



**Swansea City of Sanctuary**  
**Abertawe Dinas Noddfa**



# Co-Chair Report 2020-21

Alan Thomas, December 2021

It is over two years since our last AGM, in June 2019. During most of that time I have been privileged to work as one of two co-Chairs with Amber Esther, who sought sanctuary here from Pakistan in 2012. She has recently been granted leave to remain and has been busy arranging new accommodation, finding work and studying a course on entrepreneurship. We owe her huge thanks for the big part she has played in Swansea City of Sanctuary over the past nine years.

## Context

Since early last year, the immediate context for our activities has been the COVID-19 pandemic, with the lockdowns and restrictions on public events and meetings which it has brought.

Perhaps more important for the longer term is the policy context. The UK governments notorious “hostile environment” is set to worsen with the introduction of the Nationality and Borders Bill. This will criminalise those fleeing violence and discrimination for coming to the UK via “irregular” routes, like those crossing the Channel in small boats, while not doing anything to provide safe alternatives. It will create two classes of refugees with differentiated treatment based not on their need for protection, but on how they arrive. With the most recent deaths the number drowned in the Channel trying to reach the UK has risen to 166 since 2014, and this is likely to get worse.

The policy environment in Wales is much more positive, although unfortunately immigration policy is not devolved to Wales. Still, the Welsh Government has a “Nation of Sanctuary” policy, based on the principle that “Integration begins from Day One”. This means that, unlike in England, every effort is made to ensure that asylum seekers can access health and education services including free ESOL classes irrespective of their immigration status. Also, in Wales the “All In” policy for keeping homeless people off the streets during the pandemic is continuing whereas in England it has finished, and the Home Office has conceded that in Wales it will not restart evictions of those whose asylum cases have been decided until after talking to the Welsh Government.

Despite strong anti-migrant rhetoric from the government and mainstream media, public support for sanctuary remains strong and if anything increases in response to news such as the Afghan crisis and the Channel tragedy. The UK City of Sanctuary network continues to grow, with not only more and more local groups but more “streams” including libraries, gardens and football clubs of sanctuary to add to the more established schools, universities, health, local authority network and others. In Swansea we now have the first Art Gallery of Sanctuary in the UK in Glynn Vivian, and Gower College has become the first College of Sanctuary in Wales.

Our main event during this period was the tenth anniversary of Swansea as a City of Sanctuary. We had planned a year of celebrations starting in June 2020. Although much of it had to be cancelled or moved online, we have still been able to use the anniversary to increase support for sanctuary across our city and are pleased that Swansea is now also moving towards becoming a Human Rights City.

## Management Committee 2019-21

The following have been management committee members for some or all of the period since the last AGM. A big thankyou to all of them.

Amber Esther (Co-Chair)	Funmilayo Olaniyan	Sibu Mbwembwe (2020-21)
Alan Thomas (Co-Chair)	Carlos Ibarra Rivadeneira	Christiana Olagundoye (2021)
Kathryn Williams (Secretary)	Grace Rungua	Jami Abramson (2021)
Thanuja Hettiarachchi	Marilyn Thomas	Ibrahim Badawi (2021)
Saba Humayun	Krys Williams	Sezgin Erdem (2021)
Klaudia Krogulec	Tracy Anstee (2019)	Gemma Mughini (2021)
Almas Laesm	Desmond Bangura (2019)	Jose Cifuentes (2021)
Richenda Leonard	Jill Duarte (2019-20)	Alex Warlow (2021)
Domini Lewis	Carys Davies (2020-21)	

## Highlights

The following were highlights of the past two years. They are described in more detail in our [October 2021 Newsletter](#) and on our website:

- The City and County of Swansea signalled their ongoing support very publicly, with a flower display at the Civic Centre and a bench in the Dylan Thomas square in the Marina, and by lighting up the Guildhall in our colours on our actual anniversary on 21 June.



- Several supporters recorded anniversary greetings for our social media.
- Over 100 people contributed to beautiful [banners](#) celebrating our city of welcome.
- Our “Where Are They Now?” mini-project recorded stories of people who have obtained leave to remain and their experiences of education and employment.
- 250 people attended our online conference, held in partnership with The Open University, on “Improving Access to Higher Education and Employment for Forced Migrants” – see the recently published [report](#).
- Our final anniversary celebration - “We Are What Our Supporters Do” – was held as an online gathering of sanctuary seekers and supporters, with technical support from Glynn Vivian Art Gallery.



- “**Sanctuary**”, a film about Swansea as a City of Sanctuary by the Fusion project in the Cultural Services Department of the City and County of Swansea, was premiered at a socially-distanced event at the Taliesin Arts Centre. You can see it on YouTube, with either [English subtitles](#) or [Welsh subtitles](#).



## Supporters Activities

Several of our supporting organizations responded to the call to mark our anniversary, including:

- The University of Wales Trinity Saint David “[Art for the Park](#)” project displayed fabric bird houses made by asylum seekers as symbols of displacement and refuge.
- The African Community Centre produced a Cookery Book with recipes contributed by their members from all over the world.
- The Taliesin Arts Centre ran a number of workshops with asylum seekers which informed a film series “A New Kind of Home” to be screened in 2021-22.
- The Friends of Cwmdonkin Park planted an Orchard of Sanctuary.
- Ravenhill Park Friends put on a series of multi-cultural events and a flag and lantern parade.
- Both UWTSU and Swansea University initiated Sanctuary Bursaries open to all asylum seekers and refugees.



## Anniversary Sanctuary Awards

During the “We Are What Our Supporters Do” celebration, seven awards were presented.

Four of our most dedicated supporting organisations had their previous awards renewed:



**Oxfam Books and Music Shop Castle Street:** the first organisation to sign our pledge in 2008, the UK’s first Shop of Sanctuary in 2014, award renewed in 2017 and again this year.



**Ethnic Minorities and Youth Support Team (EYST):** previously awarded in 2016, and renewed this year.



**Swansea Council for Voluntary Service (SCVS):** previously awarded in 2016 and again this year, now also the host organisation for the *Better Welcome to Swansea* mentoring scheme.



**Unity in Diversity (UiD):** previously awarded in 2016, and renewed this year.

Two **new** awards were also made:



The **Fusion** project, from the City and County of Swansea’s Cultural Services Department.



**Glynn Vivian Art Gallery:** the UK’s first Art Gallery of Sanctuary!

Finally, a special Anniversary Award was given to an organisation which has always been one of our biggest supporters and arguably was instrumental in promoting Swansea City of Sanctuary in the first place, but has never itself applied for an award :



**Swansea Asylum Seeker Support Group (SASS)** including the **Share Tawe** voluntary hosting project



Since the celebration, there has been one more anniversary award:



**Gower College:** the first College of Sanctuary in Wales, which contributed to the new national Colleges of Sanctuary resource pack.

## Partnership Projects

As a principle, Swansea City of Sanctuary does not generally itself run projects directly supporting asylum seekers or refugees. However, where a gap in services is identified, we can be instrumental in getting something going and in some cases become a partner in a project run by one of our supporting organizations. Two of these are ongoing:

### A Better Welcome to Swansea

This is the continuation of a project started as part of the 2015-18 Wales Cities of Sanctuary project run for us by Displaced People in Action. It is now a partnership with SCVS and managed by them.

- The project welcomes and supports people seeking asylum and refuge in Swansea.
- It aims to reduce isolation, encourage active participation, promote well-being and enhance integration by matching newly arrived people with trained volunteer mentors.
- Mentors help people use buses, find best places to shop, and access services, social groups and community support, ESOL classes and other training and volunteering opportunities.
- Some mentors themselves have lived experience of seeking asylum; others have lived here for weeks, years or all their lives.
- In the last full year before lockdown over 300 people were supported; this year over 150.
- New volunteer mentors and interpreters are always needed; please get in touch if interested.

### SHARE Tawe

This was started by our Destitution Working Group and has involved different partners over the years including Swansea Quakers, Caer Las, Shelter Cymru, and most recently SASS, which has managed the project since 2015. It is now moving to become an independent project of EYST.

- SHARE Tawe finds safe, welcoming beds in local people's homes for people made destitute by the asylum system.
- Since the launch in 2010, some 100 people have been hosted.
- The stability provided by being hosted helps some guests prepare a fresh asylum claim and move back into Home Office accommodation.
- Many ex-guests move away or lose touch, but at least 25% have received leave to remain.
- A new pilot shared housing project has now started in partnership with Pobl Housing Association, with a two-bedroom flat for a refused asylum seeker and a rent-paying new refugee.
- In the few years before lockdown SHARE Tawe provided over 3000 bednights per annum. This has reduced to around 2000, with 7 people currently accommodated.
- The project is preparing for large numbers of people to be made destitute all at once, as soon as the pandemic subsides sufficiently for the "All In" policy to be wound down in Wales and Home Office evictions restart. More hosts will be urgently needed, as well as financial and other support; please get in touch if you might be able to help.

## Looking Ahead

As we enter our second decade and, hopefully, emerge from pandemic restrictions, we have much to build on while we may face uncertain and perhaps growing challenges.

### Legacy of Anniversary

- We have a stronger committee with more active members. We are putting in place a new organizational structure with a smaller group who will become trustees when we implement our plans for charitable registration plus a broader range of active roles both for committee members and other volunteers.
- We now have several active self-supporting subgroups (on sanctuary awards; communications; schools; parks and gardens; arts) and expect to increase this number as we take on new areas of work. Work in these subgroups provides some of the most important roles for our committee members and volunteers.
- Our communications are much improved, including circulars to pledged supporters; regularly updated website; facebook; twitter; and most recently Instagram and YouTube.
- We are now facilitating ongoing Swansea Asylum and Refugee Support Coordination Meetings. This is a result of having set up regular online meetings for those involved in supporting asylum seekers and refugees to exchange information and work on practical problems together throughout the pandemic,
- There is a broader network of support for the principles of sanctuary and inclusion. This brings potential for mobilization, as witnessed during the autumn of 2021 by the support shown for the vigil in solidarity with refugees following the Channel tragedy and also the mini-march for climate justice and refugees, both organised at very short notice.

### Opportunities

Given our strengthened position, there are a number of opportunities for new or expanding areas of work which we hope to be able to take up in the next year or so. These are areas for volunteers and supporting organizations to participate in small groups or set up new ones. Here are some of them:

- Schools and Universities of Sanctuary. Our schools group already has a programme with five schools working on becoming Schools of Sanctuary in 2022 and others set up for the following two years. As well, both Swansea University and UWTSD are following up their new Sanctuary Scholarship schemes by working towards University of Sanctuary awards.
- Potential for joint communications between asylum seeker and refugee support organizations. We are considering an initiative on coordinating communications between those involved in direct support for asylum seekers and refugees, especially on public awareness-raising and providing information both for those needing support and those looking for ways to help.
- Joint work on access to employment for refugees. This was one of the themes of our June 2021 conference, the report of which contains a number of recommendations which should be followed up. The work on arranging the conference demonstrated a level of interest in

this rather neglected area from several quarters, so we already have the makings of a good working group.

- Travelling Exhibition. Planning is well advanced for an exhibition, in partnership with Swansea Museum, Swansea University's Centre for Migration Policy Research and The Open University's COVID Chronicles from the Margins. The launch has been postponed, but hopefully the exhibition will be on display in several venues at different times during 2022, including the Waterfront Museum in June, which covers Refugee Week. There is potential for a programme of linked events by member organizations in each case.
- Football Club of Sanctuary pilot. We have been pleased to notice the commitment of Swansea City to anti-racism and been trying to make contact in the hope of gaining their public support. Very recently we have been approached by UK City of Sanctuary which has an initiative to enlist a number of the bigger clubs as "Football Clubs of Sanctuary" and hopes to include the Swans. Watch this space!
- Swansea World Singers. We had funds for local singing workshops and plans for a "Choral extravaganza" and re-started this international singing group. But winter weather and the resurgence of the pandemic have put these activities on hold again – temporarily, we hope.
- More work with parks and gardens. This is another area with a new working group and great potential. As well as the examples of Cwmdonkin and Ravenhill mentioned above, there are several other local groups interested in demonstrating their support for sanctuary and promoting their local parks or gardens as inclusive spaces for the whole local community.

## **Challenges**

In order to make the most of these opportunities we will have to overcome a number of challenges, both internal and external.

Internally we must continue to grow our organizational and volunteer capacity. We will be putting our new structure to work and carrying through the long-planned move to charitable registration. We also need to maintain our links with broader networks, both within Swansea with overlapping interest groups and those where we can make "common cause" and more broadly with the Welsh Refugee Coalition and through UK City of Sanctuary.

At the same time, the policy environment is likely to throw up some big external challenges. The likely post-pandemic surge in destitution, mentioned above, may be huge. Beyond that, the Nationality and Borders Bill will be coming into effect, with a generally dreadful impact on those seeking refuge. Its implications for us in Swansea are almost completely unclear.

Overall, we can and must continue to counter the false narrative that the public is hostile towards those forced to leave their homes and seek sanctuary here.

In fact, we can demonstrate that support for welcome and inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees remains strong both in public institutions and the public as a whole, whether they are forced to arrive via "irregular" routes or come through resettlement schemes.

We are proud to be  
a place of safety!  
Refugees are part  
of us!



**WE STAND**

**#TOGETHERWITHREFUGEES**