

To: Cabinet
Date: 8 July 2026
Report of: Director of Housing
Title of Report: Annual review of the Council of Sanctuary Framework, 2025-2028

| Summary and recommendations | |
|------------------------------|---|
| Decision being taken: | To provide an update on the progress made in Year 1 of the Council of Sanctuary Framework 2025-28 and to seek approval for the implementation of the Year 2 Action Plan |
| 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, Council of Sanctuary Framework 2025-2028 |

| Recommendation(s): That Cabinet resolves to: | |
|--|---|
| 1. | Note the progress made in Year 1 to implement the Council of Sanctuary Framework and Action Plan and the emerging risks and challenges for delivery over the next year and beyond |
| 2. | Approve the adoption of the new Framework Action Plan for Year 2 (26-27); and |
| 3. | Delegate authority to the Director of Housing, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities, to update the Action Plan when required to respond to emerging risks and challenges. |

| Information Exempt from Publication |
|-------------------------------------|
| None |

| Appendix No. | Appendix Title | Exempt from Publication |
|--------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Appendix 1 | Council of Sanctuary Framework | No |

| | | |
|-------------------|--|----|
| Appendix 2 | Risk Register | No |
| Appendix 3 | Equalities Impact Assessment (Updated) | No |
| Appendix 4 | Year 1 Action Plan with rag rating | No |
| Appendix 5 | Year 2 Draft Action Plan | No |
| Appendix 6 | KPI table | No |

Introduction and background

1. The Council has a proud track record of welcoming people seeking sanctuary who make Oxford their home and achieved Local Authority of Sanctuary award status in November 2024 which delivered a key action within the Council's Thriving Communities Strategy 2023-27. 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 those institutions to become active participants in the City of Sanctuary network.
2. Officers presented the Council of Sanctuary Framework and Action Plan 2025-2028 to Cabinet in January 2025 for approval. The Framework was developed with residents, staff and external partners and sets out how the Council will seek to support people seeking sanctuary over the next 3 years.
3. It was agreed by Cabinet that officers would report back annually on progress made against the action plan. This report sets out progress and challenges against the planned actions over the past year. The report also seeks approval for the updated action plan to be approved for year 2, updated to address emerging challenges.
4. The Council continues to provide support to people arriving on government backed refugee resettlement schemes through its corporate commitment, as well as visa schemes such as Home for Ukraine to settle and rebuild their lives. The Council has developed additional programmes to facilitate move on for people residing in and exiting from Home Office accommodation, supporting wider corporate aims to prevent homelessness.
5. 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 including asylum seekers, refugees and vulnerable migrants.

Council of Sanctuary Framework and Action Plan

6. The Framework committed the Council to work in collaboration with the sanctuary 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.

7. As part of the process to achieve the *Council of Sanctuary Award*, the Council developed an Action Plan and commissioned a needs assessment which was produced in early 2024 which engaged over 100 people seeking sanctuary and support agencies and can be found via this [web link](#). The full Framework document and action plan can be found at **Appendix 1**.
8. Whilst there have been challenges, most acutely linked to nation-wide protests and community cohesion in summer 2025, there has been a lot of progress towards meeting the Year 1 actions embedded within the Action Plan which could be found in **Appendix 4** with a full rag rating.
9. Below is a summary of the thematic Action Plan areas and Year 1 progress and updates:

➤ **Wellbeing, Education and Employment**

10. Employment is a key driver in improving financial and housing prospects and the Council have been involved in several work strands to boost employability prospects for people seeking sanctuary. The Council's Youth Ambition Team is delivering employability advice for people moving on from Home Office accommodation including a drop in service and one to one support including CV writing, confidence building and job searches with at least 40 people engaging with the service which will continue into financial year 2026/27.
11. Addressing structural barriers has also been a clear objective. The Council has worked with the Oxfordshire Inclusive Economy Partnership (OIEP) which has developed its webpage to include improved guidance for employers when hiring refugees and are also working with an Oxford based academic (from the University of Southampton) to produce a policy briefing for the evaluation for the Refugee Employment Support Project (RESP).
12. Health and wellbeing is a key area of focus, with the Council utilising grant funding to support improved health outcomes. Examples include the Resettlement Team providing support for households who have arrived under government backed schemes to access therapeutic counselling for individuals via local health charity Refugee Resource.
13. The Council is also part funding an Oxfordshire Asylum Seeker Care Co-ordinator (ASCC) whose role supports improved early intervention for asylum seekers in Oxfordshire with 277 individuals supported in 2025/26 on key areas such as GP registration, vaccination catch up, health checks, NHS app registrations and advocacy to support access to required health care.
14. English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) is a programme that addresses critical need and supports access to employment, volunteering and other education courses. All families resettled by Oxford City Council (in Oxford through the government backed resettlement schemes) are offered ESOL support under the commissioned wraparound support contract that Oxford City Council commissions with Asylum Welcome which is in its 3rd Year, delivering over 200 hours of ESOL to resettlement families. The City Council has also worked closely with Oxfordshire County Council to promote ESOL helping to facilitate learning across Oxford.
15. The Council has supported the Schools Advocacy Programme (delivered by Asylum Welcome) since 2021 which provides support for families to engage with local schools, helping children thrive and empowering parents to participate meaningfully in their children's education using volunteer mentors who work with families to help them

navigate the UK school system. Below is a case study from a participant in the programme demonstrating the impact that it can have:

Case Study – Parent participating in the programme

“The Schools Advocacy Programme has given us the gift of hope and opportunity, by helping us to support our children’s education and wellbeing in school. Every week, we are greeted with welcoming smiles and taken through the doors of the schools to meet mentors and teachers; people and surroundings that in the beginning were scary and unfamiliar, soon felt welcoming and safe.”

➤ **Housing and Homelessness**

16. The Council continues to utilise grant funding to support the prevention of homelessness in line with the Council Strategy and the Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy. The Council’s Housing Services provides support for households to move on from Homes for Ukraine hosting, transitional accommodation and Home Office contracted contingency and dispersal accommodation, accepting homelessness duties in 100 cases.
17. The Council has supported at least 54 households in year 1 to move on successfully into independent housing from Home Office managed accommodation. This has been supported by the Council’s Procurement and Placement Team and Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) partners who work with private landlords to increase the supply of private sector housing and also provide support to homelessness applicants the Council have a duty towards, who self-find private sector accommodation and the Council provides support via the first month’s rent and deposit.
18. Work is on-going to improve the quality of information provided to Oxford’s residents to assist them to navigate the UK housing system. For example housing advice leaflets that have been translated into 9 languages and produced alongside videos with translation; this can be found via the Council’s Youtube channel: [Finding a home if you are homeless](#)
19. The Council has delivered the Local Authority Housing Fund (LAHF) which, in the last 3 years has delivered 22 properties through direct purchases for temporary accommodation usage for homelessness households and resettlement groups including Ukrainian and Afghan households, adding to the Council’s wider housing portfolio and helping to prevent homelessness.
20. There has been a strong focus by the Council on rough sleeping with work to better track individuals who may come from a sanctuary background and are found to be rough sleeping by the Council’s commissioned outreach team. The Council’s Rough Sleeping Team is now recording this information in monthly reports, with overall reported numbers remaining low however spikes have occurred over the past year. Officers plan to analyse this data in year to understand if any further mitigations can be put in place.

➤ **Building Communities & Amplifying Voices**

21. A key objective of the Framework Action Plan has been to work in partnership to build community resilience and amplify voices. To facilitate this aim, the Council has continued to hold internal and external stakeholders group meetings quarterly to provide accountability to the Action Plan and improve the reach of the Action Plan across the Council and partner organisations.

22. Improved communication from updates to the refugee, asylum seeker and migrant web pages on the Council's website, and an enhanced translation tool has been implemented to aid navigation. There here have been intranet updates and lunch and learn interactive sessions for staff where people with lived experience have shared their experiences, including at the recent all staff conference.
23. Supporting residents to access positive activities has led to strong engagement with Council backed projects. For example, over 1000 people have accessed sporting sessions led by the Council's Communities Team to improve wellbeing, foster friendships and engagement with the local community. The Resettlement Team has worked with the Dancing Oxford project (organised by the Culture and Community Development Team) working with Pegasus Theatre company, Chameleon, to bring a refugee led dance show to Oxford with the focus on young sanctuary seekers.
24. The Museum of Oxford has several semi-permanent exhibitions which bring to life various groups' journeys to Oxford. Big Ideas grants have also recently been awarded to various sanctuary seeking support organisations e.g. Asylum Welcome, EMBS, Oxford Community Action, Oxford Hub, Refugee Resource, whilst recent small grants went to Damascus Rose Kitchen, Iranian Community Network, Oxfordshire Asian Women's Voice, Syrian Community Oxfordshire, Syrian Sisters, Iraqi Women Art and War and Tandem Oxford

Shaping Services

25. A key area within the needs assessment was to encourage people with lived experience to be more involved in the development of Council policy. Officers have undertaken several initiatives to put this into practice. A dedicated co-production section was incorporated into the new Citizen Engagement Policy. Several teams are actively involved in co-producing policies and initiatives, including the No Recourse to Public Fund (NRPF) protocol with Oxfordshire County Council and partners to develop a toolkit for advice if staff are working with individuals who have the NRPF condition which can be a significant barrier to accessing services. It is expected that this protocol will be finalised in autumn 2026.
26. Other key programmes include the NRPF Co-Production Group, which brings together residents who have the NRPF immigration condition to help create a resource for other residents. This is currently in development and expected to conclude in autumn 2026.
27. The Community Champion programme, made up largely of individuals who have sought sanctuary in Oxford, demonstrates exceptional expertise in co-production. It has been instrumental in amplifying underrepresented voices through achievements such as creating multilingual resources (including a GP receptionist animation in six languages and a Healthwatch video on language support), leading community events like Black History Month and a Men's Health football tournament, and producing a Community Cookbook showcasing lived experiences. In addition, it has influenced key consultations on NHS plans, the Council's anti-social behaviour policy, and citizens' experience surveys, contributing 223 insights into health barriers and engaging 2,845 individuals across diverse communities.

Supporting Integration

28. The Council continues to support resettlement from government backed resettlement schemes namely the United Kingdom Resettlement Scheme (UKRS) and Afghan Resettlement Programme (ARP). In 2025, the Council resettled 8 new families (15 adults and 21 children). A total of 32 families were supported during the year. Delivery includes end-to-end coordination, procuring suitable and affordable accommodation, which is predominantly in the private sector, to commissioning intensive wrap-around support through Asylum Welcome.
29. The Council continues to support residents under the Homes for Ukraine scheme. There are now around 44 hosting arrangements and many other households have moved onto independent accommodation. A specialist Early Intervention and Triage Officer delivers statutory housing support alongside upstream prevention and post-tenancy sign-up assistance. The Homes for Ukraine Rematching Team works county-wide to prevent homelessness and ensure residents are connected to appropriate, holistic support.
30. The Council continues to commission holistic support for people granted refugee status and moving on from dispersal accommodation. For example, from January – March 2026, the Council's commissioned partner saw 221 clients (including 56 new arrivals) across 24 drop-in sessions to support with upstream housing advice, health and wellbeing referrals, signposting to legal advice and practical support. The Council attends drop-in sessions to support homelessness applications and housing advice for people moving on from Home Office contracted accommodation and saw 219 individuals in 25/26.
31. The Helping Hands initiative is a regular litter pick around the contingency hotel, which houses people claiming asylum and managed by Home Office contractor, increasing engagement with the local community. Volunteers at the Oxford Homeless Project Hotel have regularly served meals, packed food parcels, and offer services such as free haircuts. The Council has also commissioned. The Sundial Centre has also undertaken cultural awareness workshops for people seeking sanctuary.

Working in Partnership & Innovating

32. A key element of the Action Plan is to work in partnership with local organisations, leveraging skills and capacity to widen reach and outcomes for people seeking sanctuary. The Council is currently working with Oxford Brookes University and the University of Oxford on two research projects with a focus on welcoming
33. The Council is developing a "*Basics of Sanctuary*" e-learner module, in partnership with Oxfordshire County Council and Oxford Brookes University, and the aim is for it to be a stand-alone training module on the county wide Oxfordshire Safeguarding Board platforms in perpetuity. This can then be accessed by all agencies within Oxfordshire.
34. 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. The partnership includes statutory partners such as the NHS and Thames Valley Policy and other voluntary and community sector partners such

as Connection Support which deliver the Homes for Ukraine wraparound support contract commissioned by Oxfordshire County Council.

Sanctuary KPI's

35. One of the accepted recommendations from the Scrutiny Committee when it considered the Framework, was to set clear performance measures as part of the Action Plan. Officers have developed individual measures of success against the actions and created overarching KPI's for this Action Plan. These can be found in **Appendix 6**.

Year 2 Framework Action Plan

36. In light of progress against the Year 1 Action Plan, and respond to new challenges, a new Year 2 Action Plan has been developed, updating the current Action Plan after consideration of progress and to ensure the priorities are adapted to the emerging challenges. The new Action Plan for Year 2 can be found in **Appendix 5 and cabinet are asked to adopt the new Action Plan to progress the work for the financial year 26/27**.
37. The Action Plan will be reviewed regularly to monitor and report on progress against commitments in the Framework. To ensure it can respond quickly to emerging priorities and risks, approval to revise the plan throughout the Year as required in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities is sought.

Financial implications

38. This report is not requesting any additional budget allocation to deliver the Framework and funding has been set aside to support this from a historic grant programme which support migrants 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 over 3 years.
39. 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 forecast, through regular financial management and monitoring or otherwise, 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

40. 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).

41. The Council of Sanctuary Framework document and Action Plan aim to fulfil the principles set out in the Equality Act relating to the PSED. 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.

42. The proposed 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

43. See Risk Register attached under **Appendix 2**.

Equalities impact

44. An equality impact assessment was completed as part of the Council of Sanctuary Framework 2025-2028, and this has been updated for this cabinet paper and can be found in **Appendix 3**.

45. A number of actions in the Year 2 Action Plan were set in relation to improving the delivery of the Strategy and in relation to individuals or groups with a protected characteristic and in relation to delivering actions related to equalities, diversity and inclusion (EDI).

Implications of Local Government Reorganisation

46. Government guidance concerning LGR has been considered in relation to this report and there are no significant implications noted at this time. In future, strategy and framework documents will need to be considered by the successor Council to ensure alignment with Council priorities and requirements

Carbon and Environmental Considerations

47. 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.

| | |
|----------------------------|--|
| Report author | Stephen Cohen |
| Job title | Refugee and Resettlement Manager |
| Service area or department | Housing Services |
| Telephone | 07889 172942 |
| e-mail | Scohen@oxford.gov.uk |

Background Papers: None

Table 1: Glossary of terms:

| Term | Description |
|---|---|
| Migrant | A person who moves from one country to another, for the primary purpose of work or study, or to reunite with family |
| Asylum Seeker | Individual who applies for protection as a refugee and who is still waiting for a decision on their claim for refugee status |
| Refugee | Someone who has had a positive decision on their asylum claim; they have been recognised as a refugee under the United Nations Convention. This means that they are recognised to have a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion in their country and are entitled to protection. |
| Resettled Refugee | a refugee who has been offered a permanent home in a country while still outside that country. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) identify vulnerable refugees, who they deem in need of resettlement. Local authorities and community sponsors assist in resettlement. |
| Undocumented Migrant | Someone who does not possess the required (and correct) documents to enter, or remain, in the country |
| UASC or Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Child | A child who is outside their country of origin to seek asylum. They are separated from parents and relatives and are not in the care of someone who has parental responsibility. Locally, they are looked after by Oxfordshire County Council. |
| A Person on No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) | Someone who is not entitled to benefits because of their immigration status, e.g. an international student, someone on a spousal visa, a visa overstayer. |

| | |
|---|--|
| A Person Seeking Sanctuary/ Sanctuary seeker | A collective term that we use refer to everyone who is a refugee, asylum seeker, undocumented migrants, survivors of modern slavery or a person with a precarious immigration status e.g. on No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) and others who may not fit into any of these categories but are seeking safety and a place to rebuild their lives. In Oxford, we use this more inclusive term when talking about our sanctuary work. |
|---|--|