



**Discussion:
Seeking Sanctuary**

Vicki Squire

Hello. I am Dr Vicki Squire, and this is the Open University's Open Politics podcast on

Catherine Birara

There's a man I know who was saying that when they first came to Sheffield, they made a phone call to somebody who was from the same country with them, they came as asylum seekers, but this person they were calling was working with NHS and they called and said: Oh, hello, how are you? What are you doing in Sheffield? I said: Oh, I'm an asylum seeker. And they hung up on them.

Vicki Squire

This isn't a unique response. Refugees and asylum seekers face many challenges in the UK, such as hostility, isolation and exclusion. They are often depicted as either victims or threats, and as such are not perceived to have the same capacity to act as citizens. However, the City of Sanctuary movement challenges these assumptions. In 2007 Sheffield was declared the UK's first City of Sanctuary, and there is a growing network towns and cities around the UK working towards the same goal.

Inderjit Bhogal is co-founder and Chair for the City of Sanctuary and he explains why he saw the need for such a group:

Inderjit Bhogal

When people come here, if they're fleeing danger and persecution and hostility and violence, that's not what they should experience here.

There is a great deal of hostility towards those who come to take sanctuary amongst us, and the City of Sanctuary is about taking people away from hatred towards a culture of welcome and hospitality and integration and inclusion.

Craig Barnett Our aim was not to create another campaigning group because there are many campaigns for these aims to abolish detention, to establish the right to work and so on.

Vicki Squire

Craig Barnett, co-founder and National Co-ordinator for City of Sanctuary. What's lacking is enough ground swell of mainstream public support for those campaigns. So our aim is to build up the local grassroots support for people seeking sanctuary in their own communities... to talk to sports clubs and choirs and schools and colleges and businesses about whether they want to be part of being a welcoming safe city, and if so, what they can do about it.

Inderjit Bhogal

A lot of people don't really know the stories of those who come to live amongst us, they don't really understand the hardships or the experiences that they've come out of or bring with them. So, one important thing is to actually listen to what people want to say and the stories they have to share... they're not just numbers, figures, they have faces, they have names, they have families, they have histories, they tell their stories.

Vicki Squire

One way that refugees and asylum seekers tell their stories is through drama. Having taken sanctuary within Sheffield herself, Catherine Birara is Chairperson and co-founder of the Side-by-Side Drama Group.

Catherine Birara

Side By Side started as a movement of raising awareness about issues faced by refugees and asylum seekers. We used to go to schools and service providers like the council, the children services, and tell them about issues facing refugees, asylum seekers and how they can provide better services to them when they have them as their clients. Then we changed it and decided to do it in drama so that we can reach the wider community in raising awareness. And that's when we formed Side By Side.

Vicki Squire

Groups such as Side by Side challenge the ways refugees and asylum seekers are portrayed as victims or threats. It allows them to come together with a range of people within the city to make the voices of those taking sanctuary heard.

Simon Cross grew up in Sheffield and found that being part of the group was an education for him.

Simon Cross

Before joining Side By Side I didn't have the greatest understanding of the problems associated with being a refugee or asylum seeker. I suppose I fell into the middle ground of somebody who knew that there were lots of problems in getting to this country and seeking asylum, but also not realising just how severe and extreme they were.

And I suppose if somebody had to turn round to me two or three years ago and said asylum seekers get free mobile phones, they get all their food paid for, they go to the top of the housing list, I would have just sort of shrugged my shoulders, believed that and thought nothing of it. But now I know that's not the case, and just how difficult life is.

Vicki Squire

For many taking sanctuary in the city the conditions under which they are left waiting for a decision on their status is a major difficulty and source of frustration.

Catherine Birara

It was a long waiting period. For me it was 5 years of waiting with no answer, with nothing to rely on. Then one day a letter came through the post and they said we've granted you indefinite leave to remain. For me it seems maybe they lost my file or they had forgotten about me ... but I was living okay and my children were going to school and ... The only thing is that an asylum seekers are not allowed to work. It's a bit difficult because we come from a background of working in our countries. And it was a bit difficult and a bit shocking.

During that time I just did volunteering work and that kept me going and it made me forget about the waiting time.

Craig Barnett

When I talk to people seeking sanctuary here, the thing they always say to me is how they want to work they want to contribute, they want to do something positive, something constructive. And people who are waiting for a decision on the refugee status, they don't have the right to work, they're prevented from working by the Government. There's incredible frustration there, it's really crippling for people in terms of their sense of wellbeing and dignity and their mental health.

Inderjit Bhogal

They really are crushed by the system and you know, a lot of people live on the edge of their nerves. But also if they're not working, they don't have any money, that's a really difficult situation. So many people live in destitution and a great deal of hardship, and that's a reality.

Craig Barnett

The other thing is the social isolation as well, the fact that - especially when you are not working - it can be very difficult to meet people, especially local people. So one of the ways in which supporting organisations can help people is by simply giving them an opportunity to volunteer, to get involved, to contribute to their community, even if they're not able to do paid employment.

Catherine Birara

When I started volunteering I gained a lot of confidence because I gained skills, I learned how to talk confidently; I learned how to.. to facilitate trainings ...I learned a lot of things which I thought maybe even when I face the immigration, I can use these skills to talk to them. And I'm just so happy because my volunteering didn't just go down the drain, it has given me something which, you know, it's very precious.

Vicki Squire

City of Sanctuary activities help to create the conditions for those taking sanctuary to participate as equals in the life of the city. The movement also challenges the problematic ways that refugees and asylum seekers are depicted.

Catherine Birara

The movement of City of Sanctuary has made a big impact because the name asylum seeker has, has been used as a stigma and people don't want to be called asylum seekers any more because it's just ... it's like a name which has a bad meaning.

Craig Barnett

The whole term, asylum seekers, became a convenient category for blaming everything on this group. And of course, the political consequences of that are that we've now created this group who are the only people in this country who can be both denied the right to work, denied the right to benefits, locked up indefinitely without charge of trial, denied the right to medical care. No other group could this happen to and it's because there's been a political process. And this is what has brainwashed people really into thinking that asylum seekers are the cause of all the ills in our society.

Simon Cross

Members of our group have actually told me that there is a very, very different perception, publicly, of how people view a refugee and how people view an asylum seeker. They actually look upon refugees as people who have been disenfranchised, people who are stateless people who deserve being given a second chance. Where they look at an asylum seeker as being somebody who is basically coming to this country, out to make trouble, out to get what they can.

Inderjit Bhogal

What they come here for is that their life is in danger, either through persecution or through abject poverty, and what they want for themselves is safety and protection. That's what they come here for.

Craig Barnett

So what we're trying to do is to create a different language, a different set of understandings around what it actually means to be forced to seek sanctuary.

Vicki Squire

City of Sanctuary creates opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers to act as citizens. The movement provides a different way for people to understand the issue of sanctuary and addresses some of the difficulties that cause refugees and asylum seekers such as frustration. Importantly, it also provides opportunities for those taking sanctuary in the city to speak for themselves.

Catherine Birara

The power of just going in front of people and talking and telling them and changing their mindsets... people will come back to you and tell you, you know what you said, it has really made me think, it has really helped me understand... And when people say that you know you're doing the right thing, so it's a good feeling.

Vicki Squire

Taking Sanctuary was an Open Politics podcast produced by the Open University. You can watch the accompanying video or listen to more politics podcasts at www.open.ac.uk/openlearn/politicspodcasts