

THE ISSUE

Research shows that British people want to provide sanctuary to people fleeing persecution, and that they feel even more positive when they have met a person seeking sanctuary.



WHAT CAN I DO?

Befriend a person who is seeking sanctuary in the UK.

WHAT CAN I DO?

Invite a person who has sought sanctuary to give a presentation on their experiences to your local group, branch or congregation.

THE SOLUTION

Encourage encounters between people seeking sanctuary and UK residents.

WHAT CAN I DO?

Encourage local sports clubs or cultural organizations to participate in events that bring together settled communities and people seeking sanctuary.

65.7% OF RESPONDENTS SAID THAT IT WAS 'VERY' OR 'QUITE' IMPORTANT FOR THE UK TO PROVIDE SANCTUARY TO PEOPLE FROM ABROAD WHO ARE FLEEING PERSECUTION.

For more information and advice on how to perform these actions visit: www.citizensforsanctuary.org.uk

CITIZEN ACTION TOOLKIT 4: Personal Encounters

As a country we are very proud of our long tradition of providing sanctuary.

The truth is, though, that we rarely get a chance to meet people who have fled persecution face-to-face and see the great benefit that sanctuary brings.

But there are thousands of people willing to share their experiences, and the more we encounter them, the stronger our pride in sanctuary will be.

What will I find in this toolkit?

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10 WAYS FOR CITIZENS TO SAVE SANCTUARY



CITIZENS
for sanctuary

Independent Asylum Commission
citizens

This toolkit is a supplement to the '10 Ways for Citizens to Save Sanctuary' booklet. You can download an electronic version or order copies of the full booklet at www.citizensforsanctuary.org.uk.

THE ISSUE

Research shows that British people want to provide sanctuary to people fleeing persecution, and that they feel even more positive when they have met a person seeking sanctuary.

The Facts

65% of people are 'very' or 'quite' proud of the UK's tradition of providing sanctuary to people fleeing persecution.

66% of the British public agree that it is important for the UK to provide sanctuary to people fleeing persecution.

24% of the public feel 'uncomfortable' about 'asylum seekers', 15% feel 'angry', 18% feel 'accepting' and 5% feel 'welcoming'.

Links

For more information on the Independent Asylum Commission public attitudes research, see:

www.citizensforsanctuary.org.uk/pages/reports/report1/2_PublicSupport.pdf

The Power of Encounters

The Independent Asylum Commission conducted the most in-depth research into public attitudes to people seeking sanctuary ever undertaken.

That research consisted of focus groups, a public consultation, an opinion poll, and individual interviews. The research showed that the British people want to provide sanctuary to people fleeing persecution, but often express negative or hostile feelings towards those they identify as 'asylum seekers'.

The research found something else too – the single most important factor which determines how a member of the public responds to people seeking sanctuary is a personal encounter. The most hostile opinions were expressed by those who had never met a person who had fled persecution, and was based on a story they had read in the newspapers, Chinese Whispers in the local community, or a community grievance that was blamed on 'asylum seekers'.

Conversely, the most positive opinions were expressed by those who had met a person seeking sanctuary! This is true of a lot of things – the more contact we have, the more we respect and understand others. Without this exposure we make unfounded assumptions because we don't know or understand the whole picture. As a result, people seeking sanctuary are often thought of as ignorant, uneducated, illiterate and intolerant of 'British-values' and the English language. When you meet them in person, you discover that this couldn't be further from the truth!

Many who have fled persecution and made the perilous journey to our country have succeeded entirely *because* they are intuitive, clever, resourceful people, who value our society and its values and who want to integrate and lead fulfilling lives. Many of them want to be understood and accepted, and want to show their respect and gratitude for the sanctuary the UK offers.

Fear of the unknown and a perceived lack of commonality make it difficult for relationships to be formed, but this can easily be overcome. The more we meet, engage and listen to those seeking sanctuary, the deeper and more authentic our understanding will become. This will enable us to spread accurate information about people seeking sanctuary, and will help to dispel fear and misunderstanding.

The power of personal encounter cannot be beaten!

THE SOLUTION

Encourage encounters between people seeking sanctuary and UK residents.

The Facts

71% of the public have never met and spoken to a person seeking sanctuary in their local area.

Only 6% of the public think that people seeking sanctuary have had a positive impact on their local area.

59% of the public think that meeting a person seeking sanctuary would make them feel more positive towards them.

Further information

For guidance on how to do successful one-to-one or 'relational' meetings then email sanctuary@cof.org.uk.

Doing it One-to-One

So, if personal encounter is the best way to encourage the public to support sanctuary, then we must find ways to facilitate those encounters.

Ironically, if the number of people seeking sanctuary in the UK was as high as some newspapers would have us believe, then this might be an easier task. However, the number of people seeking sanctuary in the UK is only about 25,000 applicants a year at the moment. Given that the population of the UK is 60 million, that would mean that every single person who sought sanctuary in the UK would need to meet 2,400 Britons!

The most powerful and enduring encounters are one-to-one. While not everyone in the UK will have opportunity, there is no reason why you shouldn't if you haven't already. Start by making an effort to meet and engage with those seeking sanctuary, and endeavour to fully understand their situation. Once you have built up trust and friendship, then you can encourage others to do the same.

Set up encounters in informal settings, and really get to know the person. Don't just ask the where, when and how questions, but ask the *why* questions. Ask the questions that will unveil their hopes and dreams, and will give you insight into what makes that individual tick.

The more you do this, the more you will see that people seeking sanctuary are individual human beings, just like you and I, and are not part of a seething mass, or 'flood'.

A few years ago a group of people were discussing how they might organize an innovative event for Refugee Week in Parliament. Instead of hosting a reception or a speaker meeting, they decided to host a series of encounters between MPs and refugees from their constituencies. This was a powerful experience – for the refugees, many of whom had never been to Parliament before and appreciated the opportunity to have tea on the famous Terrace overlooking the Thames and talk face-to-face with their representative. But it was even more powerful for the MPs, many of whom see people seeking sanctuary every week in their constituency surgeries, yet are so focused on sorting their 'problems' that they do not have the time for a real personal encounter.

Read on for more information on how to facilitate encounters.

WHAT CAN I DO?

Befriend
a person who is
seeking sanctuary
in the UK.

The Facts

Befriending is a process whereby two or more people come together with the aim of establishing and developing an informal and social relationship ... ideally the relationship is non-judgemental, mutual, purposeful and there is commitment over time.

Links

Some examples of befriending projects:

<http://www.smileproject.org.uk/>

<http://www.mrcf.org.uk/#face>

<http://www.timetogether.org.uk/>

Look out for others in your local area.

Let us know if you are struggling to find any in your area – email sanctuary@cof.org.uk.

Imagine...

You arrive in a strange country having fled persecution in your home country. You have sought sanctuary and have to navigate a complex bureaucratic procedure, deal with lawyers and caseworkers, sort out housing, and prepare for interviews with the Home Office.

Your case may take months to get a result, and then if you are lucky enough to be granted refugee status you will need to move house, find a job and navigate a whole new complex bureaucracy. Throughout this time you find yourself isolated, with few sources of support and little opportunity to meet others in the community.

This is the experience of many people who come to the UK in search of sanctuary. The need for local people who understand the way the 'system' works, who can act as a bridge between different communities, and who can mentor a person as they begin to adjust to the UK, is enormous. It is a great need, but the experience is also a great privilege.

So, if you are outgoing, patient, attentive and (above all) keen, then why not make a real commitment to those seeking sanctuary, and become a befriender?

Befriending offers supportive and reliable relationships to those seeking sanctuary, in a way that goes beyond just a simple "How are you?". It is a regular series of encounters that builds trust and develops relationships which last. They offer support to the isolated; trust to the misunderstood; and insight into the hopes and fears of others. And what's more, you don't have to do this alone.

There are several organisations that offer you the training, support and contacts that you will need. They ask a commitment of about 5 hours a month (that's 1 hour in every 144!), and for a desire to build productive relationships that boost the confidence, and assist the integration of those seeking sanctuary into society. You can engage in activities like working on a CV or developing a work strategy, helping with forms and opening a bank account, gaining language skills and helping with access to education.

The scheme will help you too. As a mentor, you will gain great skills in communication and relationship building. You will learn more about people and the world and the situations different people face. You may even start to learn a new language!

And best of all, you will have succeeded in creating a real and enduring personal encounter in your community. Encourage your friends to do this too. You can change minds – one by one!

WHAT CAN I DO?

Invite a person who has sought sanctuary to give a presentation on their experiences to your local group, branch or congregation.

The Facts

“We had a genuine asylum seeker coming to talk to the children at school. It was interesting – my daughter is all for asylum seekers now and is only 11 years old! Information is a good thing.” Glasgow focus group.

Further information

Possible opportunities for testimony:

- At a coffee morning
- As part of a school assembly
- During a Sunday service or after Friday prayers
- Over a communal lunch
- At a social function or party
- At a public event such as the opening of an exhibition
- During Refugee Week (3rd week of June)

Share the message and encourage testimony.

Not everyone can befriend a person seeking sanctuary – so how can we encourage encounters with a larger number of people?

An obvious method is to ask a person seeking sanctuary to meet with a group of local people. We have found that one of the most powerful ways of changing opinions is to hear the testimony of someone who is seeking, or who has sought, sanctuary.

When an authentic testimony is delivered with honesty and conviction by a person that people can see, the effect can be quite profound. People listening often have to challenge their preconceptions of ‘asylum-seekers’, and for many this will be the first time they have met someone seeking sanctuary face-to-face.

If you know someone seeking sanctuary, ask them sensitively if they would be interested in giving a public testimony. Remember, they may be afraid or uncertain about the prospect of opening up to strangers, so you must respect their initial reaction. However, if you ensure that the audience will be receptive and understanding, then you can pave the way for encouraging them to open up and share their story.

You can work in advance to prepare the testimony, writing down key points, and drawing out details and feelings that they may not initially disclose – but be sure not to pry issues that are too sensitive for them to talk about. It is a good idea to rehearse the testimony, and ensure that the person is comfortable in the venue where it will be delivered. And always ensure that you are there to support them during the testimony, and to moderate any questions.

Just remember this is not just the telling of a story, or a bid for sympathy - this is the building of trust and the creation of a strong and public relationship between people who may otherwise have never met. It may even be that the audience – be it school, or church or mosque – feels moved to take action based on this testimony.

United by their greater understanding of the situation, they may want to lobby their MP to sign the *Sanctuary Manifesto* before the next election, participate in the voucher exchange scheme or get involved in one of the other actions from ‘10 Ways for Citizens to Save Sanctuary’!

WHAT CAN I DO?

Encourage local sports clubs or cultural organizations to participate in events that bring together settled communities and people seeking sanctuary.

The Facts

Alhassan "Al" Bangura is a Sierra Leonean refugee who plays football for Brighton & Hove Albion as a midfielder, on loan from Championship side Watford.

Christopher Wreh – the former Arsenal footballer is a Liberian refugee.

Fabrice Muamba – the Birmingham fans used to chant: Muamba, Oh-oh,
Muamba, Oh-oh,
He was a refugee,
Now he's quality, Muamba, Oh-oh!

Links

London Citizens

www.londoncitizens.org.uk

Doing Community Cohesion

An awful lot has been written and said about 'community cohesion'. There are many programmes and events which seek to heal community divides by celebrating different cultures and helping settled communities to better understand new communities.

Despite these valiant efforts, the Independent Asylum Commission's Public Attitudes Research Project shows that they have not succeeded in bringing together settled communities and people seeking sanctuary.

Rather than just celebrating multiculturalism or talking about community cohesion, we need to *do* community cohesion. Doing community cohesion means bringing diverse people together in purposeful acts to improve their local areas and address the issues that affect them.

In London we do this through community organising, forming an alliance of civil society institutions such as churches, schools mosques and refugee organisations, to pursue the common good of all in the community. If you are based in London you can 'do' community cohesion by getting your church, school, mosque or refugee group to join London Citizens.

But there are other ways of 'doing' community cohesion too. It was once said that sport is the 'universal language' – an unspoken activity that binds us together as both players and spectators. It could be a really useful way to bring together settled communities and those seeking sanctuary, and is a lot of fun at the same time.

Why not encourage local sports clubs and social groups to host a match or small tournament? Get community groups to put forward a team, or just get people along and select mixed teams on the day. This creates a safe and trusting environment for people to engage in a fun and universal activity.

Of course, you needn't choose football or even a sport – it could be a joint allotment project or anything that brings people together in a common endeavour.

TOP TIP: Try to avoid events that ask the settled community to celebrate someone else's culture. Instead find something that members of both communities can do together.

Resources

Title

Text

Please let us know how you get on with these actions. We will collate all of the results from across the country and add them to our website so we can see all the change we have accomplished.

If you need advice or support, please contact carina.crawford-rolt@cof.org.uk.

Good luck!