



Hackney Borough of Sanctuary Framework and Action Plan 2026-2029

Foreword from Mayor Caroline Woodley

Hackney has a proud history of migration. From those arriving on the Empire Windrush to communities fleeing conflict, Hackney has always been a place to find sanctuary. The work we're doing to formally become a Borough of Sanctuary pays tribute to this history. Our plans demonstrate our commitment to ensuring that Hackney will remain a place where migrants, refugees and people seeking asylum are welcomed, supported and able to thrive.



I want to recognise the work that my Cabinet lead Carole Williams, together with officers at Hackney Council, and in close collaboration with our partner networks, have done to move towards becoming a Borough of Sanctuary. Our action plan will be delivered in partnership with a dedicated team of Sanctuary Ambassadors and shaped by people's lived experience of seeking sanctuary.

In Hackney, we know that a community that is inclusive, welcoming and compassionate allows everyone to thrive. We have one of the most diverse populations in the country. The last census reported that 89 languages are spoken across our borough and 40% of Hackney residents were born outside of the UK. This diversity is at the heart of what makes Hackney such a culturally dynamic, open and creative community.

Hackney has always been a campaigning council and throughout the Borough of Sanctuary process we have taken opportunities to advocate for migrant rights, as well as sharing Hackney residents' views on the value of migration with the Government and City Hall. We love being a part of London's Loved and Wanted campaign and will always challenge anti-migrant rhetoric that seeks to divide our communities.

This framework and action plan mark Hackney Council's commitment to ensuring our borough remains an open, inclusive and supportive community for those fleeing persecution.

The cover image is a piece of art created by a Hackney resident, Ibrahim Abdul Jabbar, who claimed asylum in the UK and lived in Hackney while awaiting the outcome of his application.

Foreword from Councillor Carole Williams, Cabinet Member for Employment, Human Resources, and Equalities



Hackney's Borough of Sanctuary Framework and Action Plan is being launched at a time when racism, religious hatred, and anti-migrant rhetoric are rising nationally, with record levels of racially, and religiously aggravated offences and sharp increases in hate crimes. Yet, alongside this deeply troubling context, more local authorities are stepping up as places for sanctuary, and communities across the country are visibly organising in solidarity with migrants, refugees and people seeking asylum. Hackney's decision in 2023 to formalise its status as a Borough of Sanctuary, and our membership of the City of Sanctuary Local Authority network places us firmly within this hopeful and growing movement for welcome, dignity and safety.

As Cabinet Member with responsibility for the Borough of Sanctuary Framework, there is a clear commitment that Hackney will not be a bystander in these times. This plan sets out how we will turn our values into action, making Hackney a place where people seeking sanctuary feel safe, a sense of belonging, are able to participate and thrive. It recognises the strength, resilience and contributions of migrants and refugee communities, and it approaches sanctuary as a matter of rights, justice and shared futures.

The Action Plan has been co-produced through a Steering Group, bringing together Council and NHS staff, voluntary and community sector partners, and, most importantly, Sanctuary Ambassadors who have lived experience of seeking sanctuary. Co-production has shaped both the priorities and the spirit of this work, ensuring that our commitments respond directly to lived reality and to the solutions proposed by those most affected.

Hackney's pledge to become a Borough of Sanctuary is inseparable from our commitment to anti-racist practice. Delivering this plan will mean new ways of working across services and portfolios, and sustained collaboration with partners and communities. It is central to who we are as a borough and Labour administration, not a tick box exercise to be set aside with the political weather changes.

My sincere gratitude goes to the officers for their personal and professional dedication and passion for advocating for migrant communities. Their work in delivering this plan, grounded in the lived experiences of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, clearly focuses on building a welcoming, hopeful, and inclusive Hackney for all.

Foreword from Rafie, a Sanctuary Ambassador and member of our Steering Group

When I first arrived in Hackney, I was not yet a refugee. I was seeking asylum and lived in a hotel for over a year and a half with others who had also fled war, conflict, and crisis. That time was extremely difficult – we had lost everything, and did not know what the future would hold.

Despite these challenges, I felt lucky to be placed in Hackney because of the support we received. Organisations were available to listen and support us from when we arrived, helping us understand the asylum system, register with a GP, access specialist support and raise concerns about issues like food.

Sitting in the hotel all day is very difficult, so I volunteered with Migrants Organise as an interpreter, and created a Sudanese social group in Hackney linking residents with newly arrived asylum seekers. Through this work, I connected with Hackney Council and joined the conversation about what it would mean to be a Borough of Sanctuary. I helped deliver workshops to the voluntary sector, and co-designed the action plan as a member of the Steering Group.



For me, Hackney becoming a Borough of Sanctuary is a commitment to recognising the power of activating communities, and working in partnership to improve the support available for sanctuary seekers. When people from different backgrounds can sit together, share their cultures, and solve problems together, stress is reduced, and people can rebuild their lives.

This Action Plan sets out a clear strategy to make life better for sanctuary seekers, increasing key services like English classes, improving the quality of services through training, and creating a clear workplan to explore the development of new services holding the voice of those with lived experience central within the process.

It's been an amazing experience to be part of the development of the Borough of Sanctuary Action Plan, and I have greatly enjoyed meeting people and sharing our different experiences to think deeply about the changes we can make to improve the lives of Sanctuary Seekers. I believe that this action plan will help Hackney grow into an even stronger sanctuary, building on the great things already happening across the borough.

Key definitions

Asylum seeker / person seeking asylum	A person who is seeking international protection. In the UK, it applies to someone who has made a claim for asylum with the Home Office, often on the basis of persecution in their home country.
Refugee	A person who has been recognised as a refugee by the government (i.e. has a valid claim for asylum). Refugees in the UK are granted limited leave to remain, can work, and can access public funds.
Migrant	Anybody who has moved from one country to another, either voluntarily or involuntarily.
Sanctuary seeker	We use this term to recognise anyone who has migrated involuntarily e.g. because of war or persecution. This includes people seeking asylum, refugees, and people who have arrived as part of a government scheme such as Homes for Ukraine or the Afghan Resettlement Programme.
Hackney Council	Hackney Council (or London Borough of Hackney) is the local government body in Hackney. It is responsible for a number of local public services including education, social care, and housing. Hackney includes areas such as Hoxton, Haggerston, Homerton, Clapton, and Stoke Newington.
Resettlement / resettlement scheme	Resettlement occurs where a person/family has been recognised as a refugee and is supported to move to another country, such as the UK. The Afghan Resettlement Programme is an example of this.
Unaccompanied asylum-seeking child (UASC)	A child who arrives in the UK alone, and makes a claim for asylum. They receive support from local authorities as a looked-after child.
No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)	A condition whereby an individual, because of their immigration status, cannot access certain types of support (for example welfare benefits). For example, this can apply to people who don't have a valid visa to be in the UK, as well as those who do have a valid visa but have a condition on it that they cannot access public funds.

Introduction

This framework has been developed as part of Hackney Council's commitment to becoming a Council of Sanctuary. We use the phrase 'borough' of sanctuary in recognition of the fact that feeling welcome extends beyond the local authority, and is relevant for a person's experience of many different organisations and services. We seek to use our influence and resources to support the borough as a whole to feel like a place of sanctuary.

We are committed to embedding a culture and practice of welcome within Hackney Council, and to work in close partnership with residents and organisations in Hackney which are supporting refugees, migrants, and people seeking asylum - or '**sanctuary seekers**'. We do so in recognition of the significant contributions made by sanctuary seekers to the borough, which in turn benefit the wider community in Hackney.

Hackney is a diverse and dynamic borough, but faces structural challenges in housing affordability, poverty and climate vulnerability. The Mayor's focus on these three areas underpins Hackney's Strategic Plan with a focus on:

Working together... for a fairer, safer Hackney

Working together... for a greener, healthier Hackney

Working together... for every child in Hackney

This framework is a key part of our Strategic Plan and our wider Equality Plan. The Equality Plan brings together key frameworks, including the Anti-Racism Framework, and the Poverty Reduction Framework, to work with communities to identify and eradicate poverty and racial inequality at every life stage. Hackney Council is committed to embedding equality, equity, diversity, inclusion and belonging across our services. This work brings together our legal duties on equality, our focus on fair outcomes (equity), the diversity of our communities and workforce, and the practical conditions that allow people to participate fully (inclusion) and feel part of the organisation and of the borough (belonging).

This framework presents an opportunity for us to develop a detailed plan about our work with sanctuary seekers for the next three years. We passed a motion in 2023 to become a Borough of Sanctuary, and we take our role as a local authority seriously with regards to being a place of welcome. Hackney has a strong history of communities living and working together, but in an increasingly fragmented world, we recognise that we are not immune from external events and influences that seek to destabilise communities and breed distrust and division.

Our action plan was co-produced by a Steering Group comprising Council and NHS staff, representatives from the voluntary and community sector, and Sanctuary Ambassadors - Hackney residents with lived experience of migration. It was also informed by a number of contributions from other voluntary organisations, residents, and staff across the Council. We are grateful for their contributions, and look forward to continuing to work closely with partners on implementing our action plan over the next three years.

A history of seeking sanctuary in Hackney

Hackney has a long history of migration, and people have moved to the area for hundreds of years in search of new opportunities - sometimes by choice, and sometimes by circumstance. The borough has been enriched by the settlement of new communities, and our diversity is now our strength. As a result of conflict and persecution, many communities have sought sanctuary in Britain over the last 500 years, and Hackney has provided a place for many people to live, work and call 'home'.

Early records of people seeking sanctuary

In the early 1800s, Russian and Eastern European Jews came to East London to escape persecution and hardship. Many worked in small workshops, especially in clothing and shoe making. They contributed to the borough's bustling markets and cultural life, bringing their own language, Yiddish, a mix of German, Polish and Hebrew.

A place of refuge during the World Wars

During the First World War (1914-1919), around 3000 Belgian refugees passed through Hackney. They found shelter in places such as the Salvation Army refuge on Mare Street. Leading up to and during the Second World War (1939-1945), Hackney and other areas of London became a place of refuge for sanctuary seekers from China, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and other countries.

Hackney's residents also played a critical role in the efforts to rescue Jewish children from the Holocaust, known as the Kindertransports. Rabbi Solomon Schonfeld personally organised the rescue of 3,500 children, and many children were offered safe places to live in Stamford Hill, including Schonfeld's own family home on Lordship Park in Stoke Newington.

Communities affected by war in the late twentieth century

In the 1980s, following the Vietnam War, Hackney Council supported a government scheme and offered housing to approximately 120 Vietnamese families. Many more moved to the area to be close to family members. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Hackney welcomed a large number of Turkish people from mainland Turkey, as well as people from the Kurdish community who had fled persecution in Turkey, Iraq and Iran. Hackney also welcomed sanctuary seekers affected by the Biafran War of independence in Nigeria, and civil war in Sierra Leone, as well as Somalis fleeing armed conflict and persecution.

Sanctuary seekers in Hackney today

Hackney Council has welcomed sanctuary seekers to the borough through different humanitarian routes. The Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) was launched in 2014 to offer sanctuary to people displaced by the conflict in Syria. Between 2016 and 2019, 35 people were resettled in Hackney under this scheme. In response to the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan in 2021, the government launched the Afghan

Resettlement Programme to support Afghan citizens to relocate to the UK, focusing those at risk because of their previous work for or with the UK government. Hackney has welcomed a number of families from Afghanistan through this scheme. Since the Homes for Ukraine scheme launched in 2022, Hackney has welcomed over 450 Ukrainians to the borough - thanks to the generosity of Hackney residents. There are approximately 700 people seeking asylum residing in Hackney at any given time, as they are placed in the borough by the Home Office while their claims are processed.

Hackney Museum

In 1987 Hackney Council opened Hackney Museum to 'enhance understanding of the many cultures which make up Hackney'. Museum staff work with communities with experiences of migration, and people's stories are told through exhibitions and displays, public events, online content and our learning programme with schools.

School sessions at Hackney Museum explore stories of individuals who have made Hackney their home, and pupils learn about people who came to Hackney seeking sanctuary. Through our annual Refugee Week learning programme, local primary school pupils meet with local residents who share their lived experiences of coming to Hackney as child refugees.

Residents can visit Hackney Museum once it reopens in 2027 to find out more about the histories of diverse communities in the borough and understand how different people's experiences fit alongside others'.



Caption: Suitcases are used to share stories of migration with school children. This suitcase is filled with items relating to a child's story of fleeing Vietnam, including drawings she made of her journey.

Hackney Archives

Hackney Archives' mission is to collect, preserve and share Hackney's history by building our knowledge of the past for a more positive future. In valuing people through history, we are passionately committed to documenting communities and migration in Hackney.

Our work is centred on people and collaboration, valuing personal testimony and lived experience. We

[placeholder for image of archives/archival material]

<p>create opportunities for people to share knowledge, engage with Hackney's community history collections, which we achieve by partnering with local organisations and residents. In recent years, this work has included the An Viet Foundation project at Hackney Archives, a collaboration between Hackney Chinese Community Services and Hackney Council, successfully preserving the largest known archive of British-Vietnamese history for future generations.</p>	
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The voices and experiences of residents

The voices and experiences of residents are fundamental to our work. We are grateful to some Hackney residents who, as we put this framework together, shared their experiences and what sanctuary and inclusion mean to them.

<p>"I arrived from Afghanistan in 2021 and was accommodated in the borough of Hackney. I am grateful for the support provided through refugee programs within this borough and receiving services through organisations like Groundwork. Their help was valuable in guiding me and my family through the early stages of settlement, education, housing, and to understand the system and procedures of essential services such as electricity, gas, water, rent, and council tax. I learned how to manage these responsibilities confidently to make my settling into life in a new country much easier. I also truly appreciate that my daughters can now attend school — something impossible back home. Moreover, a consistent and suitable support is needed for refugees to rebuild their lives with dignity and stability."</p>
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<p>Afghan individual who arrived in Hackney in 2021</p>
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<p>"I am grateful to have had the opportunity to express my views regarding the kindness of the Council. This opportunity allowed me to share my experiences and appreciation for your support, guidance, and companionship, and to show how these actions have fostered a sense of safety, belonging, and hope in our lives.</p>

<p>When my sister and I arrived in Hackney, we felt scared and uncertain about the future. From the very first days, the people of the area and Groundwork welcomed us with kindness, respect, and a deep understanding of our situation. The council and local organisations supported us as if we were family — guiding us with housing and education, helping us learn the language, and ensuring access to healthcare. Their support at every step made us feel safe and valued.</p>
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Hackney is more than just a place to live; it is a safe, humane, and welcoming home. Here, we learned that a “sanctuary” is not only a place of physical safety but also a space for growth, hope, and belonging.

I truly believe that showing solidarity with refugees and migrants is a profound act of humanity and social justice. When councils demonstrate this commitment in practice, they create communities where everyone feels respected, included, and equal.

For me, Hackney represents kindness, collaboration, and hope - a place where I could once again embrace the dream of a peaceful and fulfilling life. It is a community that reminds us of the importance of inclusion, compassion, and support for all who seek sanctuary.”

Afghan individual who arrived in Hackney in 2021

“I came to Hackney in June 2022.

The borough supported us in education, housing and everything.

When a borough stands with refugees it gives a strong message that everyone deserves respect, support, and dignity.

For me Sanctuary means feeling safe.

Inclusion is important because it helps everyone feel belonging in the place. In the community. And make the community stronger together.”

Afghan individual who arrived in Hackney in 2021

“My family came to Hackney from East Africa in the early 1990s, seeking stability, opportunity, and a sense of belonging. Hackney became our first (my siblings and I were born at Homerton) and only real home — a place where different cultures, languages and faiths came together. I grew up surrounded by that diversity, which shaped how I view community, fairness and inclusion today.

The borough supported my family in countless ways — through access to education, housing, and compassionate staff who took the time to understand our needs. I remember going with my mum to appointments where she was treated with patience and respect. Those experiences inspired me to one day give back to the same community that helped us settle.

For me, sanctuary means safety and acceptance — being able to live authentically without fear of exclusion or judgement. It's more than protection; it's about creating spaces where people can thrive and belong.

It's vital that councils show solidarity with refugees and migrants, because they are often the first place people turn for help. Demonstrating compassion and inclusion isn't just good

practice — it's who we are in Hackney. Inclusion ensures everyone feels valued and heard, which strengthens our community and the borough's proud spirit of welcome."

Hackney Council staff member

"I came to England when I was 7 years old in 1979. It was just my dad and I. My mum, sister and brother were left behind. My dad was a university professor & councillor in South Vietnam, due to be imprisoned for his protests and activities against the government after the war.

Hackney Borough has supported us initially by offering us housing. We had a warm welcome at the refugee camps and in Hackney. My father wanted to give something back. He set up a Community Centre that existed for over 30 years. The Council supported him by helping him find a centre to rent. He helped the Vietnamese community to help themselves, become self-sufficient. It contributed to Hackney's vibrancy today.

Sanctuary to me means a place of "rest". Rest, where you can find some peace without watching over your shoulders all the time. It gave us the opportunity to start from nothing and rebuild our lives whilst never forgetting the welcome that we had.

Inclusion is important as it gave us the humility to acknowledge the help we've been given. To try to respect others as we've been there ourselves. To know that we exist as part of the whole wider community."

Vietnamese individual who arrived in the UK as a child in 1979

"When I first arrived in the UK, everything felt overwhelming. I didn't know the rules of the country, I didn't speak English, and I was full of stress and fear as my family tried to find safety in a new environment. Hackney offered us support at a time when we needed it the most. In the beginning, communication was difficult, but step by step we received the help and guidance we needed, as well as housing that was essential for me and my family. We are deeply grateful for the care, patience, and support we received. Hackney helped us feel safe and start rebuilding our lives."

A Ukrainian resident who arrived as a child through Homes for Ukraine

"When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022 I was absolutely horrified. The sight of thousands and thousands of people, mainly women and children, trying to get to the border to evacuate, completely broke my heart. I knew I had to do something more than

just provide charitable donations, and when the Government's Homes for Ukraine scheme opened up, so did my path forward.

I established a connection with three Ukrainians, one of them a child, and we took it from there. For all of us it was a complete step into the unknown. They didn't just need shelter, they needed help in navigating the UK system from getting buses, to opening bank accounts, to getting into a school, and so on. That's why the Homes for Ukraine scheme was so good: because the host could help with all of this.

Hackney were incredibly supportive. They fully vetted me and my house before my guests arrived, they were in touch regularly, and they provided access to numerous forms of support, moral and financial. It was a great team effort by the UK Government, local government, and individuals."

Hackney resident and Homes for Ukraine host

"Sanctuary, to me, is a place where I see myself in peace, where I am understood, and where I feel that I am a valued person. It is a place where I receive support, where I can begin a new life, and where I don't have to fear the dangers and difficulties I came from. [Showing solidarity with people seeking sanctuary] is important because asylum seekers need an opportunity to start a peaceful life. When the local council shows support, it builds trust, strengthens community connection, and shows that everyone has a place where they feel they belong.

To me, sanctuary means having a place where you can breathe again. It's somewhere you feel safe and welcomed, even when everything else in your life has been uncertain. Growing up in Hackney while seeking asylum, I found a sense of calm and belonging that helped me feel like I had a future. [Showing solidarity with people seeking sanctuary] matters because people seeking sanctuary often arrive with very little, not just in terms of belongings but also support. When a Council shows understanding and stands with them, it makes a huge difference. It helps people rebuild their lives with dignity and feel like they are part of the community."

Care leaver, who sought asylum as a child in Hackney

Our values and principles

Hackney Council is a proud member of the **City of Sanctuary Local Authority Network**, and we are aligned with the City of Sanctuary's values.

These are:

- **Inclusive** - we welcome and respect people from all backgrounds, place the highest value on diversity and are committed to equality.
- **Open** - we are committed to a culture of working collaboratively across the City of Sanctuary networks and in partnership with others.
- **Participation** - we work with people seeking sanctuary and value and recognise the contribution of all. We aspire to ensure people seeking sanctuary are involved in all decision making and are supported to become leaders in the organisation, networks, and the wider movement.
- **Inspire** - we work with enthusiasm and positivity and are determined to surpass what has already been achieved. We act as a catalyst for change by being open to new and innovative ideas, sharing knowledge and working in partnership.
- **Integrity** - we aspire to high standards of honesty and behaviour, and always to act in the interests of people seeking sanctuary.

We take a person-centred approach to our work and recognise that sanctuary seekers have different experiences and needs, and therefore there is no singular way in which to support sanctuary seekers. However, across all communities and all new residents in Hackney, the following principles shape our work.

1. Centring anti-racist practice in our work

In July 2020, Hackney Council adopted a motion to work towards being an anti-racist organisation. Since then, the Council has developed and published an Anti-Racism Framework, informed by staff, residents, and community and statutory partners, seeking to change as an institution, identify and eradicate racial inequality at every life stage, and celebrate and serve our diverse communities. This approach also recognises and seeks to address the multiple and intersecting inequalities affecting residents (such as age, gender, disability, and sexual orientation and identity).

The fact remains that there are many people in the UK who believe that racism does not exist, whilst many communities across the country feel increasingly unsafe and unwelcome. The hostile environment persists, and we are witnessing a deeply concerning increase in the normalisation of racist narratives - we see this often in conversations about immigration and migrants. It means that our work to be a Borough of Sanctuary is inseparable from anti-racism and our efforts to deconstruct the power and effects of racial inequality. It is vital that our work supporting sanctuary seekers is shaped by anti-racist practice. This includes recognising our position as a local authority as one of power, being transparent with

residents about what that means, and exploring how we can build trust with residents as well as support trusted local organisations. Through this framework and action plan, we are taking steps to be active in the work to tackle racial inequality.

2. Co-producing our work with residents

Coproduction is central to Hackney Council's approach to designing and delivering services. Rooted in the Council's Strategic Plan, Community Strategy, Equality Plan, Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy, and Anti-Racism Framework, it means working with residents, community groups, and partners to shape decisions and solutions together. By valuing lived experience, coproduction helps us build trust, improve outcomes, and ensure services truly reflect local needs. We see coproduction as a vital framework for embedding anti-racism throughout our work. When done properly, it provides a methodology for sharing power and challenging structural barriers in partnership with racialised communities.

Our Borough of Sanctuary Action Plan has been co-produced in full partnership with Sanctuary Ambassadors, all of whom had experience seeking sanctuary in Hackney. Sanctuary Ambassadors ran workshops with voluntary and community sector organisations in April 2025, and evaluated the outputs to produce a robust set of feedback and evidence which informed the Steering Group's work. Five Ambassadors also joined the Steering Group, collaborating with local organisations and Council officers to develop the action plan.

Hackney's Sanctuary Ambassadors have approached this process with enthusiasm and unwavering commitment to improving the lives of sanctuary seekers across the borough. Their reflections, ideas, and stories have enriched the work of the Steering Group and helped us produce an action plan we are proud of. We are deeply grateful for their time, expertise, and dedication.

3. Using a trauma-informed approach

We recognise that many individuals who come to Hackney seeking sanctuary have experienced significant trauma, including displacement, persecution, violence, and loss. Our approach follows the principles of trauma-informed practice, ensuring that staff and partners are sensitive to these experiences. It's important that we prioritise building safety, trust, and emotional wellbeing in all interactions.

For us, being trauma-informed means understanding the impact of past experiences on a person's ability to engage with services, and tailoring our support accordingly. We focus on building safe and respectful relationships, offering choices wherever possible, and providing consistent, transparent communication. This approach also emphasises empowerment, ensuring that sanctuary seekers have a voice in decisions that affect their lives, and providing opportunities throughout our work for individuals to take on leadership roles and build confidence. Many sanctuary seekers navigate hostile environments, racism and xenophobia, and so we see the provision of opportunities to build safe relationships and confidence as a fundamental approach within our work.

In practice, a trauma-informed approach includes providing staff training on trauma awareness, working closely with voluntary and community organisations to provide specialist support, and designing services that minimise re-traumatisation. Our trauma-informed approach is embedded in the co-production of initiatives like the Borough of Sanctuary Action Plan, ensuring that sanctuary seekers are partners in shaping services, rather than passive recipients. By recognising and responding to the impact of trauma, Hackney Council strives to create an environment where sanctuary seekers feel that they belong, and that they are safe, supported, and able to thrive in our borough.

4. Focusing on prevention and early action

Small problems can grow and become bigger problems that feel overwhelming if they are not addressed properly early on. This can affect sanctuary seekers more than some others - for example because of language barriers, difficulties navigating complex systems of support, and correlated disadvantages like poverty. This means that it's important that services recognise that rather than seeking to treat everyone equally, we need to provide support based on individual needs and experiences.

Fear or distrust of public services can mean that many sanctuary seekers do not approach services for support. A person's immigration status may mean they are not eligible for services, or that the complexity of the immigration system leads to them being incorrectly turned away by professionals. We see repeated examples of crises occurring which might have been avoided through earlier intervention.

Everyone benefits when residents are able to access the support they need at the right time. It is critical that services keep sanctuary seekers safe and healthy, and reduce barriers to accessing support. This means that service providers in the borough should be knowledgeable of the issues facing sanctuary seekers and that they change the way they work accordingly. This might include practical factors like offering interpreters, considering where and when appointments are offered, or how information is provided. Just as important is whether sanctuary seekers feel genuinely welcome in spaces and feel a sense of belonging, which relies on staff working to deconstruct power hierarchies in the way they work with residents.

We believe that all communities can benefit when we work more preventatively. We hope that supporting people earlier and creating the conditions for people in the community to support each other will help sanctuary seekers to thrive in Hackney.

5. Working in partnership

Hackney benefits from a large, vibrant, and vital network of voluntary and community organisations, many of which play a significant role in the lives of sanctuary seekers in the borough. They are trusted, safe spaces for sanctuary seekers, and they are rooted in Hackney's communities. Some of the best support that people receive is not through formal services, but through community networks and organisations that people draw on for social and practical support. Any Borough of Sanctuary needs to value the wider infrastructure that makes these community networks possible.

We seek to work in close partnership with these organisations, as we understand that some residents will feel nervous to approach local government services. We will convene networks and work collaboratively with other services and organisations (including the NHS, primary and secondary healthcare, the police, faith groups and the voluntary and community sector) so that Hackney feels like a borough of sanctuary to its residents. Partnership working extends also to central government, and across asylum, resettlement, and migration policy, we actively seek opportunities to advocate for change and to platform the voices and experiences of residents.

It was local faith groups and the Hackney Refugee and Migrant Forum which first initiated the call for Hackney Council to become a Borough of Sanctuary. It was through their work supporting sanctuary seekers that they recognised the importance of being vocal in support of migrants and migration. By working in partnership we know we can support thriving and welcoming communities.

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Our journey so far

Hackney Council is engaged in a range of programmes and projects which demonstrate our alignment with the Borough of Sanctuary principles - many of which we do in close partnership with voluntary and community sector partners. This is a strong foundation from which we can continue to build our support for sanctuary seekers in the borough.

Migrant Children and Families

The Migrant Children and Families team works with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and care leavers, and families with insecure immigration status. The team provides innovative and meaningful support to sanctuary seekers, recognising the persecution and mistrust many children and families have experienced from figures in authority before and while in the UK.

The team identifies suitable accommodation for newly-arrived unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and ensures their holistic needs are met, and assesses the needs of families experiencing destitution and homelessness due to their precarious immigration status. The team works with a variety of agencies and specialist services such as University College London Hospital's infectious diseases clinic, GPs, and the Virtual School Service. The team centres the voices of children through a participation group.

The team provides training and workshops to help local partners and practitioners to better understand the immigration needs of children and families in the borough. In line with this, the team has partnered with the South London Refugee Association to work towards the Immigration Pledge, which seeks to take a proactive approach to supporting looked-after children and care leavers with immigration and nationality issues. The team supports children to have their immigration matters resolved as soon as possible, especially for those in the care system, in recognition of the impact of this on wellbeing and belonging.

Welcome Hackney

Welcome Hackney is the Council's dedicated team supporting people seeking sanctuary. The team was created in 2023 to bring together the Homes for Ukraine Scheme, Afghan Resettlement Programme, and support for people seeking asylum living in Home Office accommodation. Since then, the work of the team has expanded. The name 'Welcome Hackney' reflects the service's ambition of being available to all migrants and sanctuary seekers in the borough.

The Welcome Hackney team works directly with residents, connecting them with opportunities and services that help them navigate arrival and support their overall health and wellbeing. The team co-produces projects with sanctuary seekers to meet their needs on a larger scale. This includes initiatives like community kitchens for people seeking asylum without access to cooking facilities, and employability workshops to support people to find education and employment opportunities. In 2023, the team developed Refugee Next Steps, a service for single newly-recognised refugees to find housing and avoid homelessness.



Welcome Hackney also funds support for people seeking asylum in Hackney to access advice and support. Welcome Hackney and Hackney Libraries have also run the weekly *Welcome Hub* at Dalston CLR James Library since May 2024, a drop in service for any residents in Hackney with experience of the immigration system. The Hub welcomes approximately eighty visitors a month, providing advice and support to access local services.

The Welcome Hackney team provides expertise and training to other services in the Council, and coordinates events and activities celebrating and highlighting the contributions of migrants to the borough. The team also uses Hackney Council's institutional power to advocate to other teams and organisations for policy changes that might help prevent issues arising for other people in future. This happens in working groups and forums at different levels - with local partners around key issues such as homelessness, regionally through London Councils and the Greater London Authority, and nationally in forums with the Home Office and Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government.

Culture, Libraries and Heritage

Hackney's libraries, museum, and archives have a long-standing commitment to celebrating and documenting the history of migrant and sanctuary-seeking communities. Staff receive cultural awareness training and subject specialists within our teams deliver training to other council departments, fostering a deeper understanding of Hackney's migration history.

Hackney's eight libraries offer a 'Sanctuary Card' which enables refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers and those living in temporary accommodation the opportunity to sign up to the library without needing to provide a fixed address. We have also expanded our Jewish (Torah), Islamic, Chinese, and Italian book stock collections; hosted author events discussing books about the Windrush scandal and stories of child migration; and forged a new partnership with Dnipro Libraries in Ukraine to aid in the development of a mobile library service in Dnipro.



Events and exhibitions are co-designed with refugees, migrants, and asylum-seeking residents, and community leaders, authors, and creatives. The *More Than a Bundle* exhibition at Hackney Museum, created by Emel Sevinc, explored the experiences of migration and making among the Turkish diaspora in Hackney's garment trade. Hackney's Culture Team continues to deliver the long-standing Hackney Carnival and Black History Season programmes, celebrating the rich culture and heritage of Hackney's migrant communities.

This work across many decades is recognised as foundational to much of the work happening across the council today to support strong and cohesive communities and to build teams that champion the creation of equitable and accessible services for all residents.

English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and Employability

Hackney's Employment, Skills and Adult Learning service seeks to increase opportunity, improve access to learning, and promote socio-economic integration for all residents. The Adult Learning Service serves as a landing point for new arrivals to Hackney, offering a diverse array of courses and activities with clear progression routes. These include informal ESOL and Functional Skills provisions, which act as stepping stones for learners to build confidence, community connections, and successful futures. Recognising that English language learning is a fundamental need for new arrivals, the service rapidly established dedicated classes to welcome and support Ukrainians arriving in the borough in 2022.

In 2025, the service launched the Connect to Work programme, offering up to twelve months of tailored employment support for Hackney residents facing additional barriers to the labour market — including refugees, Ukrainians, and resettled Afghan individuals.

Hate crime and community safety

Hackney Council is deeply committed to our 'No Place for Hate' mission; we are united in our shared determination to challenge prejudice and intolerance wherever it arises. Our Hate Crime Strategy ensures that survivors and communities affected by hate crime receive an integrated partnership response that is sensitive to their needs and proactive in protecting them from hate.

We encourage all residents to learn about how to report a hate crime and to support those who have been affected. We have commissioned Stop Hate UK to provide a dedicated reporting service to Hackney residents, which offers support and guidance throughout the reporting process. Together, we can ensure that Hackney remains a place where everyone feels represented, included, and safe.

Public health

Recognising that migrants arriving in the UK often experience poorer health outcomes than the UK-born population, we work with key partners, including the NHS, the North-East London Integrated Care Board, and GPs, to ensure we are tackling the challenges that many migrants encounter.

Common challenges include missed vaccines, the effects of communicable diseases and long-term conditions (such as diabetes or high blood pressure), late access to maternity services, mental health needs, and language barriers. These challenges are shaped by issues such as social isolation, limited knowledge or access to healthcare, and discrimination. It is essential that Hackney Council and health partners seek to redress this and ensure migrants are able to access timely and effective healthcare when they need it.

Some of our key priorities include supporting timely GP registration and access to primary care for newly arrived migrants and refugees, advocating for targeted outreach and improved access to routine immunisations and screening, working with partners to plan and deliver immunisation catch-up clinics, and ensuring the effective management of infectious disease outbreaks (e.g. measles or flu).

Domestic Abuse Intervention Service

Hackney Council leads pioneering partnership work to support victims/survivors of domestic abuse with No Recourse to Public Funds. The Domestic Abuse Intervention Service provides support in a number of ways, such as providing casework and safeguarding support to protect survivors from harm, working with statutory agencies to take action against perpetrators, providing culturally and language specific services, challenging the Home Office and their accommodation providers when systemic concerns have arisen about women's safety, and delivering training to the workforce to improve the professional system around refugee and asylum-seeking women. It is this record of robust and sensitive support and intervention that evidences the Council's commitment to supporting women and children.

Migrant and refugee women are disproportionately affected by harmful practices such as Female Genital Mutilation, Forced Marriage and 'Honour'-Based Violence. The Domestic Abuse Intervention Service created, in partnership with local organisations and other agencies, the City and Hackney Female Genital Mutilation Protocol, which builds upon national guidance and is the only local protocol in the UK which includes prompts around anti-racist practice, identifying positive strengths within families, and considering trauma to practitioners.

Throughout its work, the service works alongside organisations from Hackney's rich community, voluntary and faith sector to provide tailored support and link residents into services delivered 'by and for' women of particular language and cultural backgrounds.



Ukrainian Cultural Event hosted by Welcome Hackney in July 2024

Our 3-year action plan

Between May and November 2025, a Steering Group comprising Council and NHS staff, representatives from the voluntary and community sector, and Sanctuary Ambassadors (residents with lived experience) met to develop a three year action plan for Hackney



Council's work to support sanctuary seekers, building on what already exists. We are especially grateful to our Sanctuary Ambassadors and voluntary sector partners (Derman, WHEAT Mentor Support, Foreign Affairs, English for Action, and Hackney CVS) for their commitment and dedication.

To shape and support the Steering Group's work, the Welcome Hackney team circulated surveys, met organisations one-on-one, and convened workshops with staff, residents, and local organisations, to gather as much

feedback as possible about sanctuary seekers' experiences with Council services. They also gathered ideas about what residents would like to see in a three year action plan. Our Sanctuary Ambassadors analysed all of this feedback, and the Steering Group discussed and set the priorities for the Council, and agreed the final action plan in November 2025.

In delivering this action plan, we will work in accordance with the values and principles set out in this framework. We will ensure that residents with lived experience and local organisations are at the centre of holding us accountable and ensuring we are delivering on this work.

1	Developing Council services and staff awareness	Lead Directorate
1.1	Introduce training for all Council staff to access, in order to develop staff understanding of sanctuary seekers' rights and entitlements. Incorporate the Borough of Sanctuary Framework into the Council's staff induction and policies across the Council.	Adults, Health, and Integration
1.2	Ensure that interpreting services are available and accessible to all residents accessing Council and local health services, and that they are being applied consistently.	Adults, Health, and Integration
1.3	Explore opportunities as part of our People Strategy to attract and recruit sanctuary seekers seeking employment at Hackney Council.	Finance and Corporate Resources
1.4	Strengthen data collection and sharing practices across the Council, identifying opportunities to improve data collection to inform the delivery of services. Be transparent with residents about why data is being collected, and have a clear process for what we do with the	Adults, Health, and Integration

	information.	
1.5	As part of the Council's equalities work, ensure that the needs of sanctuary seekers are incorporated into the Council's procurement, grant-making, and decision-making processes.	Chief Executive's Directorate
1.6	Continue to work in close partnership with voluntary and community sector organisations supporting sanctuary seekers, facilitating knowledge sharing and best practice networks.	Chief Executive's Directorate
1.7	Reflect the increased risk of exploitation and modern slavery faced by sanctuary seekers in an updated Modern Slavery strategy and new Sexual Exploitation strategy, ensuring appropriate staff are trained in exploitation indicators and referral routes so that we meet our statutory safeguarding duties.	Chief Executive's Directorate
1.8	Proactively consider our participation in all formal resettlement schemes, seeking opportunities to increase the number of sanctuary seekers who can find refuge in Hackney. A proactive approach will be underpinned by Hackney's participation in key central government initiatives such as the Local Authority Housing Fund (LAHF), and resilience planning to ensure we are able to support new community sponsorship and resettlement schemes which emerge as the result of international events.	Adults, Health, and Integration, in partnership with Housing, Climate, and Economy and other services

2	Libraries, Culture, and Heritage	Lead Directorate
2.1	Achieve Libraries of Sanctuary status, embedding a culture of welcome, inclusion, and belonging for all visitors. This includes strengthening internal and external partnerships, continued community engagement, and the hosting of co-located services that support sanctuary seeking communities to access the council, engage with services, and participate in civic life in a safe and welcoming environment.	Housing, Climate, and Economy
2.2	Continue and expand our public-facing events and programmes to foster a welcoming and inclusive community for sanctuary-seekers, with a clear message of support from Hackney Council and an opposition to anti-migrant rhetoric and hate crime. This will include promoting the understanding of migrant histories, cultures, and experiences in our libraries, cultural, and heritage services, and introducing a council-led 'Refugees Welcome Here' campaign engaging local organisations and businesses.	Housing, Climate, and Economy
2.3	Across our libraries, expand our community language collections in key languages and topics that are representative of Hackney's community. In the spirit of Hackney's Community Library Service (established after the Second World War to deliver books to recovering cities) to explore expanding our partnerships with libraries internationally.	Housing, Climate, and Economy

3	English for Speakers of Other Languages, employment, and adult learning	Lead Directorate
3.1	Ensure ESOL classes are accessible and that the process of enrolling is straightforward. We will explore the re-introduction of a Single Point of Contact role for ESOL.	Housing, Climate, and Economy
3.2	Introduce a microgrants programme for informal ESOL opportunities (e.g. conversation clubs).	Housing, Climate, and Economy
3.3	Develop a Hackney 100 work placements programme for sanctuary seekers.	Housing, Climate, and Economy
3.4	As part of the Council's Economic Development Plan, explore how to increase access to employment opportunities for sanctuary seekers, including raising awareness amongst employers, and providing practical support for sanctuary seekers.	Housing, Climate, and Economy
3.5	Introduce more opportunities for sanctuary seekers to co-produce our employability programmes and the ESOL curriculum.	Housing, Climate, and Economy
3.6	Review the Council's ESOL working group and establish priorities, including mapping provision across the borough, and gathering evidence around the barriers to participation (such as travel and childcare costs).	Housing, Climate, and Economy

4	Housing and homelessness	Lead Directorate
4.1	Develop the existing staff training offer to provide enhanced training to frontline housing and homelessness staff, supporting staff to confidently and expertly support sanctuary seekers through the housing system.	Housing, Climate, and Economy
4.2	Lead a journey mapping and gap analysis exercise in partnership with residents, identifying where and when information and support can be expanded to help sanctuary seekers successfully navigate private rental, temporary and social housing pathways.	Housing, Climate, and Economy
4.3	Carefully consider the support options available to sanctuary seekers living in temporary accommodation, identifying areas to enhance the support individuals have - particularly in understanding their options and their rights.	Housing, Climate, and Economy

5	Health	Lead Directorate
5.1	Play an active role in the implementation of North East London's Health and Care Partnership's Health and Homelessness Strategy - especially Pillar 5 (support for people seeking asylum and refuge) - ensuring the voices and experiences of sanctuary seekers in Hackney are accounted for when mapping gaps in support, training needs, and accessibility of information.	Adults, Health, and Integration, in partnership with other services
5.2	Working with Health partners to support all GP surgeries to become accredited Safe Surgeries, ensuring that the intention of this programme is reflected in residents' lived experience of accessing primary care.	Adults, Health, and Integration, in partnership with other services
5.3	Work with Health service partners to deliver more outreach work (including information and advice, screening, immunisations) in community settings.	Adults, Health, and Integration, in partnership with other services
5.4	Embed sanctuary seekers' representation in resident participation processes within public health services and programme design, delivery and evaluation, for example the Community Health Champions Programme.	Adults, Health, and Integration, in partnership with other services
5.5	Map out mental health and wellbeing support available for sanctuary seekers, including for those who are not confident speaking English, identifying any gaps.	Adults, Health, and Integration, in partnership with other services
5.6	Explore actions that can be taken to mitigate the impact of NHS charging and data-sharing rules, and advocate for these rules to be reformed in a manner that does not deter people from seeking healthcare, undermine public health measures and make it harder for healthcare workers to do their jobs.	Adults, Health, and Integration, in partnership with other services

6	Children and young people	Lead Directorate
6.1	Encourage and support Hackney schools to embed the values and practices of Schools of Sanctuary through a culture of welcome, inclusion, and belonging for all pupils. The Council will explore strengthening this through practical support such as an enhanced provision for multilingual students, engagement with parents, and	Children and Education

	provide assistance with accessing school uniforms and meeting other essential needs.	
6.2	Build on existing efforts to embed a trauma-informed approach across all Council services supporting families and children by providing comprehensive training on the unique experiences and needs of sanctuary-seeking families and children, enhancing understanding and inclusive support strategies.	Children and Education
6.3	Ensure that clear and relevant information is accessible to newly arrived sanctuary-seeking families in the borough, supporting their understanding of local services, rights, and opportunities.	Children and Education
6.4	Provide training to key frontline staff, including local GPs, Health Visitors and Hackney Customer Services, to increase awareness of available services for sanctuary-seeking families, strengthen signposting and referral pathways, and improve the identification of mental health, physical health and special educational needs amongst sanctuary seekers.	Adults, Health, and Integration with Children and Education
6.5	Develop opportunities for different teams in the Council to learn from the Migrant Children and Families team, in particular other teams in Children's Services.	Children and Education

7	Asylum and supporting people with no recourse to public funds	Lead Directorate
7.1	Maintain and develop the range of services providing outreach within asylum accommodation to increase residents' access to essential support and resources.	Adults, Health, and Integration
7.2	Explore what best practice is in providing housing/shelter and financial support for individuals with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), particularly people who are fleeing domestic abuse and/or are pregnant.	Adults, Health, and Integration
7.3	Co-create and implement the Council's policy to support people with NRPF with the aim of improving the consistency and quality of advice and support given, including access to personalised guidance and support beyond printed or digital information.	Adults, Health, and Integration
7.4	Work to increase the availability and accessibility of immigration advice and casework for Hackney residents to ensure timely, high-quality support for those in need.	Adults, Health, and Integration