

Speech to OCC , Tuesday 12 th September , Mark Goldring, Director, Asylum Welcome

Seeking sanctuary in Oxfordshire

When I spoke to you 2 years ago, I urged the County to be more proactive in supporting refugees and asylum seekers;-to better engage with people with lived experience and with civil society to make our county a safe and positive place for sanctuary seekers in an ever more hostile national context.

Since then we have had thousands of arrivals on official resettlement schemes, from Afghanistan, Hong Kong and Ukraine. They have, by and large, been well supported. You, and other councils have significantly strengthened your teams and your staff have stepped up.

All credit: But this improvement is very much focussed on councils collaborating with government and each other, usually on official resettlement programmes. These aren't open to most people fleeing persecution across the world.

What we aren't yet doing locally is taking a holistic look at the lives and needs of these asylum seekers, people often fleeing violence in their own and now vulnerable members of our community. Especially with the growing Home Office backlog, and the ever more challenging national context, they are likely to be in limbo in our county for years.

Oxfordshire has about 600 asylum seekers in four hotels, as well as increasing numbers being housed in every district awaiting an outcome on their asylum claim. They include many Afghans not lucky enough to get on the 2021 flights. Most of their applications will eventually be approved so many are likely to settle locally.

The support that they receive is cause for concern; not able to work or find their own housing, with poor quality food, sometimes unhygienic conditions and little to do, often being moved at short notice, - ten local hotel residents recently received 24 hour notice of transfer to the Bibby Stockholm, postponed only because of health problems on the barge - one of our Burmese, Kassam clients and was due to join on this platform today, but yesterday received such a transfer letter and feels too upset to speak.

The plan to open an immigration detention centre at Campsfield, next year will add an extra set of injustices, the incarceration of people who have committed no offence but to seek sanctuary.

We should and we can do better. We will do so by challenging these developments. And by listening closely to sanctuary seekers and considering how locally we might better respond to their needs.

We will do better by working with the voluntary sector; the council is so far neither realising its potential of nor supporting it effectively. The Local Authorities of Sanctuary scheme, that you are being encouraged to explore in the resolution later today is a really positive, systematic and realistic way of developing a plan for this.

I hope that you will support it.