

To: Cabinet
Date: 22 January 2025
Report of: Executive Director – Corporate Resources
Title of Report: Council of Sanctuary Framework, 2025-2028

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	This report seeks approval and adoption of the draft Council of Sanctuary framework document.
Key decision:	No
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Linda Smith, Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities
Corporate Priority:	Support Thriving Communities
Policy Framework:	Thriving Communities Strategy 2023-27

Recommendation(s): That Cabinet resolves to:	
1.	Approve and adopt the draft Council of Sanctuary Framework document, including the Action Plan.
2.	Agree that an annual progress update should be produced for Cabinet.
3.	Delegate power to the Executive Director – Corporate Resources, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities, to amend the design of the framework document without changing the content, and to make changes to the action plan to keep it updated to developments and changes.
Appendices	
Appendix 1	Council of Sanctuary Framework
Appendix 2	Risk Register
Appendix 3	Equalities Impact Assessment

Introduction and background

1. Oxford has a population of circa 165,000, of which, approximately 35% of residents were born outside of the UK¹. The Council has a proud track record of supporting people seeking sanctuary who make the city their home. There is ambition to go further, and the Council has made a public commitment to become an accredited Local Authority of Sanctuary within the Thriving Communities Strategy 2023-27.
2. This paper introduces the draft Council of Sanctuary framework and Action Plan, which with partners, has been developed and lays out how the Council will seek to support people seeking sanctuary over the next 3 years, subject to Cabinet approval. Whilst the Council has made significant efforts for many years, challenges remain.
3. Since 2015 the Council has successfully resettled 58 refugee families that have arrived through government recognised resettlement schemes and committed to resettle 8 refugee families per year for the next 5 years, subject to scheme viability. This was approved at Cabinet on [12 July 2023](#) and full Council on [17 July 2023](#).
4. Since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Oxford has welcomed over 527 Ukrainian guests through hosting arrangements. The Home Office has established a contingency hotel and dispersed accommodation under the asylum dispersal plan within Oxford. The Council is supporting new refugees to prevent homelessness and reduce the threat of rough sleeping.
5. There is a government backlog for decisions on individual asylum claims, although it has reduced within the last 12 months, it still is very high compared to recent years.² The local picture is reflective of the international situation with more people seeking safety and refuge in the UK from war, conflict, and crises from other parts of the world. The [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees \(UNHCR\)](#) estimates around 122million people are displaced in 2024.
6. The work by the Council aims to foster an agenda of inclusivity and compassion for all residents that have come from a background of forced displacement. To ensure this report is inclusive of the broad range of legal statuses, living circumstances and experience of migration, the Council has chosen to use the interchangeable term 'people seeking sanctuary' in this report which represents people that are from a forced displacement background.

Council of Sanctuary Award

7. The City of Sanctuary UK charity aims to create an inclusive, welcoming, and hospitable environment for people seeking sanctuary from violence and persecution.
8. The *Sanctuary Awards* are provided by the network of local groups and City of Sanctuary UK, to recognise and celebrate the commitment by institutions to the charity's values and vision and enable them to become active participants in the City of Sanctuary network.
9. The Council approved a cross-party motion to become a *City of Sanctuary* on [22 July 2019](#)

¹ <https://www.oxford.gov.uk/population-statistics/oxfords-population>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-june-2024/how-many-people-do-we-grant-protection-to>

10. A further Council motion on [21 March 2022](#) directed Officers to plan for the development of a sanctuary strategy and demonstrate what the Council is doing to help those seeking sanctuary in light of the conflicts in Ukraine and Afghanistan.
11. The Council confirmed its commitment to become an accredited Council of Sanctuary at the *Sanctuary Fair* in 2023 and fulfil an action within the Thriving Communities Strategy 2023-27.
12. In October 2024 the Council submitted the formal application to become an accredited Local Authority of Sanctuary. This has been assessed and approved following the subsequent formal panel assessment in November 2024, meaning the Council has been successful in achieving the award, meeting the assessment criteria.

Thriving Communities Strategy

13. The Council has existing key strategies and policies which inform and complement the aims of this draft Council of Sanctuary Framework and Action Plan. These include the Thriving Communities Strategy 2023-2027, Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy, Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2023-2028, Anti-Racism Charter, Citizen Experience Strategy 2023-25 and the socio-economic duty.
14. The Council's Thriving Communities Strategy 2023-27 committed the Council to champion Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) and engage with and facilitate conversations about equality throughout the city, and work to make Oxford an anti-racist city through the Council's [Anti-Racism Charter](#).
15. Furthermore, the Strategy committed the Council to work in collaboration with refugees, asylum seekers and the migrant community to inform and develop a Local Authority City of Sanctuary Action Plan and ensure the Council meets its commitment to become an accredited local authority of sanctuary.
16. In 2022, the Council worked with local voluntary and community organisations to gather views from people seeking sanctuary on the Council's Thriving Communities Strategy and the resulting report fed into the strategy.

Council of Sanctuary Framework

17. As part of the *Council of Sanctuary Award*, the Council is required to develop an Action Plan to confirm how it will support people seeking sanctuary in Oxford over the next 3 years. This draft Action Plan has been embedded into the draft Council of Sanctuary Framework document and follows collaboration with internal Council departments and external partners, as well as residents with lived experience.
18. To fully understand the level of need locally, in October 2023, the Council commissioned local charity Asylum Welcome to complete a needs assessment of local residents with lived experience. Over 100 individuals and local stakeholders were interviewed or took part in focus groups, and clear themes emerged regarding access to health and wellbeing, transport, education & employment and accommodation.
19. The draft Council of Sanctuary Framework sets out the Council's vision and how the Council will work to support people seeking sanctuary. The document is attached in Appendix 1, if approved, the final text will go through a design improvement process to produce the final document.

20. The Council has high aspirations and wants to achieve in this policy area but like any part of the public sector only has certain powers, responsibilities, and resources, and therefore needs to leverage support and work in partnership to deliver these aims. The work to improve outcomes for people seeking sanctuary involves close collaboration across local government but also crosses over to other organisations and the Council has built robust partnerships with statutory agencies, the voluntary and community sector, and other stakeholders.
21. The Action Plan that is embedded within the draft Framework has some actions that the Council will deliver, building on existing initiatives and implementing new projects where required. There are also some proposed actions where the Council will work in collaboration with other organisations or support other agencies to achieve positive outcomes.
22. Some areas of the Framework will require support from central government for the tools and funding to achieve our goals. The Council will seek to influence and feed into policy development by engaging constructively with central government to lobby for funding and influence the direction of policy and deliver elements of the Framework.
23. The Council continues to engage with local partners via the county wide Oxfordshire Migration Partnership. It is noted that other local authorities in Oxfordshire such as Oxfordshire County Council and West Oxfordshire District Council have passed Council motions and have also committed to becoming Local Authorities of Sanctuary and grow the sanctuary movement locally.

Options available

24. Recommendation – Approve the draft Council of Sanctuary Framework. The Council will adopt this Framework to undertake improvements in service delivery, as well as working in partnership to support other local organisations to deliver actions to make Oxford a more inclusive and welcoming place to live and work. This also fulfils a key action within the Thriving Communities Strategy 2023-27.
25. Do nothing – Under this option, the Council would not approve the draft Council of Sanctuary Framework. The Council would not be able to implement the draft Framework and Action Plan. Therefore, under the ‘do nothing’ option, the potential benefits referenced in this report will not be realised and the Council will not fulfil an objective within its Thriving Communities Strategy. The Council will need to consider other ways to support residents seeking sanctuary.

Financial implications

26. This report is not requesting any additional budget allocation to deliver the Framework. The Council has an existing allocation of £50,000 from the Controlled Migration Fund to support the work, and this will be used alongside other existing government grants to the Council to support people seeking sanctuary to deliver the direct aspects of the framework.
27. The Council estimates that the grant funding mentioned above will be sufficient for the direct delivery of aspects of the framework that the Council is responsible for. If additional costs are identified, then these will be considered as part of the normal Council budget governance process. Other elements of the Framework may require applications to be made for external investment from partnership organisations from other parts of the public sector.

Legal issues

28. The Council is committed to upholding the principles of the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) as outlined in the Equality Act 2010. To fulfil this commitment, the Council will have due regard for the need to:
- Eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under the Act;
 - Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who don't share it;
 - Foster good relations between people who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not (which involves having due regard, in particular, to the need to tackle prejudice and promote understanding).
29. The draft Council of Sanctuary Framework document and Action Plan aim to fulfil the principles set out in the Equality Act relating to the PSED. The recommendation for an annual progress update will measure the success of the plan and consider any equalities impact. Any required improvements to the Framework or the Action Plan will be implemented to ensure the Council creates a supportive environment where all residents can feel secure, respected, and empowered to thrive.
30. The proposed draft Framework and Action Plan aim to support individuals of all backgrounds, collaborate with local organisations and communities, and the Council will actively consider the diverse needs of all residents to foster a city that is inclusive, welcoming and supportive.

Level of risk

31. See Risk Register attached under Appendix 2.

Equalities impact

32. An Equalities Impact Assessment has been completed as part of the Thriving Communities Strategy. A further Equalities Impact Assessment has been completed as part of this cabinet report and can be found within Appendix 3.

Carbon and Environmental Considerations

33. There are few environmental considerations arising directly from this report. There is a need to continue to support residents to reduce their carbon imprint and support the corporate ambition to become a zero carbon Oxford. Any households that are resettled or helped into accommodation within private rented properties within the city which will be registered with the Council's selective licensing scheme which takes into consideration environmental impact.

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Background Papers: None

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