries for All

Our **Libraries and Archives Service** is currently progressing towards a 'Libraries of Sanctuary' accreditation. Many services in our libraries are already designed with the needs of people seeking sanctuary at the heart, providing opportunities to better understand and settle into Westminster. Libraries are a space where people can gain information on housing, healthcare, employment and digital inclusion, and be linked or referred to other services as necessary. Across our 15 libraries, we offer ESOL classes at multiple proficiency levels, English conversation groups and support for navigating work opportunities and accreditation pathways.

Library staff have received bespoke training from organisations including **Migrant Help** so that they are equipped to support people in Westminster seeking sanctuary. **Citizens' Advice Westminster** also hold sessions on topics such as the cost of living, immigration and housing within our libraries. 'Welcome to Bi-Borough Libraries' guides have been created for initial information and guidance, accessible both online and in print in multiple languages.

Every year, a programme of activities are scheduled for **Refugee Week**. Last year, events included author talks, storytelling sessions, art displays and food festivals. This was delivered in partnership with our vibrant community, charity and faith organisations, including **Compass Collective** and **Counterpoint Arts**. Alongside the regular support offered, these events provide a platform for refugees and asylum seekers to share their experiences, skills, and talents, reinforcing a sense of **community and solidarity**.



Modern Slavery Response

Survivors of modern slavery can also be seeking sanctuary with no recourse to public funds and can be exploited to remain in the UK. To combat this, our **Modern Slavery Exploitation Co-Ordinator** drives our Coordinated Community Response approach, which highlights the role that everyone plays in ending modern slavery. The Co-Ordinator oversees a modern slavery partnership, with meetings attended by up to 60 professionals from a variety of statutory and third sector agencies. The partnership's annual action plan has a deliverable action focused on supporting victims of modern slavery with insecure immigration status to safely report crimes, and support 'safe reporting' schemes.

Often, modern slavery and exploitation victims with an insecure immigration status are fearful of government services and support, so our coordinator works closely with trusted local voluntary and community organisations, including **Tamar**, **Kalayaan** and **Hestia**. We also commission a modern slavery service from **The Passage**, who provide accommodation to people before a referral to the NRM.

An example of positive joint working includes all Westminster parks having visible posters in Tagalog (the Filipino language, where most domestic workers come from) and English promoting the Modern Slavery Helpline. This was done as domestic workers frequent Westminster parks with the children they are looking after, so it is a good and safe space to share information with them.

We advocate for improved conditions for exploitation victims with an insecure immigration status and contribute to research on providing safer reporting mechanisms for crimes, and protections for those on Overseas Domestic Worker visas. Our Co-Ordinator's exemplary work gained the **Human Trafficking Foundation's Outstanding Contribution to Statutory Services award in 2025**.

Homelessness Response

For people who are granted refugee status in Westminster, accessing housing can be a barrier, due to the lack of affordable housing in the borough. This can lead to more rough sleeping and homelessness among new refugees.

In 2025, we launched a five-year **Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy**, which centres around four pillars of early prevention, crisis response, rehousing & recovery and resettlement. We have committed to work with those with Restricted Eligibility due to immigration status, to provide accessible information and advice, design and deliver specialist emergency interventions, and address barriers to re-housing including language and employment skills. We will also support people with Restricted Eligibility with additional health needs, to provide crisis accommodation and embed inclusive healthcare practises, in collaboration with health colleagues

Adult Education

The **Westminster Adult Education Service (WAES)** offers a range of support for people seeking sanctuary, to help reduce the barriers to education, social integration and resettlement. WAES ensures that sanctuary seekers are not only supported in the classroom, but also in their wider wellbeing, so that learning remains accessible and sustainable.

WAES offers bursaries to contribute to travel costs, childcare, course materials and other essentials. In partnership with **The Good Things Foundation**, WAES provides learners with SIM cards with 6 months of data, minutes and texts. This enables learners to stay connected with family abroad, access online learning platforms, use essential digital services, and participate more in everyday life.

In addition, WAES co-delivers a **Welfare Advice Service** with **Citizen's Advice Westminster**, providing regular, on-site drop-in sessions for learners. Over the past year, one of the most frequent areas of support has been **asylum and immigration guidance**, with specialist input from **Migrant Help** to ensure accurate, timely and trauma-informed advice.

WAES works closely with **local community organisations** to support learners experiencing food insecurity or financial hardship. This includes partnerships with neighbourhood food pantries and community hubs including **The Abbey Centre**, to offer affordable weekly food provisions, community meals and wellbeing activities. Learners are regularly signposted or directly supported to access these services as part of a holistic approach to inclusion and stability.

Through this integrated package of educational, welfare and community support, WAES plays a vital role in helping people seeking sanctuary in Westminster to learn, rebuild confidence, participate in their community, and take meaningful steps towards independence and belonging.



Developing our Workforce

Staff from across the organisation and at various levels of seniority have come together to provide the dedicated support for people seeking sanctuary in Westminster. Underpinning this, we have overarching commitments and training that allow continuous improvement in our support to people seeking sanctuary.

We believe that if the Council is a more inclusive workplace, it will help us to work with communities in a more inclusive way. Strategic action plans have been co-created with staff networks and EDI champion volunteers across the Council to drive forward tangible outcomes including improved support for disabled staff, and greater cultural competency.

We have taken care to increase diversity in recruitment panels, and a '**Reverse Mentoring**' Programme has been launched for senior leaders to learn directly from colleagues with different lived experience. Complementing this, teams can access an **EDI toolkit**, covering inclusive leadership, lived experience awareness training and inclusive language, to ensure their work can serve everyone.

In 2024, we launched our **Anti-Racist Action Plan**, which directly corresponds with our commitment to become a Council of Sanctuary, and protect those who flee to the UK.

One action focuses on training, which has been offered to all staff working for the Council in various ways in 2025, including a mandatory 'Inclusion' course for Council officers and training from **Race Equality Matters** on challenging microaggressions. Our commitments are also being embedded through anti-racism audits of policies, practices and cultures, to identify areas for improvement and accountability. This work has been recognised through the **Race Equality Matters Trailblazer Status**, which spotlights organisations that are implementing impactful solutions to drive race equality.

Inspired by *Leading in Colour: The Fierce Urgency of Now!* a resource aimed at white public sector leaders to promote and maintain inclusivity and cultural competency, in 2025, Bi-Borough Children's Services launched an **Anti-Racist Practice Standards** and Action Plan to guide our work with children and families. This toolkit was co-designed with staff and a diverse editorial board, setting out our commitments and how they will be achieved over the next five years. Our work in this space was shortlisted for a Local Government Chronicle Award in 2025 for Diversity and Inclusion. To ensure that our Children's Social Care workforce best reflects our children and young people, including our UASC, we have bespoke offers to develop staff from Global Majority backgrounds, such as the **Black and Asian Leadership Initiative**.



Bi-Borough Children's Services works with families and partners in a way that is relational, through our **systemic practice model**. This model focuses on relationships and patterns in our interactions, to make active choices that enhance our ability to work fairly, respectfully and efficiently. All staff that work with our UASC and former UASC Care Leavers are also trained in **Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience**, which ensures they can sensitively work with children and young people who have complex forms of trauma, due to their sanctuary seeking backgrounds.

We are pleased that in 2024, our **Housing** directorate showed interest in the systemic practice model and embarked on a five-year programme to introduce a cultural change into the way they deliver their services. To date, almost 240 staff have been systemically trained, with the aim to train all Housing staff by 2029. This training will ensure that officers across the Local Authority deliver services in a way that is person-centred and compassionate.

Across the Council, we have also committed to **#2035**, an ambition to transform Westminster into a healthier and fairer community by 2035. This is guided by Professor Sir Michael Marmot's research, which demonstrates that factors including early childhood, education, employment, housing & neighbourhoods, racism, climate and community connections & support significantly influence people's health & wellbeing. We have developed a **Toolkit** and a **Speaker Series** showcasing good practice, supported by the **Centre for Excellence**. This is supported by the **Westminster Community Change Makers** training, providing practical experience of co-producing with communities, together with the NHS, police and local voluntary and community organisations.



Our Commitments

This context, our vision and aims, and our ways of working, have helped us to develop our four central commitments to those who seek sanctuary in Westminster. These commitments will be delivered in a culturally-sensitive, person-centred way, to support people seeking sanctuary, regardless of background.

Our commitments have been explicitly informed by our engagement with those with lived experience, the staff that work with sanctuary seekers, and local community organisations. We have also reviewed our 'lessons learned' from recent programmes of support for people sanctuary and will continue to reflect on our practices to provide the best support possible.



Community and Collaboration

We will support our staff and our local network of professionals to work together to provide holistic support for people seeking sanctuary in Westminster. We will ensure that our work is guided by the voices and feedback of people seeking sanctuary, and that we continue to champion the needs of people seeking sanctuary locally and nationally.

Why?

People who are seeking or have sought sanctuary in Westminster have expressed the importance of having consistent community spaces to meet people, find out information and receive support. They have highlighted how being involved in community groups has enhanced their experience in Westminster, as it provides an opportunity to express their opinions and a greater sense of inclusion and belonging.

Professionals supporting people seeking sanctuary have emphasised that in Westminster, the best support comes from a joined up approach. Due to the fantastic array of activities and services available in Westminster, people seeking sanctuary can be supported in many ways. However, this is only possible if these organisations are aware of each other, to signpost people, and work together, to ensure the best outcomes can be achieved.





Health and Wellbeing

All people seeking sanctuary in Westminster deserve to be healthy and well, and we will make sure that this message is clear in our work, aligned with our #2035 commitments. We will work with partners in a sensitive way to identify and break down barriers to accessing support, to ensure people seeking sanctuary can access the support they need.

Why?

People who seek sanctuary often do so due to persecution, war, or other traumatic factors, which can affect their life experience. Added to this, embarking on a journey to seek sanctuary in the UK is a lifechanging, complex and often traumatising experience. Through an effective offer for people seeking sanctuary for their physical and mental health, we can help people rebuild their lives and feel supported. We heard that emphasising welcome in Westminster is meaningful, and we want to reinforce that everyone should feel included in our borough.

People seeking sanctuary also told us that support to access health services in the UK needs to be a supported process, and professionals want to be aware of the support available.



Housing and Accommodation

We will protect people seeking sanctuary to feel safe in where they live and address issues if they do not. When people receive their refugee status, we will help to maximise opportunities for settling into the UK.

Why?

People seeking sanctuary have told us that the place they live has a significant impact on their lives and ability to settle into the UK. Unfortunately, the standards of accommodation for people within hotel accommodation provided by central government is often inadequate and can cause further harm. To foster a culture of welcome in Westminster, we know we need to advocate for better accommodation solutions for people who enter the UK seeking sanctuary.

For people who gain refugee status in the UK, we have heard that refugees need to be informed about their options to secure sustainable housing. We, as the local authority, play a key role in this, setting out how to navigate housing pathways and drawing on government funding to help refugees in the borough find sustainable housing solutions.



Employment and Learning

We will work to help people seeking sanctuary have relevant opportunities to learn, access courses including ESOL and gain experience when in Westminster. We will work internally to learn and gain accreditations to best support people seeking sanctuary and deliver our services in a way that is anti-racist.

Why?

People seeking sanctuary have also told us that their sense of independence improves when they have opportunities to learn, volunteer and gain work experience in the UK. We have heard that people enjoy the opportunity to give back through volunteering, alongside learning more through educational courses. It is important to highlight that many people seeking sanctuary come to Westminster with significant expertise and experience. Whether people have existing qualifications or do not, we want to maximise opportunities wherever possible.

Internally, we also know that to support people seeking sanctuary, we need to be consistently learning and adapting to promote a culture that supports welcome. This can be aided by providing culturally competent services and anti-racist training across the Council, supporting our services to be the best and share our learning with others.



Action Plan

Our action plan sets out our specific actions to be completed within the first year of this strategy, and overarching actions to advance Westminster as a Council of Sanctuary. These actions will be delivered with **collaboration**, **transparency** and **inclusivity**, as per our ways of working.

Alongside these actions, the best practices reflected in this strategy for schemes still open for people seeking sanctuary will continue. As the external circumstances, including funding, national policy and law, are often changing for people seeking sanctuary, this action plan will be reviewed annually, to ensure that that it remains timely and supports us to meet the needs of those seeking sanctuary in our borough.

Community and Collaboration

Action	Timescale	What success looks like
Specific Actions		
Establish an oversight panel with people with lived experience to oversee the implementation of this action plan.	6 months	We are held to account, in line with our commitments and action plan, by people with lived experience from a variety of backgrounds. People seeking sanctuary in Westminster have a regular forum to have their voice heard.
Establish coordination meetings led by the local voluntary and community sector (VCS) to maximise capacity and facilitate information sharing.	6 months	Regular meetings led by local VCS that facilitate joint working and address issues for people seeking sanctuary. Local resources are maximised; duplication is reduced and our offer for people seeking sanctuary is strengthened.
Create a toolkit of support for people seeking sanctuary in Westminster, including an updated directory of services.	6 months	Professionals supporting people seeking sanctuary in Westminster know where to refer and signpost to. People seeking sanctuary access the support they need.
Review resources within the Council to maximise operational and strategic cohesion.	12 months	Across the Council, different teams are joined up in their work for people seeking sanctuary, and the vision set out in this strategy is delivered.
Overarching Actions		
Continue to be an active participant in local networks providing support for people seeking sanctuary.		We, as the local authority, sit as part of an effective network in Westminster providing holistic support for people seeking sanctuary, facilitated by collaboration.
Engage with the City of Sanctuary Local Authority Network.		Wherever relevant, we contribute to, learn from, and work with other Sanctuary accredited local authorities, to improve the lives of people seeking sanctuary in the UK.
Support local schools and organisations to become Sanctuary accredited.		With us as an example, other organisations and schools in Westminster undergo the process of meeting the standards and applying to become accredited, to embed the culture of welcome in the borough.
Support events that celebrate Westminster's cultural diversity and/or raise awareness for people seeking sanctuary.		As well as campaigning for change, attention is given to opportunities for joy and celebration, in partnership with our communities and local VCS, to foster a positive culture in Westminster for all, regardless of a person's background.
Support work towards a culturally representative workforce, with no pay gaps.		Our work on inclusive recruitment and closing the pay gaps mean that identity characteristics do not impact pay, and our Council reflects the communities it serves.

Health and Wellbeing

Action	Timescale	What success looks like
Specific Actions		
Reaffirm Westminster's culture of welcome through a collaborative and inclusive event to launch this strategy.	3 months	A seminal event for people seeking sanctuary and local partners is held to celebrate inclusion and togetherness.
Promote a culturally competent mental health offer for people seeking sanctuary in Westminster.	6 months	People seeking sanctuary, and the professionals that support them can easily access the offer for suitable and sensitive mental health and wellbeing services in Westminster.
Develop inclusive messaging to highlight Westminster as a Borough of Sanctuary.	6 months	The 'Westminster Welcome' is clear through our Council's communication, website and interactions with staff and will tackle misconceptions.
Overarching Actions		
Conduct our own assessments as and when new populations seeking sanctuary enter Westminster under government-funded resettlement programmes.		If the government launches/extends one of its asylum or refugee programmes, we will work with the people seeking sanctuary entering Westminster to ensure that we tailor our support to their needs. Our services meet the needs of sanctuary seekers and support their resettlement.
Develop our offer for trauma-informed training for staff to ensure this considers people seeking sanctuary.		Staff work in a trauma-informed way, equipped by training and awareness of the impacts for people seeking sanctuary from a variety of backgrounds, meaning they are worked with more sensitively.
Ensure people seeking sanctuary in Westminster continue to be supported by our modern slavery response where needed.		People seeking sanctuary who are survivors of modern slavery are supported to be safe in Westminster via the National Referral Mechanism and other partnership work with local organisations.
Continue health partnerships to address barriers for people seeking sanctuary.		People seeking sanctuary in Westminster understand the UK's health system, are registered for a GP, and can be supported with physical and nutritional issues.
Lobby for appropriate health and wellbeing funding for people seeking sanctuary in Westminster.		Alongside the culturally competent offer, there is the funding available to deliver this, to ensure that people seeking sanctuary have the chance to access services for a range of needs.
Continue our Child First approach for UASC in Westminster.		UASC in Westminster are treated as children, and we fulfil our corporate parenting role by supporting them, advocating for them, and setting them up for positive futures.



Housing and Accommodation

Action	Timescale	What success looks like
Specific Actions		
Create a guide to aid people seeking sanctuary with refugee status to navigate UK housing systems.	6 months	A resource that helps people with refugee status to know how to navigate social housing applications and the private rental market, that is accessible in a variety of languages and formats.
Utilise the Local Authority Housing Fund to provide six family sized properties for Afghan refugees in Westminster.	24 months	Families supported through the Afghan resettlement programmes are supported to access long term housing, via purchasing existing properties that meet their needs, delivered through this Fund.
Overarching Actions		
Leverage available funds to support resettlement of people seeking sanctuary.		Where possible, government funding is used to support people with refugee status to access affordable, sustainable and safe housing to support their resettlement.
Empower people seeking sanctuary to complain if they cannot live in safe conditions.		A culture where people seeking sanctuary feel they can speak up and be supported if their living conditions are undermining their safety.
Lobby the Government to ensure that people seeking sanctuary can live in safe conditions.		Working within regional and national forums, including the City of Sanctuary Local Authorities Network, to advocate for the safe placement of people seeking sanctuary.



Employment and Learning

Action	Timescale	What success looks like
Specific Actions		
Promote training offers and our Anti-Racist Action Plan to support people seeking sanctuary.	6 months	A training offer for staff that informs both on anti-racist practice and sensitive working and awareness for people seeking sanctuary.
Support our Libraries and Archives service to become Libraries of Sanctuary.	6 months	Our libraries become accredited and have a range of services and activities available and tailored to people seeking sanctuary, to help them settle into life in Westminster.
Embed awareness of people seeking sanctuary into corporate training.	12 months	Our corporate induction includes awareness raising on what being a Borough of Sanctuary means, and how to support people seeking sanctuary in different directorates.
Work with Westminster Connects to promote accessible volunteering opportunities for people seeking sanctuary.	12 months	People seeking sanctuary in Westminster are aware of and have access to a range of volunteering opportunities and have the support they need to access these opportunities. Volunteers seeking sanctuary are supported to be involved in the community, develop their social networks, foster wellbeing, learn or develop skills and improve their English.
Contribute to research on Modern Slavery Safer Reporting and Overseas Domestic Worker Rights, to ensure people seeking sanctuary in Westminster are protected.	12 months	Our contributions help to emphasise the importance of Safer Reporting and rights for Overseas Domestic Workers for survivors of modern slavery, to help influence policy change.
Continue the programme of implementing culture change in our Housing and Commercial Services directorates, including systemic training.	48 months	Our Housing and Commercial Services delivers a more inclusive and culturally competent service, with all staff in these directorates having completed systemic training.



Action	Timescale	What success looks like
Overarching Actions		
Support our libraries to become central community spaces for people seeking sanctuary in Westminster.		As Libraries of Sanctuary, Westminster's libraries will be a safe space for people seeking sanctuary to learn, attend events and have questions answered, and professionals will be able to signpost people to this offer.
Contribute to research for improving outcomes for people seeking sanctuary.		Relevant insights from our work for people seeking sanctuary will be part of research in this sector. People seeking sanctuary in Westminster will also be empowered to contribute to research.
Support people seeking sanctuary with skills and employment readiness.		People seeking sanctuary can access support from providers including WAES and WES in areas such as English for Speakers of Other Languages, understanding UK employment rights and systems, so that they can be prepared for, or secure successful employment.
Support people seeking sanctuary to services that can convert international qualifications.		People seeking sanctuary with qualifications gained outside of the UK can be aided to have their credentials understood in a UK context, to help them gain experience and work if they are eligible.
Coordinate social value commitments and business engagement to generate opportunities for people seeking sanctuary.		Funded ESOL provision, employment-readiness workshops and mentoring is available for young adults and adults seeking sanctuary. Specialist pro-bono support, such as in legal, HR or financial guidance will be available for people seeking sanctuary to access.



Appendix 1: Practice Highlights & Case Studies

Dream Arts

Dream Arts is a Westminster-based charity that fuses arts and therapy to empower mainly young people aged 6–25 to explore their creativity, build confidence, and improve wellbeing. Their work is especially impactful for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC), refugees, and families facing adversity.

Our UASC Team commission Dream Arts to provide further opportunities for skills development, therapeutic support and community building. They offer support through three core programme strands of 'Express', 'Experiment' and 'Expand'. Each of these strands takes a child first, person-centred approach, based on the interests of the individual, rather than an expectation that their sanctuary status as to be the central focus.

The majority of work with children and young people seeking sanctuary takes place within the 'Express Collective', a sub-strand of the programme. 50 children and young people are involved each year. Dream Arts begins with outreach with our UASC, engaging in existing sessions, to encourage involvement in a year-long project. Children and young people have the chance to collaborate on works such as drama, film and music, to reflect their passion and identity. Once completed, the projects are performed across the country, ending with the host: The Marylebone Theatre.

As well as the direct benefits to the children and young people involved in Dream Arts' programmes, the theatre tours are catered to people seeking sanctuary in the area, with partnerships with refugee and advocacy groups. Of the over 1,000 audience members that are toured to over the five years of the programme, 70% are from sanctuary backgrounds.

Dream Arts also share their innovative model of therapeutic arts and creative expression with those they turn to. So, though many of the benefits are felt for our populations in Westminster, better outcomes are being curated across the country.



A Family Supported by our Family Navigators

A single mother and her son came to the UK from Vietnam to seek asylum. Her son had Special Educational Needs and a diagnosis of autism; however, he had received no additional support before coming to the UK, meaning his developmental, social and educational needs were not being met.

The family were placed by the Home Office in a contingency hotel in Westminster. The Family Navigators realised that her son needed additional support and worked with the family to support the son into a special school in Westminster, and set up an Education, Health and Care Plan.

For the first time, her son began enjoying school, and instead of resisting starting the school day, he was resisting ending the day.

In fact, she was so grateful for the support provided by us, that she shared her story at Westminster City Council's 2025 Staff Conference.

She told us that "Coming to this country has changed my life, and I couldn't have done it without the support of the Family Navigators."

Ukrainian Welcome Centre

The Ukrainian Welcome Centre (UWC) is a single point of contact for Ukrainian refugees who arrive, settle and live in the UK. As the Centre is based just off Oxford Street, it is a central hub for Ukrainian refugees across London and in Westminster specifically. The primary language that is spoken in the Centre is Ukrainian, which fosters a sense of a 'home away from home' for Ukrainians who have had to flee their country due to war.

The Ukrainian Response Team work closely with the UWC to ensure that Ukrainian refugees in Westminster can be supported in a variety of ways, and their voices can be heard, to inform service delivery in the Council.

A regular programme of events is offered in the UWC, including weekly ESOL classes, arts and crafts sessions, pastoral support, alongside social activities and cultural presentations.

"The UWC staff & Westminster Council are the Ukrainian community. Your tremendous support with housing issues, the rich cultural programme, sports and other activities you organise for us greatly help us adapt to our new life and even if it is just for a moment, forget about the war." – feedback from a Ukrainian after a UWC session in May 2025.

Appendix 2: Engagement Summary

Many thanks to all of the people with lived experience, professionals and organisations who worked with us to share experience, provide feedback and suggest actions. The time you took with us has been invaluable for the creation of this strategy and action plan.

We took care to ensure that how we engaged with people with lived experience fit personal needs and comfort. This included one-to-one telephone conversations, meetings in known locations, and involvement in community activities.

A series of one-to-one meetings were also held with professionals within the Council and with professionals and volunteers in various local organisations within Westminster. Alongside this, we held focused discussions with teams and partners and reviewed our wealth of existing engagement and feedback.

Central themes that emerged in these conversations highlighted the importance of:



Feedback from Ukrainian Guests

"Thank you, Westminster Council, that cares and supports people in their complicated situations every day. I truly need this support. I especially appreciate the attention and help as it means I am not alone during this difficult time for all of us."

Feedback given at Ukrainian Welcome Centre, February 2025

"It is so lovely that you invite us to the picnic and my husband and I made friends from Ukraine. The Ukraine Response team work very hard to help us to be part of a community."

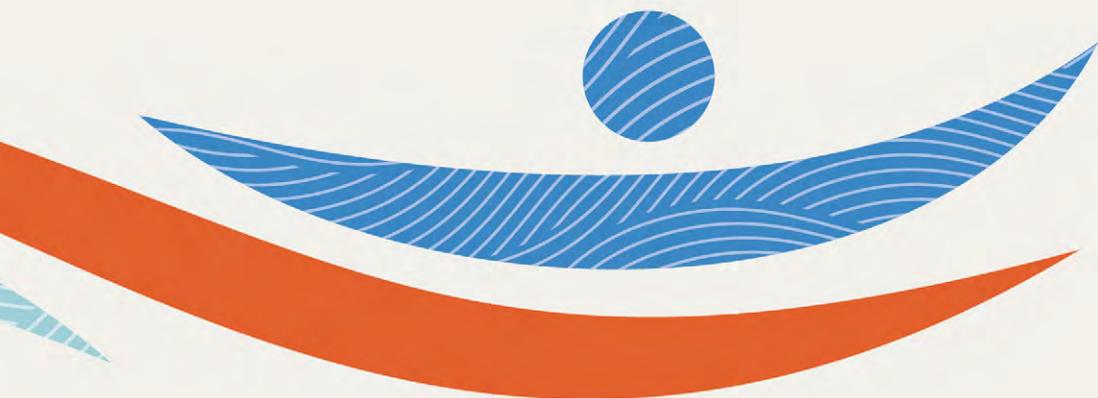
Feedback given after the Ukrainian Response Team's Summer Picnic, 2025

"Thank you, Ukraine Response Team, for making this day so special. I felt so honoured to be part of this wider community group and it made me feel so welcome."

Feedback given after the Ukraine Response Team's Sayers Croft event, August 2025

"It's useful to communicate with Westminster Council employees, who are interested in the life of Ukrainians, our problems and needs. They do everything to help us adapt to a new life. This is very important for us. Humanity and kindness are priceless for us now, as we are very vulnerable because of the war."

Feedback after engagement session at Ukrainian Welcome Centre, October 2025



Appendix 3: Key Terms

Term	Definition/Explanation
Asylum Seeker	A person who has arrived in a country and uses their legal right to request asylum. In the UK, people must apply to seek asylum, and their cases are reviewed in line with the United Nation's 1951 Refugee Convention to determine whether they can be given refugee status.
Bridging Accommodation	All accommodation secured by the Home Office to temporarily accommodate people who evacuated to the UK under the Afghanistan Resettlement Programmes.
Children's Services	A department within a local authority that support children and families. This can include Children's Social Care, support for children with disabilities, education support and supporting children in care.
Contingency Accommodation	All accommodation secured by the Home Office to temporarily accommodate people who have submitted an application for asylum and are awaiting a decision. This is also often known as Contingency Hotels, as hotels are most commonly used as accommodation.
Cultural Competence	A set of skills, attitudes and principles that allow people to understand, communicate and effectively interact with and deliver services for people across cultures. This requires understanding your own culture, and cultural differences and contexts.
Dispersal Accommodation	A longer-term temporary accommodation from the Home Office, expected to be offered when available after Contingency Accommodation. This is also for people waiting for their asylum claim to be determined.
Housing Teams	Housing teams often sit within a Local Authority, and provide services including assisting with housing applications, managing social housing properties and supporting social housing tenants. This can differ based on a person's local area.
Intersectional(ity)	A framework to understand how people's characteristics overlap and can create multiple connected forms of discrimination.
Local Authority	Also often known as a council, this is a part of the government that provides public services and facilities in a local area, including social housing and public health. The local services provided depends on the local area a person is living in.
Migrant	A person who leaves their country of birth or residence to settle in another country. The legal definition of a migrant is not fixed, and the reasons people migrate can be varied, from moving to be with family or study, to moving due to damage from a natural disaster.
Modern Slavery	A broad term, rather than a specific act. It can be understood as when a person is exploited by others, for personal or commercial gain. They can be tricked, coerced, forced, or lose their freedom in another way. This refers to many different forms of exploitation, which can occur together.

Term	Definition/Explanation
No Recourse to Public Funds	When a person cannot claim 'public fund' benefits, including Universal Credit, due to their immigration/visa status.
Public Health	Work that is done to help people to stay healthy and protected from threats to their health. This can be delivered individually, or with dealing with wider factors, such as food and diet.
Refugee	A person who has fled their own country because they are at risk of serious human rights violations and/or persecution. Refugees have a right to international protections and are defined and protected under the 1951 Refugee Convention. In the UK, refugee status currently grants a person five years leave to remain, and refugees gain the right to work, claim benefits, access mainstream education and housing.
Restricted Eligibility	A term often used within Housing that indicates people who have no recourse to public funds so have no entitlement to Housing Benefit or local authority allocation of social housing.
Sanctuary Seeker	A broad term for refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants with varied immigration status that migrate to a country for greater protection and safety.
Statutory Services	Certain services in the Council are expected to be provided by law. This includes children's safeguarding and social care. The duty to provide a service is obligatory, but the way it is delivered can be determined by the local authority.
Systemic Work	A way of working that focuses on relationships between people to understand how people's experiences can be impacted by them. This is based on the idea that we need to recognise we are all part of groups or systems, which impact how we act and interact with others.
Trauma-Informed	An approach to work that is based on the idea that trauma can affect individuals, groups and communities, and action has to be taken to prevent re-traumatisation. Practice should be focused on safety, trust, choice, collaboration, empowerment and cultural consideration.
Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children	A child (person under 18) seeking sanctuary who enters the UK without a parent or guardian and therefore are taken into the care of the local authority.



