

P-06-1174 Stop the Welsh government & public groups from making Wales a Nation of Sanctuary

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 13 Medi 2021
Petitions Committee | 13 September 2021

Reference: RS21/0497-4

Petition Number: P-06-1174

Petition title: Stop the Welsh government & public groups from making Wales a Nation of Sanctuary

Text of petition:

The Welsh government and public groups, are actively promoting Wales as "a nation of sanctuary" for foreign nationals (refugees and asylum seekers) to come and live in Wales. This is NOT the will of the majority of the people in Wales. The Welsh government have yet to consult with their constituents (ie the Welsh nation), regarding this matter. If Wales becomes the Nation of Sanctuary, the Welsh heritage will very quickly be eroded away.

On <https://wales.cityofsanctuary.org> they state (and i quote) "We're pleased we already have the support of Welsh Government and have started some really exciting work with universities, the health service and trade unions". Just because a very small minority of people in Wales, are willing to open their arms, homes and country to refugees and asylum seekers, that DOES NOT represent the majority of the Welsh nation.

We as a nation simply can not sustain any more refugees and asylum seekers to be placed/housed in Wales. The Welsh government can not afford to look after people and families that are struggling to put food on the table or a roof over their heads as is. There are thousands of people/families (including children) that are homeless in Wales and require urgent help. The money saved by not accepting these refugees and asylum seekers into Wales, could go towards helping people of Wales that really need it.

We (the signed) want to abolish Wales as a nation of sanctuary.



1. Background

1.1. Historical context

The protection of people fleeing their homelands began in 1921 when, following the First World War, the League of Nations began coordinating a set of international agreements to provide travel documents to those persons.

Following the sharp increase of displaced persons during and after World War II, a diplomatic conference in Geneva resulted in the 1951 Refugee Convention, which was later amended by a Protocol in 1967. The United Nations' Refugee Agency (UNHCR) oversees both agreements, which have 149 state parties and are the main international agreements for the protection of refugees.

The core principle of the Refugee Convention is 'non-refoulement', which asserts that a refugee should not be returned to a country where they face serious threats to their life or freedom.

Non-refoulement is now considered a rule of customary international law. This means that it has universal application to all states, regardless of the existence of an international agreement or their status in relation to it.

The protection of refugees is also indirectly enshrined in other regional agreements to which the UK is a party, such as the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR). For example, Article 2 guarantees the right to life and Article 3 provides for freedom from torture and inhumane or degrading treatment. Together, they prohibit 'indirect refoulement', which means an expulsion to a state from where migrants may face further deportation without a proper assessment of their situation.

1.2. Definitions

According to the Refugee Convention 1951, a refugee is:

a person who is outside their country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution.

This differs from the definition of an asylum seeker, which is:

a person who has crossed an international border in search of protection, but whose claim for refugee status has not yet been decided.

An asylum seeker is therefore someone who has arrived in a country and asked for asylum. Until they receive a decision as to whether or not they are a refugee, they are known as an asylum seeker.

In the UK, asylum seekers **do not have the same rights** as a refugee or a British citizen. For example, people seeking asylum aren't allowed to work or claim benefits.

1.3. UK Government support for asylum seekers

The **UK Government provides** asylum seekers with housing, financial support and access to services if they meet the **eligibility requirements** (that they are homeless or do not have money to buy food).

Equivalent provision is made for those whose **asylum application is refused**, who must meet **different eligibility requirements**.

Housing

Housing is allocated by the UK Government and asylum seekers are not able to choose where they live.

Financial support

Asylum seekers **receive £39.63 per week** per person in the household for food, clothing and toiletries. This allowance is pre-loaded onto a debit card each week..

Additional sums are provided to pregnant mothers and mothers of young children, as follows:

Pregnant mother	£3
Baby under 1 year old	£5
Child aged 1 to 3	£3

An additional one-off maternity payment of £300 can be provided to mothers if their baby is due in 8 weeks or less, or if their baby is under 6 weeks old.

Services

Asylum seekers are able to receive free NHS healthcare, including free prescriptions, dental care, eyesight tests and help paying for glasses.

Children are able to attend state schools, including applying for free school meals.

In Wales, asylum seekers and refused asylum seekers are entitled to the same equity of access to health services as the resident population.

1.4. UK Nationality and Borders Bill

The UK Government's Nationality and Borders Bill is currently progressing through the UK Parliament. The three main objectives of the Bill are to:

1. Increase the fairness of the system to better protect and support those in need of asylum.
2. Deter illegal entry into the United Kingdom, thereby breaking the business model of people smuggling networks and protecting the lives of those they endanger.
3. Remove those with no right to be in the UK more easily.

According to the House of Commons Library, 'irregular journeys to the UK and late claims for asylum would be deterred and penalised in various ways.'

It would allow for the off-shore processing of asylum claims, a practice which the United Nations describes as 'dehumanizing, expensive and fail(s) to resolve the underlying causes of movement and displacement'. The Bill would introduce new ways to deter certain claims, would broaden criminal sanctions for related offences and maximise their associated penalties. It would also grant additional powers for vessels in UK territorial seas to be stopped and redirected.

The UNHCR issued a statement that it was 'saddened' that the Bill had passed its second reading.

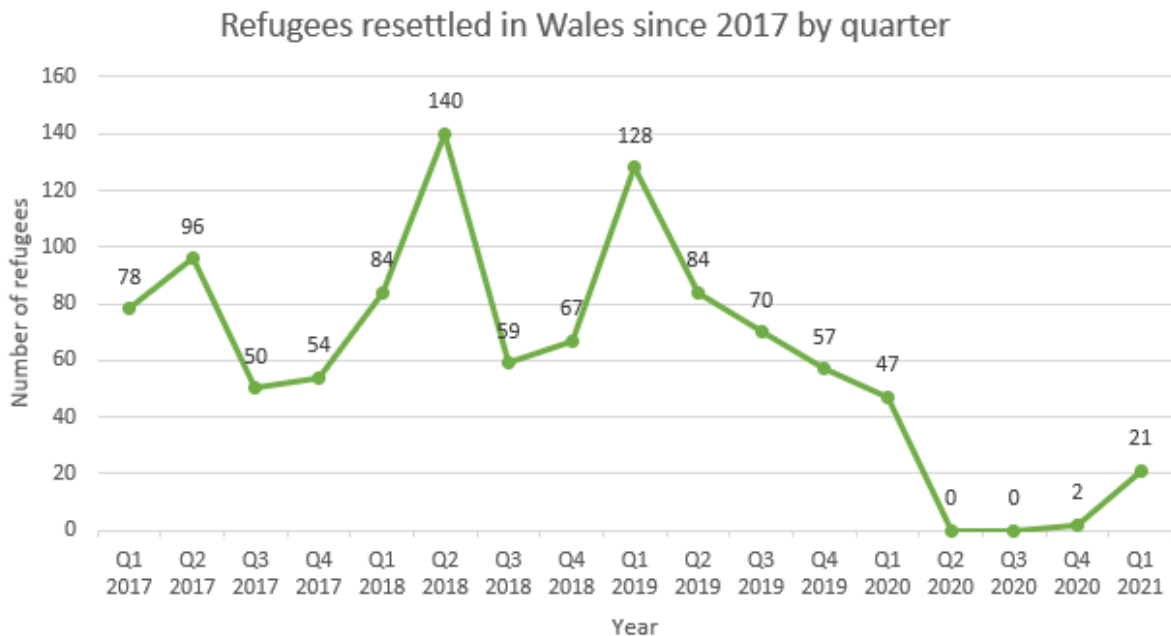
2. Wales

2.1. Statistics

Refugees in Wales

Resettlement of refugees was paused during the second and third quarter of 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic. Resettlement recommenced in December 2020, when 2 refugees were resettled in Wales. 21 refugees were resettled in Wales in the first quarter of 2021.

The number of refugees resettled in Wales since 2017 by quarter is shown in the graph below:



Source:

Home Office Immigration Statistics, [Res_D01: Refugees resettled by resettlement scheme and local authority](#) (updated 27 May 2021)

Asylum seekers in Wales

As of 31 March 2021, there were 2,734 asylum seekers in Wales.

Local authority [data shows](#) the number of asylum seekers in receipt of support up until 31 March 2021. Support is provided under UK-wide legislation and is divided into two categories: subsistence only and dispersed accommodation. [Dispersed accommodation](#) means long-term temporary accommodation provided through the Home Office.

As of 31 March 2021, 10 of Wales' 22 local authorities were providing support, as follows:

Local Authority	Number of asylum seekers receiving support: subsistence only	Number of asylum seekers receiving support: dispersed accommodation
Caerphilly	1	0
Cardiff	48	1,322
Conwy	0	6
Merthyr Tydfil	2	0
Neath Port Talbot	1	0
Newport	23	403
Rhondda Cynon Taf	2	0
Swansea	18	783
Vale of Glamorgan	1	1
Wrexham	3	120

Source: Home Office Immigration Statistics, Asy_D11: Asylum seekers in receipt of section 95 support by local authority (updated 27 May 2021)

3. Welsh Government action

In 2019, the Welsh Government announced it would become the world’s first Nation of Sanctuary. This was in response to a 2017 inquiry by the Fifth Senedd’s Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee into refugees and asylum seekers in Wales.

The Welsh Government’s impact assessment summarises how the policy:

seeks to remove barriers to asylum seekers accessing services, improve employability support for refugees, improve integration and knowledge of rights for refugees and asylum seekers and mitigate destitution, mental ill health and homelessness.

The assessment concluded that ‘no negative impacts of these proposals have been identified.’

International compliance & recognition

The Welsh Government and its Ministers are required to comply with the UK’s and Wales’ international obligations.

In the plan, the Welsh Government explains how the policy ensures that it fulfils Wales' international obligations and complies with the seven United Nations Conventions signed and ratified by the UK.

The Nation of Sanctuary policy was endorsed by the United Nations, which gave the policy its 'full backing'.

Devolution

The plan also provided an opportunity for the Welsh Government to set out its position on devolution arrangements, given that asylum and immigration are reserved to the UK Government:

Responsibility for asylum and immigration rests with the UK Government rather than the Welsh Government. This means that some of the key levers to prevent harmful outcomes, such as timely and good asylum case decision-making, the quality of asylum accommodation and provision of legal aid, are out of our control.

However, the successful integration of refugees and asylum seekers will require concerted effort on the part of the Welsh Government, Welsh public services and Welsh communities.

Costs

In November 2020, the Welsh Government responded to a Freedom of Information (FOI) request for the total cost of its Nation of Sanctuary programme to date. These are provided as follows:

Annex A

Name of Project/Scheme	Cost (Jan 2019 – Oct 2020)
ReStart: Refugee Integration*	£1,502,922
Asylum Rights Programme	£760,500
Asylum Justice	£45,000
Sanctuary Website	£17,071
WARD Scheme	£54,466
Move On Project**	£323,330
Research (Hosting)	£10,000
Research (Employer Gaps and Opportunities)	£14,998
Hate Crime Funding (WRC)	£36,000
Total	£2,764,287

* This Project is funded through the EU Asylum Migration Integration Fund.

** This cost is based on the annual allocation for the project during 2019-20 and 2020-21.

The following disclaimer accompanied the information:

The Nation of Sanctuary plan was developed through extensive cross-government working on the basis that all parts of the Welsh Government should be ensuring that schemes and initiatives are inclusive of those with protected characteristics, including refugees or asylum seekers. Accordingly, many of the actions in the plan reflect in-depth discussions about how existing funded schemes can be better aligned to the needs of these individuals. It is not possible to quantify how much of these general budgets has been used to support these members of our communities.

The following quoted information was also requested but not held by the Welsh Government:

- for a breakdown of costs for housing, healthcare and translators etc;
- have any of these people been involved with crimes, and if so what crimes;
- what percentage of these people are employed

In response to 'have the people taken in had any stock of social housing and if so how much in each county', the Welsh Government explained that:

Asylum seekers are provided with accommodation on a 'no choice' basis by the Home Office – this is not considered to be social housing and is rented from private landlords. If granted refugee status, local authorities are able to provide homelessness assistance to individuals but the Welsh Government does not hold information relating to the number of refugees accommodated in social housing.

The response also explained that the Nation of Sanctuary plan was developed in for the Fifth Senedd term, which concluded in April 2021 and that work beyond then would need to be considered by a future Welsh Government.

The Welsh Government had previously responded to an FOI request on the number of 'illegal migrants/refugees (who) are being housed in hotels, hostels and private residence in Wales' (September 2020).

Latest Welsh Government statements

The Minister for Social Justice, Jane Hutt, is responsible for the Welsh Government's activities in relation to asylum seekers and refugees since the Senedd elections in May 2021.

On 17 June 2021, the Minister gave a statement marking Refugee Week which provided an update on the Welsh Government's recent activities. The statement explained that:

- Funded services, such as the Asylum Rights Programme and Asylum Justice legal advice, have continued to deliver during the coronavirus pandemic on virtual platforms;

- Welsh Government's **Sanctuary website** has been updated to ensure that key messages around Covid-19 regulations can be easily accessed in many languages. Over the coming months, the information provided on the website will be expanded to include information for EU citizens and Hong Kong British Nationals, before adding additional categories of migrants who may travel to Wales to start a new life;
- Has funded the temporary installation of internet access into asylum properties in Wales for a period of 6 months to help them connect with family and friends and access key integration services, such as English language classes;
- Will ensure that the UK Government 'fully understands' its views on its New Plan for Immigration, including 'placing asylum seekers into communities and not in isolated prison-like reception centres'.

The statement also provided an update on the activities of schools, universities, colleges, businesses and local authorities in supporting Wales as a Nation of Sanctuary.

Afghanistan

At the time of writing, many states have announced that they will accept those fleeing from the Afghanistan.

The Welsh Government is supporting the UK Government's **Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy**. The Welsh Government has not yet announced its plans to provide sanctuary, although it **has confirmed** that it is working with the UK Government and Welsh local authorities have **advised the BBC** of their plans. 5,000 refugees will be accommodated in the UK in the policy's first year, with priority being given to women and girls. The **UK Government has committed** to providing sanctuary to 20,000 refugees, however, no specific timeline has been given for the remaining 15,000 other than 'in the coming years'.

4. Action taken by the Senedd

The Fifth Senedd's **Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee** published its report on refugees and asylum seekers in 2017. The report, "**I used to be someone**" led to the **Welsh Government announcement** that Wales would become a Nation of Sanctuary.

Following the Senedd elections in May 2021, the Sixth Senedd's **Equality and Social Justice Committee** was established on 23 June 2021. The **Committee's remit** encompasses equality and human rights, fair work, community cohesion and safety, tackling poverty, and implementation of the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015 and any related cross-cutting issues within its remit.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.