

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb hwn i'r [Pwyllgor Cydraddoldeb a Chyfiawnder Cymdeithasol](#) ar gyfer yr [ymchwiliad i Gydlyniant Cymdeithasol](#)

This response was submitted to the [Equality and Social Justice Committee](#) on the [inquiry into Social Cohesion](#)

SC 02

Ymateb gan: Dyma Ni Befriending, Bangor, Gwynedd

Response from: Dyma Ni Befriending, Bangor, Gwynedd

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### **A joint project of Croeso Menai and Bangor Quakers**

#### **1. BACKGROUND**

May 2022 onwards: Dyma Ni (Here we are)

Following the major invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Bangor and surrounding areas began to receive Ukrainian Asylum Seekers, confirmed in May as Refugees, approximately 120 people in total. Families were housed with existing households, some privately, some through the Council-vetted scheme. Approximately 60 single people were housed in a vacated University Hall of Residence in Bangor. An existing Refugee-sponsoring charity, Croeso Menai, called together churches, chapels and voluntary groups in Bangor to set up Dyma Ni as a welcome hub, which from May 2022 was hosted twice weekly in the Quaker Meeting House. This provided a welcome, food, clothing, suitcases, additional bedding, supported people in accessing language classes, and became a safe base for the Ukrainians to meet and hold craft activities, a birthday party, Christmas celebrations, and a celebration of the life of one that died here.

The Hall of Residence reception building was closed about 15 months later; the Ukrainians found or were found places to live, and some have moved elsewhere. The Dyma Ni (Ukraine) hub started to operate just once a week in summer 2023, and still meets fortnightly (early 2025). This group received generous support from the community.

#### **2. ASYLUM SEEKERS**

Spring 2023 onwards: Dyma Ni Befriending.

Westminster government started to disperse Asylum Seekers from any part of the world across the UK, as far as we are aware without prior warning to enable Local Government to make preparation.

Dyma Ni extended its remit to all Asylum Seekers and Refugees as Dyma Ni Befriending. We support the men, who are almost all alone, plus a few families and solo women, with food, clothing (donated or from charity shops), limited household equipment, travel passes or bus fares, SIM cards, laptops (refurbished) and other necessities for study, access to sports facilities, donated refurbished cycles, gardening in a Health garden, one-off fun activities (drumming; dancing.) During college holidays, we offer structured but informal English-language sessions.

We liaise with Pobl i Bobl, (a group set up years ago to collect and deliver essentials to the Refugee camp in Calais) who arrange social activities such as a weekly snooker, table tennis and board games evening, and one-off activities such as pizza-making, indoor climbing.

### *3. GWYNEDD COUNCIL ASYLUM AND REFUGEE SUPPORT CENTRE*

November 2023 onwards: Initially, before Gwynedd Council's dedicated unit was set up, Dyma Ni Befriending would phone Migrant Help for any Asylum Seeker who had not been issued with his identity card or finance card, and try to find solicitors for them, but by Nov 2023, Gwynedd Council established a support centre that deals with the Home Office, legal support, and housing matters.

### *4. NUMBERS*

We continue to hold the Dyma Ni Befriending hub meeting twice a week. By now (early 2025) we have supported between 50 and 60 people (some families) from 25 nationalities, 16 of whom have gained Refugee status and chosen to relocate. We do not know the overall total number of Asylum Seekers and Refugees in the area, as people are free to choose to come to the hub, finding out about it through leaflets left at the houses in the several languages, and from each other in the shared houses.

### *5. HOW WE ORGANISE*

Dyma Ni and Dyma Ni Befriending have been run entirely by volunteers since the beginning, many with a background in education, health or social services. Safeguarding training, DBS checks, informed consent and confidential record-keeping were set up at the start. We have a group phone that the Asylum Seekers have the number of and can text, including whatsapp. Through this we remind them of Food Bank days, any planned activities, and they communicate their needs. The phone is held by one or another Core-Team member for a week at a time.

There is also a small number of volunteers who are not in the core group. They support with conversation at sessions, helping with food, collecting and distributing donated items, fetching and returning the men that live in Caernarfon.

### *6. FUNDING*

One Core Team member has been successful in making grant applications for funding. (Community Cohesion Fund NW Wales, actual £2,386; Migrant Help community hub grant £3,000; £950 from a Trades Union; £500 from Cytun; £220 wind-up funding from Refugee Tales Cymru; and a little over £200 from individual donations.)

### *7. DIFFICULTIES*

#### *A) The Home Office chaos.*

i) Random waiting time: No-one can understand why some people sail through the application process and gain refugee status in a few months while others wait, in one case even to receive the registration card they should be issued with at the beginning, even though they clearly are on the system as they have been provided with housing and a money card.

Why do some people wait 18 months for the Substantive Interview while others from the same country who arrived later are processed within 6 months? Why do some people receive their Right to Remain within days of the Substantive Interview, while others wait many months after the interview for their decision? We have not been able to find any

statement from the Home Office of target length of time before an Asylum Seeker is called for first interview, how long before the person may be called for a subsequent interview, how long after that for the decision. Our new Member of Parliament has not received this information either, despite her asking for it.

ii) Poorly handled interviews: The men have to travel from Bangor to Liverpool, although they do not meet the interviewer in person but are interviewed via zoom; when one arrived, he found the interview centre was not aware that the interview was booked to take place, although the man had been sent the date time and place and his travel docket; after an interview, quite often the transcript is not provided, and when challenged and the transcript is sent, it is often incorrect e.g. in one case, it stated that no supporting medical evidence has been submitted, although X-rays and a consultant's report had been sent by the solicitor; men are recalled for a second and even a third interview; 5 hours of interview on one day, the last hour after the interpreter had left; the most recent injustice is that an interview for a Syrian Asylum Seeker was cancelled although the country certainly cannot yet be said to be stable and safe. The cancellation was made the day before the Substantive Interview (particularly demoralising as the man had been waiting in Bangor for 11 months, after waiting elsewhere previously. He is now thrown back into limbo).

#### *B) Mental health*

##### *i) Trauma*

Sometime a man will tell us something of the horrific experiences he has been through, sometimes not. Many have great difficulty sleeping, some are too traumatised to study or can cope with part time study. Some have physical injuries as well as mental. We find the two GP surgeries and the hospital helpful, although access to an appointment is difficult because of the arcane jargon surgeries use on their answerphone. However, we have not been able to find any mental health support.

##### *ii) Uncertainty*

In particular, they find the lack of any timetable from the Home Office about when they will get the Substantive Interview, and when they will receive a decision, makes them extremely anxious and jumpy, particularly when they see others who arrived later progressing faster. When interviews are mishandled, or cancelled; or when a man is refused and loses legal support to prepare an appeal, we see severe mental distress.

##### *iii) Financial*

Some of the men are saving some of their meagre allowance to support their families at home, so eat little, and rely on foodbanks; some are unable to be in contact with their family because the family is in hiding or in a war zone, or in a region where there is no mobile access. The longer the Home Office keeps them waiting, the worse their anxiety becomes.

#### *8. HOUSING*

##### *i) Home Office Minimum*

The government contract with Clearsprings Ready Homes requires that each man has a room containing a bed, a mattress, a duvet, a pillow, a change of bedding and towels, and a

blind or curtains. There is a metal locker in the room for clothes. There is no desk, chair, or bedside/desk light.

There must be a table and chairs in either the shared sitting room or the kitchen. There must be 'adequate cleaning materials'. The houses are carpeted, but no vacuum cleaner is provided, only a broom, and a brush and pan. This is unsatisfactory, and dangerous to health for those people with asthma. (Dyma Ni Befriending has procured second-hand vacuum cleaners and had them PAT/EET tested for two houses.)

#### ii) WIFI

There is no Home Office requirement to provide wifi in the houses. The Welsh government did ask for this, and paid Clearsprings Ready Homes, but the latter discontinued it as there were too many problems with the routers they had installed.

#### iii) Repairs

If something goes wrong with the house, such as a cooker failing, or a light not working, the men have to report it to Migrant Help, who report it to Clearsprings Ready Homes, who then send someone about two weeks later. It is noticeable by contrast that once a person has been granted Right to Remain, and is offered housing by Gwynedd Council, this is again in a shared house leased by the council from a local private student housing company. When something goes wrong in the Refugees' shared house, it is attended to on the same day or the next day.

#### iv) Housing need in UK

While recognising that many British citizens lack adequate housing, the Asylum Seekers do not choose to be housed in this way for months and years at a time. Most would far rather be allowed to work, and to be allowed to move to where there was work. While they are, in effect, held like prisoners on parole although they have committed no crime, and are prevented from working, it is right that they be provided with housing.

In a university town such as Bangor where much purpose-built student housing has been developed, older housing is available on the private market. The Asylum Seekers are less 'visible' in this multi-racial and transient population.

Some housing in Bangor has been bought by landlords as Airbnbs and this reduces the housing available for the general population, or for Housing Associations to acquire.

### 9. TRAVEL

i) The Ukrainian Refugees were provided with bus passes, and passes were subsequently extended to all Refugees. This was an excellent way of enabling people to move about, learn more about Wales, and often to meet people. Initially when the Asylum Seekers started arriving, some of the bus drivers waived them onto the bus. When the bus passes were no longer funded by Welsh Government, the bus drivers had to be strict, and only allow the use of a pass for the specific journey and day.

ii) Those Refugees and Asylum Seekers attending a course at college are provided with a bus pass for the return trip direct to college, only if they live further than 3 miles from the college. The college used to be in town but it moved out of town to a Business Park 3 miles from the centre of Bangor in September 2024. The bus timetable has not been changed to provide a bus back to town until 50 minutes after classes end. This must be a disadvantage

for all college users, not just the Asylum Seekers and Refugees. Because of this 3-mile rule, some of the men have bus passes, and some do not, although all the Bangor people live within  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile of each other.

ii) Stranded in another town. All but five of the men that we know of are in a number of houses scattered around Bangor. Five men are in one house in Caernarfon. This is very unsatisfactory, as the college is near Bangor, so these men cannot easily use what support there is in Caernarfon during college hours, and it is expensive for them to travel into Bangor from college. Caernarfon is too small to have a large number of volunteers mounting suitable activities. These men are particularly isolated, depressed and feel vulnerable.

#### *10. COLLEGE MENAI*

We have found the college authorities very helpful and supportive. They have recruited additional language teaching staff, and for those Asylum Seekers and Refugees with good English, have supported them in accessing higher level and vocational courses.

Unfortunately, the new location of the college in a Business Park outside Bangor is in an area with poor mobile phone reception, so that Asylum Seekers are not able to receive or respond to urgent calls from the Home Office during college hours, adding to their anxiety. The lack of a frequent bus service is also problematic. The college is located on the far side of the feeder road leading to Britannia Bridge and the A55, and cycle track provision from Bangor is patchy and interrupted by the road.

#### *11. GWYNEDD COUNCIL*

We are impressed with the prompt and effective support Gwynedd Council gives, since the special service was set up in the centre of Bangor in autumn 2023. We hope this will continue to be funded. We are aware also of expansion of support on Ynys Môn (including opening of a hub in Holyhead), and in Conwy.

#### *12. LEGAL*

There is only one firm of solicitors in the whole of North Wales that takes on immigration work, in Wrexham, and we understand that this is by only one person in that chamber. Many of the men arrive in Bangor from elsewhere in the UK and find that their previous solicitor will not or cannot continue to advise them. If they need to appeal, their solicitor may be prevented from continuing to advise if the Asylum Seeker's country of origin has a statistically low rate of success. Gwynedd Council has managed to find some solicitors in Liverpool, Birmingham, Manchester etc but several men have no legal support or advice at all.

#### *13. COMMUNITY RELATIONS*

We are all volunteers; all the social activities are arranged by volunteers; when we approach people for help, this is very often given free or at a reduced rate – use of premises; plant seedlings for the garden; procuring and safety-testing electrical equipment (PAT/EET); clothes; donated and refurbished bicycles; SIM cards; cinema tickets. It is all done by networking, and personal approach, with only small grants (see section 6, FUNDING). Bangor is a relatively affluent area of the county, with relatively little housing shortage, and locally there are many retired university, hospital and local government officers, giving perhaps an atypical demographic. So we are fortunate in having seen very little sign of resentment or hostility shown to our service users, (indeed, a peaceful demonstration of

support when one feared deportation to Rwanda), with only one possibly racist incident occurring in Caernarfon.

The public Library is very helpful and friendly, with photocopying, computers and wifi; MSparc has a unit in the High Street and some of the Asylum Seekers have been welcomed and shown how to use their facilities.

The Dyma Ni Befriending Hub is hosted in the Quaker Meeting House in the centre of town. There is a poster permanently displayed at the front advertising the Hub. There are other posters too, and the building is used frequently all week by many community groups. There have been no incidents of damage to the premises or threat to people involved due to the hub being held there.

The multinational and multiracial students at the University may make the Asylum Seekers less identifiable in Bangor.

#### *14. CONCLUSION*

Do not disperse Asylum Seekers before Local Government, local Education, and Health authorities have had time and funding to set up support.

Asylum Seekers are less visible, and consequently less vulnerable, in a settlement where there is already a diverse community and a lot of short-term rented accommodation, rather than in a quiet town without university or a teaching hospital, and a slow turn over of population.

The accommodation could be provided to a higher standard through local letting agencies/landlord which would benefit the local economy, rather than through a large, remote government contractor that is slow to respond.

Third sector groups are often able to respond more swiftly than public sector bodies, and this networking between existing groups itself builds community cohesion.

Volunteers operate effectively on very low funding but rely on scarce sources of repeat funding. Limitations on repeat funding are problematic when the Home Office takes so long to process applications for Asylum, and the arrival of Asylum Seekers and their need for support is unlikely to reduce.

Asylum Seekers need bus travel passes.

Asylum Seekers need wifi in their houses.

Asylum Seekers need mental health support.

Asylum Seekers want to work, and should be allowed to do so if their application is not completed within 6 months of their first registration. This would improve their mental health, and improve community cohesion by removing one source of prejudice against them.