

Public Attitudes Recommendations

Restoring public support for sanctuary in the UK

There is marked contrast between the public's support for the concept of sanctuary for those fleeing persecution, and their overwhelmingly negative perception of the asylum system. There is an urgent need to restore public understanding, support and confidence in the way that sanctuary is offered in the UK in order to safeguard long-term support for sanctuary and to preserve the UK's centuries-long tradition.

Politicians, government, media and civil society must work together to develop and promote a 'centre ground' for sanctuary in line with mainstream British values

- ◆ There should be a 'sanctuary summit' in which key figures from politics, media and civil society meet and co-operate on a realistic strategic approach to communicating sanctuary to the public, focusing on the moral and humanitarian imperative of offering sanctuary to those fleeing persecution; distinguishing sanctuary very clearly from economic migration; restoring public confidence in the asylum system; improving the availability and quality of information on sanctuary for the public; and promoting tolerance and neighbourliness towards those seeking sanctuary.
- ◆ A small team of communications specialists should be created to co-ordinate delivery of projects to further the outcome of the 'sanctuary summit' and to be a resource for government, media and civil society on public attitudes to sanctuary.
- ◆ The development and expansion of the 'City of Sanctuary' movement⁵ is expressly to be encouraged as one way of forming a centre ground for sanctuary at a local level.

There must be an emphasis on the moral and humanitarian imperative of offering sanctuary through information and education in order to secure long-term public support

- ◆ No child should leave school without being aware of the UK's past and present role as a safe haven for those seeking sanctuary.
- ◆ A permanent museum charting the history and contribution of those who have sought sanctuary in the UK should be supported and promoted to schools, and a complementary mobile exhibition created for use in communities across the UK.
- ◆ Britain's first museum charting the history and continuing contribution of those who have sought sanctuary – at 19 Princelet Street in London should be granted national status and be supported and resourced by both national and London government and by charitable trusts.

I feel proud that we offer sanctuary to those who need it – it is one of the things that make you proud to be British.”

**Plymouth focus group,
35+, C2DE**

We had a genuine asylum seeker coming to talk to the children at school. It was just really interesting – my daughter is all for asylum seekers now and she is only 11 years old! Information is a good thing. Perhaps we would accept them more.”

**Glasgow focus group,
35+, C2DE**

I don't understand the terminology – asylum seeker, refugee, economic migrant, illegal immigrant. All I know is that they are all 'bloody foreigners'."

Plymouth focus group, C2DE, 35+

I would think differently about asylum seekers if there were more positive stories in the papers and if we had more opportunity to mix with them."

Barking and Dagenham, 35+, ABC1.

- ◆ Editors, journalists and broadcasters should be commended for regularly stating their support for the concept of sanctuary, but should be aware of the impact of continually negative stories on public attitudes to those seeking sanctuary, and ensure that positive stories are also highlighted on occasion. Refugee Week is one example of a possible 'hook' for positive stories.
- ◆ Support should be made available to develop and expand or adapt successful mechanisms for improving public understanding of sanctuary, such as Refugee Week, refugee talks teams that visit schools, and the City of Sanctuary movement.

The concept of sanctuary must be distinguished very clearly from economic migration, through avoiding the term 'asylum' and choosing appropriate and understood terminology

- ◆ Those wishing to communicate effectively with the public should avoid using the term 'asylum' or 'asylum seeker' if they wish to convey messages about people seeking sanctuary from persecution.
- ◆ Politicians, journalists and those engaging in public debate on this issue should understand the general confusion of terms such as 'asylum seeker', 'economic migrant' and 'irregular migrant', and, before making a contribution, understand how their words are likely to be received and interpreted by the public. Great care must be taken to be precise in the language used.

The availability and quality of information for the public on those seeking sanctuary must be improved

- ◆ Local authorities, UKBA and the voluntary sector should co-operate to devise effective strategies to communicate with the settled communities in asylum dispersal areas.
- ◆ Resources should be invested in balanced information from an impartial source that helps local people understand who the newcomers are, where they have come from, why they are here, what their entitlements are, and what distinguishes them from economic migrants. Such information should be provided with the aim of enabling the public to engage in informed debate about the concept of sanctuary and the asylum system.

Efforts must be made to promote tolerance and neighbourliness towards those seeking sanctuary and assist integration at a local level

- ◆ Local authorities, voluntary, faith and CITIZEN groups should work together to form sanctuary welcoming groups to bridge the divide between those seeking sanctuary and the local population. The promotion of positive encounters between communities and the involvement of local people at an early stage is specifically to be encouraged.

Principles for rebuilding public confidence in the asylum system

To rebuild public confidence in the asylum system, it must reflect mainstream British values. The Commission's extensive CITIZENS SPEAK consultation, its Public Attitudes Research Project, and People's Commissions, have revealed the following core values in relation to sanctuary:

1) People fleeing persecution should be able to find sanctuary in safe countries like the UK.

This principle must be the foundation of asylum policy. This was considered the most important value by over 85% of People's Commissions. There was consensus in all 16 focus groups that the UK should provide sanctuary to those fleeing persecution. No private or public witness to the Commission questioned this fundamental commitment. Even pressure groups who believe the asylum system is too generous agree with this principle.

Importantly though, there is a strong value of fairness related to this principle: the UK should take its fair share of those who are in greatest need of sanctuary, but it must be in the context of transparent international rules and other countries taking their fair share too.

2) The UK should have an effective system for controlling our border that lets those seeking sanctuary in, as well as keeping irregular migrants out.

Securing the UK's border was seen as a high priority by some and as an important principle by almost all People's Commissions. However, most accepted the principle that letting some people who do not require sanctuary into the country was a price worth paying for allowing those who needed sanctuary to reach the UK. There was also a strong consensus in the Public Attitudes Research Project that the government needed to demonstrate effective control over borders.

3) The UK should have a fair and effective decision-making body that takes pride in giving sanctuary to those who need it and denies it to those who do not.

Ensuring that there is an asylum system that is demonstrably fair, effective, under control, and one that makes sound decisions, is important for rebuilding public confidence in the asylum system. The Public Attitudes Research Project identified concern among the public about the consistency of decisions; some are interpreted as too soft and others as unduly harsh.

4) People seeking sanctuary should be treated fairly and humanely, have access to essential support and public services, and should make a contribution to the UK if they are able.

There was consensus that people seeking sanctuary should have access to essential support and services until their claim has been resolved – all of the focus groups and all but one of the People's Commissions recommended this as a key principle. However, there were strong concerns expressed in the CITIZENS SPEAK consultation about perceived preferential treatment for asylum seekers in the allocation of housing, goods and public services. There was a strong consensus

We should offer sanctuary but other countries should do their bit as well. Every country and every area has got to share the burden.”

Hackney focus group, ABC1, 18-35

in the Public Attitudes Research Project that no-one, regardless of status, should get ‘something for nothing’. Those seeking sanctuary should be expected to make some contribution through work if they are able.

5) Once a decision has been made, the UK should act swiftly, effectively and in a controlled way – either to assist integration or to effect a swift, safe and sustainable return for those who have had a fair hearing and have been refused sanctuary.

One of the strongest messages to emerge from the CITIZENS SPEAK consultation was that hospitality is being abused by those who do not require sanctuary. The Public Attitudes Project found that the public are concerned that people ‘disappear’ if they are denied sanctuary, and cannot believe that the government does not have an effective system which ensures that refused asylum seekers leave the UK. Many participants in the focus groups were alarmed that the government should cut off support and give up control of asylum seekers by failing to ensure swift return or to monitor their presence in the UK.

The People’s Commissions broadly favoured the principle that if the person seeking sanctuary has had a fair hearing, there should be an effective and humane mechanism for ensuring that a person leaves the UK – but that up to that point their essential needs should be met.

