

# The Highland Council

Agenda Item	<b>6</b>
Report No	<b>HP/17/25</b>

**Committee:**           **Housing and Property**

**Date:**                   **21 May 2025**

**Report Title:**       **Council of Sanctuary**

**Report By:**           **Assistant Chief Executive - Place**

## **1       Purpose/Executive Summary**

- 1.1       The purpose of this report is to outline the City of Sanctuary Award process and seek approval from Highland Council for an application be lodged for the authority to be recognised as a Council of Sanctuary.

## **2       Recommendations**

- 2.1       Members are asked to:-
- i.       **Note** the efforts made by Highland and partner agencies in supporting resettlement and humanitarian programmes to date; and
  - ii.      **Agree** to the City of Sanctuary Award process and ongoing commitment required from Highland Council.

## **3       Implications**

- 3.1       **Resource** – Resource implications are detailed in the report.
- 3.2       **Legal** – There are no legal implications arising from this report.
- 3.3       **Risk** – Risk is managed through regular review and reporting to allow corrective action to be taken if necessary.
- 3.4       **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)** – There are no Health and Safety risks arising from this report.
- 3.5       **Gaelic** – There are no Gaelic implications arising from this report.

## 4 Impacts

4.1 In Highland, all policies, strategies or service changes are subject to an integrated screening for impact for Equalities, Poverty and Human Rights, Children's Rights and Wellbeing, Climate Change, Islands and Mainland Rural Communities, and Data Protection. Where identified as required, a full impact assessment will be undertaken.

4.2 Considering impacts is a core part of the decision-making process and needs to inform the decision-making process. When taking any decision, Members must give due regard to the findings of any assessment.

### 4.3 Integrated Impact Assessment - Summary

4.3.1 An Integrated Impact Assessment screening has been undertaken on 24 March 2025. The conclusions have been subject to the relevant Manager for Review and Approval.

4.3.2 The Screening process has concluded that there are positive impacts and Members are asked to consider the summary in **Appendix 1** to support the decision-making process.

4.3.3	<b>Impact Assessment Area</b>	<b>Conclusion of Screening/Full Assessment</b> <i>Positive impact</i>
	Equality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Race – positive</i></li><li>• <i>Religion or belief – positive</i></li><li>• <i>Age (young people) – positive</i></li></ul>
	Socio-economic	<i>Positive</i>
	Human Rights	<i>Positive</i>
	Children's Rights and Well-being	<i>Positive</i>
	Island and Mainland Rural	<i>No impact</i>
	Climate Change	<i>No impact</i>
	Data Rights	<i>No impact</i>

## 5 Existing Refugee and Asylum Programmes in Highland

### 5.1 Syrian Resettlement

Highland Council has a strong history in supporting refugees and has welcomed families fleeing war in their own countries, to resettle here in recent years. The first scheme to be supported was the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) in 2016 which enabled families from Syria to be resettled into properties provided by the Council. A package of funded resettlement support was provided by the UK Government for a 5-year term whereby Syrians, at the end of this term, are supported to apply for their 'indefinite leave to remain' to allow them to live permanently in the UK.

## 5.2 **Afghan Resettlement**

The Afghan Relocation and Resettlement Programme scheme (ARAP) was launched in 2021 to support the emergency evacuation of Afghans who had been employed by the UK Government in Afghanistan and assessed to be at high risk of imminent threat to life. Thirteen families were resettled in various areas across Highland directly into tenancies provided by the Council with a package of funding with 3 years resettlement support. The Council continues to support Home Office and UK Government requests for support for families under the ARAP scheme in Highland.

5.3 Lord Harrington, Minister of State for Refugees wrote to all Local Authorities in 2022 to request that all Councils commit to resettle refugees under the UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS) particularly in support of Afghans in bridging hotels. Eleven families have been welcomed to MOD Service Family Accommodation (SFA) properties in the Inner Moray Firth area since December 2023. These were Afghan Locally Employed Staff (LES) who have worked for the UK and risked their lives alongside British forces in Afghanistan.

5.4 Ministers wrote to Highland Council in February 2024 requesting ongoing support for families yet to arrive into the UK. As a result, the MOD site at Cameron Barracks, Inverness was used to support families arriving under the ARAP scheme while they wait to be matched into longer term accommodation. Children are enrolled in local primary and secondary schools with welfare support being contracted to The Mears Group through the Home Office. A weekly meeting is held with key partners to monitor progression and identify any issues. A further 8 Service Family Accommodation (SFA) properties in Inverness have been offered by the MOD to support these families and the matching process is currently ongoing between the Home Office and Highland Council. The Home Office has recently indicated that accommodation at Cameron Barracks will be phased out during Spring/Summer 2025.

## 5.5 **Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children**

Since January 2022, Highland Council have supported asylum seeking children through the Home Office mandated National Transfer scheme. Through partnership working with the third sector, the Comraich service was developed (December 2022) and has supported 56 young people, aged 16 and over, as of March 2025.

5.6 The Comraich service supports young people through leasing Council and third sector properties to provide accommodation. The support team are alongside the young people through all stages of their stay in Highland. There is a dedicated transitions co-ordinator and ESOL teacher within Comraich to support young people in their learning and language development. At the point of status being granted the young people are then transferred to the Barnardo's Springboard (Throughcare and Aftercare) service.

## 5.7 **Ukrainian Displaced Persons**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine began in February 2022 and the UK Government set up the 'Homes for Ukraine' scheme to support Ukrainian Displaced People (UDP) who fled their homes because of the invasion. Highland had one of the highest numbers of 'expressions of interest' following the request by UK Government to the public to open their homes to UDPs. A total of 233 UDPs have been welcomed to properties in Highland since the scheme was announced in March 2022.

- 5.8 The Resettlement Team, along with other Council Services and partner agencies including the NHS and HLH, have helped sponsors supporting UDPs with the administration of host payments; access to benefits; facilitating English language classes; providing employability support; developing links to higher education; and other means to help the households integrate into Highland life. Many UDPs have resettled in Highland very successfully and been well supported by community groups to integrate into local life. They have gained employment, and their children have engaged extremely well in local schools. Some consider Scotland to now be their new home, while others advise they intend to return to Ukraine as soon as it is safe to do so.
- 5.9 Since June 2022, under the 'Warm Scottish Welcome' scheme, the Scottish Government has placed Ukrainians in temporary hotel accommodation in response to the high number of Ukrainians arriving in Scotland and seeking sanctuary. At its peak, arrivals in December 2022 to Highland resulted in 7 hotels across the area accommodating 412 UDPs which comprised of singles, couples and many families. The final hotel is due to close to Ukrainians in May 2025. Over the last two years, the Resettlement Team has collaborated with Scottish Government colleagues and teams in other local authorities, in line with the Move-on Policy issued by Scottish Government, to support UDPs with their housing options. Some families chose to remain in Highland in private rentals or were successful in obtaining social tenancies. Some have been able to return to Ukraine, while others were supported into properties in other local authorities in Scotland.
- 5.10 As a result of international conflicts, it is likely that there may be further complex resettlement schemes which have not been formally announced as yet.
- 5.11 **Community events**  
Across all our resettlement and refugee programmes we have a number of achievements and events that can be celebrated. Some of these are detailed in photographs at **Appendix 2** of this report.
- 5.12 The Afghan end of resettlement celebration in August 2024 saw the completion of the resettlement programme of the first 8 families under ARAP scheme. The event was celebrated by the families, volunteers and business partners who have supported them in their journey to build a new life in Highland. The date was specifically selected by the families as it marked the 3-year anniversary of their arrival in the UK after having been evacuated from Afghanistan and it was a joyful evening of music, delicious food sharing and connecting with the community. Expressions of gratitude for the support were made by the families to New Start Highland, Highlife Highland and The Highland Council among others who have contributed to their integration into the local community. The Syrian end of resettlement celebration is due to be held in May 2025.
- 5.13 Comraich will be facilitating a number of events as part of the annual Refugee Week in June 2025. Comraich are also hosting a Highland Games event in Inverness for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children from other local authorities in Scotland. The project continues to link in with wider community, third sector partners and community groups such as the Humans of the Highlands and the Trees for Life programme. Among the achievements of the young people are: a number have passed their driving test; a young person selected to play cricket for Scotland; a young person who has had their artwork published; and a number of young persons engaging in leadership awards as part of education employability programmes.

#### **5.14 Employability**

With the support of Adult Learning at the Council, two young Afghans applied for paid work offered to Young Leaders with lived experience of forced displacement. They were successful and are now working as part of the Compass Collective Organisation at Eden Court and Cameron Barracks on Inspiring Young Voices, a three-month theatre performance project for the Refugee Youth in Inverness. One of the Syrian families set up their own business in June 2024 and now have their own placement on the Highland Food and Drink Trail along the banks of the River Ness. The Falafel Shop serves authentic Middle Eastern cuisine and have proved very popular with locals and tourists.

#### **5.15 Education**

Adult Learning at the Council support Afghans to apply for courses at UHI, both ESOL and non-ESOL. Several Afghans have passed their driving theory test. One learner who arrived with no prior knowledge of English in 2023 has now passed their driving theory and is studying at UHI. Several Ukrainian children who arrived in Highland and were living in temporary hotel accommodation attended secondary schools in Aviemore and Inverness. They successfully worked towards their National 5 and Higher exams, achieving passes in all their subjects.

### **6 City of Sanctuary Organisational Background**

6.1 The Council of Sanctuary is part of a framework of awards which sits under The City of Sanctuary UK. City of Sanctuary UK's vision is for UK to be a welcoming place of safety and be proud to offer a place of sanctuary from those fleeing persecution and violence. The City of Sanctuary UK supports a network of groups including cities, towns, village, boroughs, and regions across the UK and others engaged in the Streams of Sanctuary, Sanctuary Award, and activities to support those seeking sanctuary.

6.2 As a local authority the Council can apply for a Sanctuary Award and become a Council of Sanctuary. The Sanctuary Award process is a strategic framework for culture and institutional change within a local organisation that ensures they create a welcoming environment for people seeking sanctuary and they are active in the wider movement of safeguarding and promoting rights for those in need of sanctuary. The award process is tailored to the specific contextual challenges and opportunities within our local authority and our role in supporting those seeking sanctuary.

### **7 Council of Sanctuary Award Process**

7.1 There are nine steps to achieving a Council of Sanctuary Award. The first of these is to publicly commit to joining the network, with the second step to join the membership. The third step is engaging with local refugee organisations and those with lived experience. Through our existing partnerships, we are already doing this and have formed a working group in advance and have met with the City of Sanctuary co-ordinator for fuller information on process. From this meeting, we have been invited to attend the local authority network meetings, which do not require membership.

- 7.2 Step 4 is developing a strategy and framework for supporting young people seeking sanctuary in our community by embedding the principles across Council services. It can be a standalone strategy or part of an existing one and can focus on reviewing/uplifting Council services or develop partnership services. As part of this the Council would review the LEARN, EMBED, and SHARE criteria and subsequently submit the Award application (step 5). The criteria are noted in the next section.
- 7.3 Step 6 is the application being appraised by a panel and if minimum criteria are met, Highland is granted a Council of Sanctuary for a three-year period (step 7). Step 8 is the Award presentation and there is request that there is a publicised event to celebrate the Award.
- 7.4 Step 9 is any recommendations from the appraisal process should be discussed and actioned over the three-year period, after three years we can apply for reaccreditation.

## **8 Council of Sanctuary Minimum Criteria, Cost, Advice and Highland Area Interest Group**

- 8.1 The award process encourages local authorities to build on the minimal criteria specific to their context. The minimum criteria are:-
1. Pass a Council motion setting out commitment.
  2. Join the local authority network, pledge support, and endorse the charter.
  3. Commitment to work with the City of Sanctuary group and other refugee organisations.
  4. Show evidence of working with the City of Sanctuary group and other refugee organisations received endorsement for application from them.
- 8.2 We already have step 3 in process through the creation of our working group. The Sanctuary Awards process follows the LEARN, EMBED, SHARE principles and these criteria also need to be evidenced as part of the process. The full detail of these is in **Appendix 3**.
- 8.3 The cost for the Award for the three-year period is £2,100. The Comraich service has secured additional funding over the past financial year and is able to meet the full cost of this without any cost to Highland Council.
- 8.4 Perth & Kinross Council have kindly provided Highland with their proposals to use as a benchmark, and they have advised that their process took around 9 months. The City of Sanctuary Co-ordinator will connect Highland with other authorities to share their frameworks and models as part of sharing best practice across areas when applying for the Award. The Headteacher of Lochardil Primary School in Inverness has also been invited to the Highland working group. This school has already been granted School of Sanctuary status.
- 8.5 As noted, a working group has been established. The group has met twice and has representatives from Highland Council and Highland Third Sector partners.

8.6 There are 29 local authorities in the United Kingdom that have been granted this award to date. Achieving Council of Sanctuary would reflect Highland's commitment and achievements in supporting resettlement and humanitarian projects in recent years.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive - Place

Date: 22 April 2025

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Home to Highland

Background Papers: None

Appendices: Appendix 1 – Integrated Impact Assessment Screening  
Appendix 2 – Photographs of celebration events  
Appendix 3 – Learn, Embed, Share criteria

**Integrated Impact Assessment Screening Summary  
Council of Sanctuary Award**

**Equalities, poverty, and human rights**

The screening highlighted potential positive impacts as a result of the proposal on the protected characteristics of religion and belief, race and on age - young people and also a positive socio-economic impact.

The work of the Resettlement Partnership is to ensure people coming to Highland are provided with support to integrate and settle and where appropriate employment and learning opportunities.

A potential positive impact is also anticipated on the human rights of people seeking asylum, refuge or resettlement, specifically in relation to protection from discrimination.

**Children's Rights**

A positive impact on children's rights is anticipated as a result of enhancing and improving the services which children (within the asylum, refugee or resettlement population in Highland) receive from Highland Council and partner organisations.



## Appendix 2 – Photographs of celebration events



End of Resettlement Support Event August 2024



### **Appendix 3 - Learn, Embed, Share criteria, City of Sanctuary framework**

#### **Learn Criteria**

1. Awareness raising opportunities and provided and opportunities for discussion of welcome and sanctuary re facilitated at a community level.
2. Evidence of refugee/asylum/migration awareness raising is included into everyday business i.e. induction/training.
3. Commitment to platform and amplify voices of people seeking sanctuary, which can be meaningful engagement on strategy development or sanctuary forum.

#### **Embed criteria.**

4. Provide written strategy, standalone or broader. This should be co-produced and have a clear and transparent plan to supporting people with no recourse to public funds.
5. Demonstrate how we have embedded the concepts of welcome and inclusion across organisation.
6. Demonstrate a commitment to being anti racist and policies and practices in place that align to their work to become a Council of Sanctuary

#### **Share criteria.**

7. Publicly highlighting the work in support of welcome and inclusion by making it visible on websites/noticeboards. When the award is received it is expected the logo is on the website with t a link to the City of Sanctuary website.
8. Commitment to supporting initiatives that embeds welcome and fosters solidarity i.e. participation in refugee week or other cultural events.
9. Commitment to ongoing engagement with the City of Sanctuary network.
10. Work with the national local authority network sand partners to identify policy issues to support collective representation to the government.