

**Sheffield: A history of memories of the  
'sanctuary city'**

Rachel Humphris

IRIS WORKING PAPER SERIES, No. 43/2020

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## Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Abbreviations  | 5  |
| Introduction   | 6  |
| The decline of industry and increasing homelessness          | 9  |
| Dispersal and the creation of ASSIST                         | 10 |
| Political organising in Sheffield and the creation of SYMAAG | 14 |
| Sheffield becomes a City of Sanctuary                        | 16 |
| From awareness raising to creating 'welcome'                 | 19 |
| Northern Refugee Centre closure and 'The Sanctuary'          | 20 |
| Migration and Cohesion in Sheffield                          | 22 |
| The shifting nature of the hostile environment               | 24 |
| City of Sanctuary and Non-Cooperation                        | 25 |
| Final Remarks  | 28 |
| References   | 29 |

## **Sheffield: A history of memories of the ‘sanctuary city’**

Rachel Humphris

### **Abstract**

This working paper details a history of the memories of how Sheffield became the first sanctuary city in the UK. The paper is based on fieldwork; 45 formal semi-structured interviews with elected and non-elected municipal officers, NGOs, activists and urban residents; informal conversations and documentary analysis that began in May 2019 and are ongoing. The aim of the paper is to provide a resource for those working for progressive migration policies in Sheffield and beyond. The paper details the context in Sheffield before the ‘City of Sanctuary’ emerged in 2005. It goes on to explore the development of City of Sanctuary from its first mission to create ‘a culture of welcome’ through public education, to its role as the primary umbrella organisation representing refugee and asylum seeker issues in Sheffield. Finally, it explores the current challenges to City of Sanctuary in the UK’s increasingly hostile environment.

### **Keywords**

Sanctuary, asylum seekers, refugees, social movement, local state

### **Funding**

This research has been generously funded by The Leverhulme Trust. Grant number: ECF-2017-578

### **Citation**

Humphris, R. (2020) “Sheffield: A history of memories of the ‘sanctuary city’”, *IRIS Working Paper Series*, No. 43/2020, Birmingham: Institute for Research into Superdiversity

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## **Abbreviations**

ASSIST – Asylum Support Sheffield Initiative Short Term

CAG – Cohesion Advisory Group

CAGP - Church Action Group on Poverty

COSS – City of Sanctuary, Sheffield

CS – Cohesion Sheffield

NRC - Northern Refugee Centre

SCC – Sheffield City Council

SFF - Sheffield Faith Forum

SYMAAG – South Yorkshire Migration and Asylum Action Group

SYP – South Yorkshire Police

VAS - Voluntary Action Sheffield

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Lane, Grubb and Power (2016) *Sheffield City Story* available at <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/67849/1/casereport103.pdf> (last accessed 19th October 2020)

<sup>1</sup> Price (2018) pages 113 - 119

<sup>1</sup> Price (2018) page 155

<sup>1</sup> Northern Refugee Centre News. Issue 4. Spring 1987 cited in Price (2018) page 16.

<sup>1</sup> See Goodall 2011 'Sanctuary and solidarity: urban community responses to refugees and asylum seekers on three continents' UNHCR New Issues in Refugee Research Paper Number 221. <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/research/working/4e79f41e9/sanctuary-solidarity-urban-community-responses-refugees-asylum-seekers.html>

<sup>1</sup> Rodrigo Edema is a political refugee from Uganda who worked for COSS for more than a decade. He left the organisation in 2020 after being unhappily employed there for several years.

<sup>1</sup> On file with the author

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.meshccs.org.uk/cag/>

<sup>1</sup> <http://democracy.sheffield.gov.uk/documents/s32561/Cohesion%20Charter%20Report.pdf>

<sup>1</sup> SYMAAG refused to attend the Refugee Forum until it supported their anti-G4S campaign. Sarah invited G4S to attend and SYMAAG found it useful to confront them there. Sarah withdrew any formal cooperation with G4S. A SYMAAG member stated they have found the RF useful in recent years as a vehicle to educate other groups in the realities of outsourcing asylum contracts and hostile environment policies. Sarah did share information with SYMAAG which was useful in campaigning.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/shine-a-light/meet-uk-s-latest-weapon-against-organised-crime-and-asylum-seekers/>.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/controlling-migration-fund-prospectus>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.symaag.org.uk/2019/08/28/sheffield-hostile-environment-or-city-of-sanctuary/>

<sup>1</sup> <http://democracy.sheffield.gov.uk/mgIssueHistoryHome.aspx?IID=29001>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/jul/17/councils-refusing-to-share-personal-data-of-rough-sleepers-with-home-office>

<sup>1</sup>

<http://democracy.sheffield.gov.uk/documents/s35111/PHS%20Controlling%20Migration%20Fund%20BID%20Report.pdf>

<sup>1</sup> <http://democracy.sheffield.gov.uk/documents/s35113/Appendix%20A%20-%20CMF%20Bid%20LACEast%20280918.pdf>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ein.org.uk/news/jcwi-appeal-supreme-court-after-court-appeal-finds-right-rent-scheme-not-unlawful#:~:text=JCWI%20to%20appeal%20to%20Supreme%20Court%20after%20Court%20of%20Appeal.Rent%20scheme%20is%20not%20unlawful&text=The%20Joint%20Council%20for%20The,Rent%20scheme%20is%20not%20unlawful.>

<sup>1</sup> The core principles in the Declaration are: 1. All asylum seekers, refugees and migrants should be treated with dignity and respect. 2. A fair and effective process to decide whether people need protection should be in place. 3. No one should be locked up indefinitely. 4. No one should be left sick or destitute in our society. 5. We should welcome the stranger and help them to integrate. [https://www.cityofsanctuary.org/files/the\\_birmingham\\_declaration\\_-\\_nov-15th1\\_0.pdf](https://www.cityofsanctuary.org/files/the_birmingham_declaration_-_nov-15th1_0.pdf)

<sup>1</sup> Liverpool, Oxford, Brent, Croydon, Enfield, Islington, Hackney, Haringey, Lambeth, Newham and Rugby.

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<sup>1</sup> It is also important to note my own subject-position. I am a white, middle-class woman who grew up in the North-West of England and have primarily lived in London for a decade. I was brought up as a Methodist but subsequently consider myself to be an atheist. I have been a writer, researcher and academic for a decade. I have also volunteered for refugee and migrant organisations and therefore strongly resemble those I write about here. This paper can be seen to represent my understanding produced by those I spent time with, which has been given shape by using the language provided from my background and education, making these experiences interact and blend with my fieldwork. Those experience were not solely mine, but made in relation to all those I spent time with. Ethnographers and their interlocutors manipulate each other, negotiate and adjust their categories of thought and eventually produce a fusion that results in new meanings. This statement is not an exoneration of mistakes but rather a statement of theoretical orientation. I present a partial perspective that makes no claims to generalisability or representativeness. I do not make a claim to collect objective 'data' but rather document my tracing of sanctuary in Sheffield through my participation in the site, interviews, conversations, observations and reviews of formal and informal documents.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/project/inclusive-cities/>

Sheffield became the UK's first 'City of Sanctuary' on 18th June 2007, during Refugee Week. The Lord Mayor of Sheffield pronounced from the steps of the City Town Hall that Sheffield City Council had declared support for Sheffield as a City of Sanctuary. City of Sanctuary is also a grassroots movement and an established charitable organisation which is located in a building called 'The Sanctuary'. The City of Sanctuary movement has now spread throughout the UK and has more than 90 geographical groups in towns and cities and a growing number of thematic groups based on key issues of concern including maternity, schools, universities, theatres, shops and many more<sup>2</sup>. The UK City of Sanctuary movement has had international repercussions through localised networks in Ireland, 'Welcoming America' in the USA, Australia and New Zealand.

I start this history or 'tracing' of how Sheffield became a City of Sanctuary with a note about who I interviewed, how I came to interview them and a brief review of their situated positions. This serves to introduce many key themes that I expand upon later.

As I started this research project, I asked Jacqui Broadhead, the Director of the Global Exchange on Migration and Diversity at COMPAS, University of Oxford about Sheffield. She was working with the City through the 'Inclusive Cities' project. She gave me the contact details of Mike Fitter, the co-chair of the Sheffield Cohesion Advisory Group and a member of the Cohesion Sheffield management team (CS), Sarah Eldridge (at that time) the director of City of Sanctuary Sheffield (COSS), and Angela Greenwood (at that time), the Community Services Manager in Sheffield City Council (SCC). I began by interviewing all three and snowballing from them to other non-governmental organisations, SCC employees and SCC elected representatives. I also attended meetings in the Town Hall (see below), spoke to academics at the University of Sheffield who work with organisations in the City and began volunteering at COSS's building called 'The Sanctuary'. I also reviewed policy documents, submitted FOI requests to the South Yorkshire Police and SCC for information regarding those with precarious migration status in the city and any documents relating to 'City of Sanctuary'<sup>3</sup>.

Several key overarching themes emerged from respondents. In answer to the question, 'how did sanctuary organising emerge in Sheffield' respondents were often quick to evoke a long history of radical organising in Sheffield as the basis for their organising. The notion that Sheffield called itself, 'The Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire' was invoked as a joke, and a meaningful identity. A founding member of an advocacy organisation called 'South Yorkshire Migration and Asylum Action Group' [SYMAAG] cited this history as a key turning point for his involvement in grassroots organising. When he retired as a high-ranking civil servant, he undertook a local history of the city, 'I wrote a book about radicals in Sheffield. So that informed me quite a lot, really. And that's one of the keys to why Sheffield began the City of Sanctuary. This radical history of questioning and refusing to accept the status quo'. He describes Sheffield as, 'a community of purpose. Which means basically, radicalism is embedded in the history and practice of certain political people. There is that famous idea that it is the Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire'. Beginning from the French Revolution his book traces the entwining of politics and religion in the city, mirroring the authors own entanglements in both spheres.

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<sup>2</sup> City of Sanctuary UK website (last accessed 03.08.2020) <https://cityofsanctuary.org/>

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Mike Fitter, John Grayson and Stuart Crosthwaite who provided comments on drafts of this paper and on-going generosity, support and willingness to engage in dialogue.

Many of those I interviewed in Sheffield had their own migration story to the city. Many had moved from London or the South East of England several decades ago and wanted to emphasise how quickly they felt 'at home' in the city<sup>4</sup>. For example, as one director of a migrant serving organisation was keen to emphasise at the beginning of our interview,

there has always been sort of like this welcoming, caring, sort of, like attitude to new arrivals. It's part and parcel of Sheffield, which is why I really like it. And I arrived here from London, and just very quickly found my feet and very quickly started to feel, although I've got lots of advantages, started to feel part of Sheffield, and I sort of feel more of a home here, then I have in other places. So it is from different angles, it's, you know, it is just really great, so I can sort of see why it became, you know, the first City of Sanctuary. And I think for myself, but generally there's a pride and a sense of like, yes, you know, we are and I think there's a pride to having that sort of like, I wouldn't say label, but you know, that's what we are because it goes back quite a long time.

As part of the description of Sheffield as a 'friendly' city I was told many times about the historical bus fares that were very cheap so city residents could travel around the city all day<sup>5</sup>. Interviewees also talked about people saying thank you to the bus driver as a marker of the warmth of the city. Respondents also mentioned always seeing someone they knew in the City Centre that promoted the feeling of being a village. It should be noted that the majority of those who told me these stories were white, middle class professionals who had moved from London and the South East to Sheffield at the beginning of their professional career (some of whom had now retired). It should also be noted that those who had grown up in the city were not as complimentary and highlighted that Sheffield was underdeveloped, had been forgotten and that there were very few well-paying jobs. Refugees I spoke to highlight the racism they had experienced in Sheffield. Some noted that this had improved in the last decade, while others disagreed.

A further aspect about those involved in sanctuary in Sheffield was the amount of time that many had known each other and the small network of people who circulated through organisations in Sheffield's 'refugee sector'. Interviews were peppered with comments such as, 'I went to x volunteer's 21st birthday party over 50 years ago', or 'my wife job shared with x', or the very small number of people who seemed to circulate in the positions as trustees or board members in the various refugee, asylum seeking and migrant organisations. These respondents would often mention that Sheffield is a 'small world', emphasising the link between the relationships built in place over time and feeling that the city is 'friendly' and 'welcoming'.

These individuals often had large amounts of resources in the city and beyond. They included retired high-level civil servants, academics, lawyers, journalists, and faith leaders many of whom had direct expertise in migration or governance. They were a highly dedicated group who had given up a large amount of time over several years or even decades. For some, they narrated that this work was an important part of their identity. They shared similar values, the organisations provided purpose and they could leverage their experience and skills in a manner that resonated with these values. Some interviewees also discussed how these long standing relationships eased the way that organisations

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<sup>4</sup> As the steel industry declined SCC sought to increase employment in other sectors. The Midland Bank and the Manpower Services Commission agreed to move large numbers of jobs from London to Sheffield. (Price, 2018 p.16)

<sup>5</sup> David Blunkett devised the cheap fare policy on South Yorkshire buses which subsidised up to 85% of operating costs by 1983. It was justified by the need for economic and social mobility.

worked, while others noted that politeness abounded and there was a generalised feeling that people did not want to ‘cause a fuss’, speak out, or make a scene’ (more below).

In addition to the social and economic positions of those who worked and volunteered with asylum seekers in Sheffield, respondents also narrated a distinct difference in political orientations. A strong dichotomy emerged in interviews between radical grassroots organising and liberal or faith-based organising. David Price labels these two strands as emerging historically from ‘middle-class rational dissent and the radicalism of the cutlery artisans’ (Price 2011: xiii)<sup>6</sup>. Some respondents recognised how these traditions overlapped, but they were strongly narrated as distinct and the twin genus of what would become understood as ‘sanctuary’. It should be noted that it was often those with trade union backgrounds that strongly narrated their own political position, while others purposively stated that their work with asylum seekers and refugees was humanitarian and not political.

This introductory section has highlighted some key characteristics of the respondents I interviewed and some of the overarching themes that framed their narratives. I also want to highlight that over time, including during the course of this research, interlocutors engaged in re-considering their perspectives, often using academic research and critiques to frame reflections. These narratives are the basis on which I have constructed this ‘tracing’ of sanctuary in Sheffield and unfold in more detail in the sections that follow.

### **The decline of industry and increasing homelessness**

Sheffield drew workers from all over the world to work in the steel industry. Demand began to decline in the 1920s and the industry had collapsed by the 1980s<sup>7</sup>. SAVTE was set up in the mid-1970s to teach Yemeni steel workers English at home because they were unable to attend formal English classes due to irregular shift work. Socialist organising through trade unions helped to set up these English classes. As the current director of SAVTE explains,

‘So SAVTE set up in the mid-70s for steel workers, Yemeni steel workers. And other sort of fellow people, and other workers were sort of recognised that there was a group of people who weren't learning language [sic], they were disadvantaged, not integrating as a result of it, because of shift patterns. And so they couldn't actually go to any classes. It was called the home learning project at the time. And they set up the volunteers to go into families' homes, it was very much teaching families and helping families to sort of develop language, so that they could sort of participate and it would fit around their work, right, obviously, you know, as migration changed, and obviously, a growing need.’

Despite the decline of the steel industry, conversation clubs continued. However, the decline of the steel industry created social issues related to poverty and deprivation throughout the city including homelessness and increased drug and alcohol use. A number of faith-based voluntary organisations emerged to provide support for these individuals from the 1980s. For example, the Cathedral Archer Project and HARC (Homeless and Rootless at Christmas) which both began in 1989 to provide support to homeless people. St Wilfred's Project began in 1990 and Bens Place started in 1995.

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<sup>6</sup> These two strands are developed in Pollard S. A. *A history of labour in Sheffield* (1959) and Wickham E. R. (1957) *Church and People in an Industrial City*.

<sup>7</sup> Lane, Grubb and Power (2016) *Sheffield City Story* available at <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/67849/1/casereport103.pdf> (last accessed 19th October 2020)

These faith-based organisations were well coordinated, networked and resourced. As one Archer Project volunteer (who later became a key member of asylum organising) stated, ‘in the 1990s we had a vulnerable people’s task group. They invited all the organizations doing things for poor people. This was a big event which they invited the Lord Mayor, the bishops, Methodist Church and they have all the big speakers. And it was to join up everything going on in Sheffield. So we were already set up to deal with people who were on the edge. So Sheffield is very good at working together. Because it’s quite a small place and people are just kind of informally overlapping in different kinds of spaces’.

Also from the late 1970s, a small number of refugees from Uganda, Chile and Vietnam had settled in Sheffield. Different groups mobilised to support refugees. For example, trades union and the City Council, led by Labour MP Helen Jackson, rallied support for Chileans in Sheffield<sup>8</sup>. Vietnamese refugees arrived through UNHCR and were dispersed by national government. A new body was set up called Refugee Action Sheffield also known as the Vietnamese Community Centre. The Centre was justified because ‘the refugees faced constant family crises caused by lack of English, an inability to administer their lives, inactivity and consequence lack of pride, interest and endeavour’<sup>9</sup>. The organisation had no funding from the Home Office and only a small grant from SCC and charitable trusts with strict funding criteria<sup>10</sup>. It later became the Northern Refugee Centre (NRC).

Conversation clubs, faith based organising for ‘the poor and destitute’, trades union, local Labour Party branches and NRC all with their different remits and trajectories made up the organisational landscape in the city as migration began to rise up the political agenda. Several new government policies rapidly shifted the scale and shape of newcomers to Sheffield and the meaning of ‘City of Sanctuary’ as it emerged and developed.

### **Dispersal and the creation of ASSIST**

Two elected City Councillors and SCC employees impressed upon me that SCC has been on the forefront of national government initiatives to settle newcomers in Sheffield. They invoked the notion that Sheffield is a warm, welcoming and friendly city. The examples they provide are for refugees, or ‘regular arrivals’ with full eligibility for social protection. For example in 2001, the then Home Secretary, David Blunkett, who was also a Sheffield MP, advocated with UNHCR that the UK should take more refugees from refugee camps. The legal basis was established by the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 (NIA 2002). The resulting policy was called the ‘Gateway Programme’ and launched in March 2004. Sheffield was one of the first cities to welcome refugees through this programme. SCC also signed up to the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme to settle Syrian refugees (who were not already in the Europe Union) in January 2014. SCC also signed up to the unaccompanied asylum-seeking scheme (Dubs Amendment which was passed in 2016 but scrapped in 2017). SCC also supports community sponsorship of refugees.

While SCC signs up to formal programmes for regular arrivals, the trajectory for irregular arrivals, or those who fall into an irregular status while residing in the UK, is less clear. While David Blunkett was advocating for refugees to be resettled, he was also changing the process for those who arrive (or come to the attention of the Home Office) spontaneously in the UK. For many of those I interviewed,

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<sup>8</sup> Price (2018) pages 113 - 119

<sup>9</sup> Price (2018) page 155

<sup>10</sup> Northern Refugee Centre News. Issue 4. Spring 1987 cited in Price (2018) page 16.

when discussing the emergence of sanctuary, many began their timeline of events with the dispersal scheme that brought asylum seekers to Sheffield (and other areas of the UK).

The policy of dispersing asylum-seekers throughout the UK was introduced by the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 (IAA). The stated legislative intention was that by distributing people across the country no one area would be 'overburdened' by the obligation of supporting asylum seekers. However, previously as asylum seekers had lived near family or places where they felt they had connections. There were very few support services for asylum seekers in Sheffield.

The IAA also changed asylum support. It separated asylum seekers from mainstream benefits under the National Asylum Support Service (NASS), set at 70% of income support levels. Many asylum seekers became destitute and lived in desperate poverty. In addition, increasingly asylum claims were being rejected (although on appeal were granted if the person claiming asylum found effective legal representation). Those whose asylum claims were rejected were given 21 days to leave their accommodation and all support ceased unless they had children or could not return.

Despite the lack of support services, through connections in churches, some asylum seekers began attending conversation classes. One retired English teacher, Myra Davis, ran a Conversation Club. Almost all the volunteers I spoke to mentioned Myra. In the words of one volunteer involved at that time,

From the start, the most influential person in my book was Myra Davis. Who was not a Christian at all. She was quite, you know, actually a fervent sort of human rights activist. Humanitarian and very moral and ethical. She was one of those people who probably was so committed to her convictions on helping asylum seekers that her family would take second place, you know. She had numbers of them living in her house. Myra was a woman who was into everything. Amnesty, Save the Children, Stop The War - she had fingers in many pies.

Through establishing relationships with asylum seekers in her Conversation Club, she became increasingly involved in their support. As another volunteer continued,

'So Myra was doing a lot of teaching English to Asians which my wife was also doing. And that developed into a Conversation Club. And they started discovering people coming in who were homeless. Myra proposed the creation of ASSIST. That was a pioneering step.'

Increasing numbers of homeless asylum seekers were being referred to faith-based volunteer homeless organisations. As one volunteer remembers, 'we began to see a few asylum seekers turning up with no roof and nowhere to go. And it was such a big shock. I think part of the reaction was this must be a mistake'. And as another volunteer remembers from this time 'we thought that if we just dealt with this in the short term the government will see sense and it will all come right...'. A small group of six friends involved in conversation clubs and homeless organisations met in Myra's kitchen and agreed that 'we can't have this in our city'. They decided to give asylum seekers money to buy food. At this stage one of this group remembered 'we were telling friends, relatives, neighbours, "these people have got nothing. Can you get us some money?" We were giving people £25 a week in the beginning. There was just a handful of people and we got to know them and saw them a lot'. As another volunteer remembers, 'I was round the back of the church counting out money on the top of bins to give it to people'.

Myra also noticed that refused asylum seekers had nowhere to sleep and began to host asylum seekers in her house, and asked friends to do the same. As one volunteer stated who was involved at this time

'it was really about knowing a few people and seeing them on a regular basis. It was very, very informal.' The group began to call itself 'ASSIST' meaning 'Asylum Support Sheffield Initiative Short Term'. There were conflicting stories from volunteers about what 'short term' meant. Some states that 'short term' was because people couldn't believe that this situation would last. Others believed that this related to the support that was only meant to be short term 'because we couldn't go on supporting people indefinitely'.

ASSIST were keen to impress upon me that they did not have a religious beginning. However, many members were involved in radical religious organising including one volunteer who was Methodist lay preacher and then became Quaker, another who was a Methodist lay preacher who became an atheist and an evangelical Christian. As one volunteer stated 'I think the motivation was what I would probably call humanitarian. I think it wasn't strongly political'.

ASSIST clients are encouraged to volunteer. A volunteer who previously worked with homeless people suggested this idea. He states 'Inderjit Bhogal, a Methodist minister, had set up Homeless and Rootless at Christmas through the Archer Project and we used to get 100 volunteers each Christmas. It would be a 10-day project. And when I was chair, we involved the clients as well. And some of the clients really responded very well. They would do all the heavy lifting moving all the equipment into place we had managed to get. They fought about it and battled between themselves. In ASSIST we also tried to do the same thing with getting the asylum seekers involved. So in the night shelter it started out more or less being organised by a guy who was a computer whiz kid from Zimbabwe. He ran it for six years. Later got a really good job. I told the trustees you've got to get the clients involved as volunteers because it will help them'. In addition, Voluntary Action Sheffield (VAS), an organisation that coordinated all voluntary work in Sheffield, employed one of the ASSIST trustees. In the words of one volunteer 'that was a big way of recruiting people to ASSIST'.

One volunteer also described how SCC supported ASSIST. He stated, 'when the government was setting the rules and telling them [SCC] they couldn't, they [SCC] would try to give us money anyway'. This support came in a number of indirect ways. For example, they gave ASSIST grants for fundraising concerts. The volunteer continued, 'so one guy in particular, whose principal work was with council asylum team got us a spot in the Crucible. We also had one in the Cathedral. It didn't raise a huge amount of funds but it raised awareness. When you got the awareness, the funds came in. You are trying to persuade people to made regular donations. One guy gave a donation of £50,000'.

However, it came as a shock to ASSIST volunteers that many homeless charity volunteers did not support asylum seekers. A volunteer stated 'when ASSIST started the ARC (Assessment and Rehabilitation Centre) was getting surpluses of £5000 - £10,000 a year so they donated it to similar organizations. When I was chair of Homeless and Rootless at Christmas and Chair of ASSIST I asked whether we could give £1000 so that ASSIST could become a charity. What I didn't expect was that they all resigned. I realized I didn't say what do you really think about this – I just thought they agreed. But they didn't want to support asylum seekers because they read the Daily Mail and the Sun. And so I realised the whole of that strata of society was turning against immigrants'. This mirrors a more general trend that followed the increasing scapegoating and harassment of migrants in the British media throughout the 2000s that has been widely documented elsewhere<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> See Goodall 2011 'Sanctuary and solidarity: urban community responses to refugees and asylum seekers on three continents' UNHCR New Issues in Refugee Research Paper Number 221. <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/research/working/4e79f41e9/sanctuary-solidarity-urban-community-responses-refugees-asylum-seekers.html>

Sheffield's Catholic Cathedral was also key to early organising. One organiser commented, 'in the beginning of the asylum situation, most help actually came from the Catholic Cathedral. Which no longer really helps us at all. At the time it did. It had a change in leadership. There is this current in the Cathedral which is very conservative'. As another volunteer recalled 'for this short period in its history the Church Action Group on Poverty regarded them [asylum seekers] as an impoverished group, they've now moved on, they no longer bother about and they leave them to other organizations'.

While faith based organising in churches declined, ASSIST became one of the most successful volunteer organisations in Sheffield. It currently supports around 100 people providing £20 a week. It maintains nine houses for refused asylum seekers and a night shelter. One employee stated that the ASSIST mailing list holds more than 1000 volunteers. The charity now receives Big Lottery community funding and employs paid staff.

Difficult questions continue to arise such as how long volunteers should support an individual through hosting them in their homes. These questions have become ever more salient as the paths out of destitution are increasingly restricted. For example, increasing numbers of appeal refusals and lack of legal aid makes it difficult for failed asylum seekers to regularize their status. In addition, due to the hostile environment policies that began in 2014, it is increasingly difficult to live in the UK without migration status. As identified by ASSIST volunteers this impacts them both financially and emotionally.

First the emotional implications. One volunteer stated she is distressed because many clients are young men in their 20s who 'have their whole life ahead of them'. Volunteers grappled with feelings of perpetuating a form of slow violence by giving young men just enough to be able to live but no hope. As one volunteer explained 'people can end with their life going nowhere, stuck, can't get status, they can't go home. So if that's the case, and they need support, and there's no way around it. So there's certainly a case to say that people lose sense of possibility and direction'.

Second, the financial implications. Destitute asylum seekers are outside systems of social protection (because they have No Recourse to Public Funds) and some are outside the law (because they are evaded detention and/or deportation). ASSIST relies on voluntary donations from the residents of Sheffield. ASSIST needed to garner public support from residents in the city for donations, which became increasingly difficult as they were scapegoated in the British press (see above).

To counteract the myths around asylum seekers, ASSIST began dealing in the currency of refugee stories. As one volunteer stated 'I was going around talking to different groups and I would take an asylum seeker or two with me. The word got round. One time I was at a Tenants Association with a guy from Somalia but had lived his life in a refugee camp in Kenya. He actually said "I was carrying a gun when I was a teenager to protect myself" and I said "oh no – don't say that again!" That's not the right story. In that context, I think they understood he was by himself as a teenager because the Somalis are infiltrating the camp and taking people to fight'. Reflecting on the experience this volunteer stated, 'So he'd been through a lot. It was a mistake to take him to that group. He was not okay. I always said to people you don't need to say anything you don't want to say but early on I didn't realise how the trauma affected them'.

As another volunteer stated, 'It could be exploitative. I do think it is tricky. There is someone who I've been on a platform who pulled the nearest refugee on to the platform to tell their story. And he does a lot for asylum seekers – he has them in his house and things like that. Then he would tell people to come and tell their story and then he would almost encourage them to make it more graphic. And I always felt very uneasy about it but I didn't want to interfere'. While the idea was to 'myth-bust' the stories in the media, an unintended consequence was to solidify the notion of the 'deserving refugee'

who was able to portray themselves in a way that corresponded with Sheffield residents' image of an individual who needed and was worthy of support. It is important to note that ASSIST leadership did recognise this dynamic in 2013 and established a group of people with 'lived experience of the asylum process' and provided training to support them to tell their story.

This section highlights that from the beginning of widespread organised response to asylum seekers in Sheffield, there were many good intentions and very well connected and resourced people who wanted to share their energies and time. They were motivated by different moral standpoints including their faith, and incredulity that the national government could be willingly inflicting such hardship on asylum seekers. The fact that many believed that the government's cruel treatment of asylum seekers was a mistake that would be easily rectified perhaps indicates that volunteers believed in a fair and just system of governance and a lack of awareness of the history of migration policy.

By 2018, those supporting asylum seekers were beginning to make a connection between the oppression of migrants through the hostile environment and the oppression of poverty through austerity and the restructuring of the welfare state. The connection was made publically in a Festival of Debate event in May 2018 organised by ASSIST connecting "The 'Hostile Environment' to 'Conscious Cruelty' in the Welfare Benefits system" with speakers from South Yorkshire Refugee Law & Justice and Derbyshire Unemployed Workers Centre. The topic was also addressed in a plenary session at the Cohesion Sheffield Annual conference in October 2019.

### **Political organising in Sheffield and the creation of SYMAAG**

In 2005, the Church Action on Poverty Group (CAPG) along with 20 other churches who had been involved in giving money to asylum seekers organized a meeting in the central Anglican church. One volunteer remembers 'it was a bit of a mistake in a way because 40 or 50 asylum seekers turned up. They were thinking we could solve their problems. I remember one of them telling me been living under a bridge. We were horrified by what we heard. And we felt awfully terribly impotent'. They organized a large demonstration outside the Town Hall which included two bishops and two MPs. Following the demonstration CAPG wrote to the council asking, 'will you join us in condemning these government policies which created this destitution, and allow and agree, asylum seekers will be allowed to work?'. The Leader of the Council wrote back stating the Council should not interfere with the rights of indigenous labour to work. This volunteer was shocked because Council Leader had previously job-shared with his wife and he thought she had a similar political persuasion.

While some in CAGP wanted to go on protesting, a CAGP member told me the Bishop of Sheffield was reticent because he believed it would damage his relationship with SCC. The Bishop advised the group that the policy was a national government issue so they should lobby MPs. This marked the end of this church's involvement in forced migration issues. One member and the director of the NRC discussed setting up a political organization to campaign for better treatment for asylum seekers because 'we felt very moved by the situation'. In addition, the NRC director had to 'sort of steer clear of politics in his role in the organisation'.

As one volunteer remembered 'we held a meeting. And the original idea was to set up an organization, which would be a kind of federal body representing a whole lot of organizations and the churches and so on. Stuart Crosthwaite another founding member of this group (but not affiliated to any religious organisation) recalled how the idea was for it to become a coordinating group of groups. However,

since having meetings, it changed its objectives because asylum seekers and refugees attended and steered the meeting. He recalls, 'in the first meeting 25 asylum seekers turned up I am pleased to say. The three of us who set it up are all white, all English. The asylum seekers turned up and swamped the meeting. Brilliant.'

The asylum seekers who attended had a different idea for the purpose of the organisation. As David Price, one of the other founding members describes 'to my complete surprise, because I hadn't expected this, the people at the meeting said, what we need to do is to have a march to Lindholme. Lindholme is a Detention Centre, on the other side of Doncaster. So the very first action we took was this march'. Stuart described this event in detail as a formative moment for the group,

'They told us, "we think the most important thing is detention and we should take action". So we marched from Sheffield to Doncaster where there was a detention centre called Lindholme. It's been closed down now. The Zimbabwean and Congolese refugees told us that when they have demos at home they go from town to town and they pick up people on the way. We were like, oh, I don't know. But they were like, yeah, we will. We marched from Sheffield to Doncaster over three days, 30 miles and we stopped in Rotherham and other places just outside Doncaster and try to meet different people. And talk to them about the right to work (not just detention). There is unemployment locally, there is the right to work and then there are also people who don't have a job. We made a point of marching through the most deprived areas that are easy to find in south Yorkshire. Ex-steel and ex-coal, and we tried to make that link between asylum seekers and working class people having a bit of a shit life. Which was great. And when you march together for three days and you're sleeping in the same place and eating in the same place you get to know each other and that was a great basis for the group. That was in 2007'.

In June 2007, this group began to call itself 'South Yorkshire Migration and Asylum Action Group' (SYMAAG). This group is overtly political and refuses to apply for funding so that it is able to remain true to its principles. It is also not a formal charity but an overtly advocacy and campaigning group.

The Lindholme March was John Grayson's introduction to SYMAAG. He later became chair and spearheaded campaigning against the mistreatment of asylum seekers in privately contracted housing. He was asked by some asylum seekers based in Barnsley if he would pick them up at the end. He had organised free residential courses for asylum seekers and refugees at Northern College and recruited students through the NRC. He also organised anti-racist courses such as 'Kicking Out racism from your community'. Jim Steinke, NRC director asked John if he would join SYMAAG which he did after Lindholme.

Similarly to ASSIST, people joined this organisation from a wide range of different perspectives. As one founding member stated 'I'm an Anglican. We've got Irish Catholics who are very, very radically minded. We've managed to get good cooperation with trade unions, but I'm not sure the actual people who turn up at meetings regularly are trade unionists. It's mostly left wingers and radicals. When we first started having meetings, we'd go around the room and ask, "What's your name? What organization do you represent?" And somebody represented World Revolution or something like that. I was taken aback but you get what you get'.

Grayson and Crosthwaite conceptualised the organisation as a rights based campaigning social movement and situated SYMAAG in Squire's frame of 'mobile solidarities' (Squire 2011). Grayson considers SYMAAG's notion of 'solidarity campaigning not 'for' but alongside asylum seekers' as distinct from both trade union organising and community organising (Crosthwaite and Grayson, 2009).

## Sheffield becomes a City of Sanctuary

City of Sanctuary also emerged in 2005. City of Sanctuary is a national movement in the UK, which began as a charitable organisation in Sheffield. The founder is Inderjit Bhogal. Crucially, his timeline of City of Sanctuary does not begin when asylum seekers were dispersed to Sheffield. Rather, he began his timeline of sanctuary in 1947 when his parents were forced to leave India, when India and Pakistan separated. As he described 'my parents were teenagers and their parents told them to get out of India and be safe. Then my parents went to Kenya. But they had to get out of Africa when Kenya became independent in 1964 and we came to live here. So for 9 months over the time that Kenya became independent we didn't have a secure place to live. Nothing secure for more than 2 weeks. Every 2 weeks we had to move before we came here. I know a bit about what it is about. Not having a place, mum on her own, my dad was here'.

Inderjit described how, as an eleven-year-old living in Dudley he filled in forms for people who were having trouble with immigration because he could speak English. When he became a Methodist minister in the early 1980s he began supporting people who were facing deportation and promoting anti-deportation campaigns. He created the 'anti-deportation shrine', a prayer station he took to different churches and city centres in the Midlands where they heard stories of people facing deportation. He encouraged people to 'pray and protest'.

He became a member of the National Churches working on racial justice. He recalls how 'we started looking at US sanctuary – looking at the people who were fleeing the death squads in El Salvador and the churches that were supporting that. Then we discovered that in Switzerland people were living in old nuclear shelters. I went to see them. They were supported by churches. It was Sri Lankan Tamils at that time. We were called the Churches Sanctuary Group. There were four of us and we'd meet and talk about what was happening. We put together some resources. One was called 'Why sanctuary?' The churches sanctuary group were supporting two people in church sanctuary in the mid-1980s. One was the Church of Ascension in Hume and the other was in a Methodist Church on the City Road in Smethwick. They were both broken by the police.

At the Methodist National Conference, Inderjit chaired the group that set guidelines for churches who found themselves the position of being 'in sanctuary'. As he explained, 'sanctuary isn't given, it's taken. If someone takes sanctuary in your church how do you handle that? How do you work around the law? Are you breaking the law? Are you aiding or abetting? We discussed all those kinds of issues'.

In the 1980s, Inderjit visited Sheffield from his home in Wolverhampton to support NRC. He settled in Sheffield in 1987 and took positions as chaplain at the two universities. In 1989, he set up Homeless and Rootless at Christmas (see above) and Muslim-Christian Interfaith walks that took place through Burngreave, the area of the city that has a high number of cheap private rented accommodation and new arrivals to the UK. A turning point for Inderjit emerged when he received a letter from Craig Barnett. Craig was living in Liverpool at the time and called his house 'a sanctuary'. As Inderjit describes 'I thought that's interesting so we began writing to each other. He was on the same wavelength as me'.

Craig describes his meeting and eventual move to Sheffield. He had been living in Liverpool in the early 2000s with his wife. Liverpool similarly experienced dispersal at the same time as Sheffield. Craig had witnessed asylum seekers being moved into deprived areas of the city that had no history of racialized minorities. Asylum seekers also had no support. He describes how 'they were incredibly visible and vulnerable and there was no support for them'. In response, Craig and church friends set up a house

of hospitality where they gave overnight accommodation to people who travelled to Liverpool to register their initial asylum claim. 'They were making their way to Liverpool after getting off a lorry or whatever and they would arrive in the evening after the Home Office closed and they would sleep in bus stops. So we heard about this and we set up an arrangement with the Refugee Council and organisations who were sending people to Liverpool and told them they can stay overnight with us and we will take them down to the Home Office and give them a bed and get them into the system. It was very informal. We weren't a charity. It was our family home, we were a live-in community and we had my daughter. She came on the bus with us and she would go through the scanners and everything. It was actually really lovely because asylum seekers would turn up completely bewildered they didn't know what country they were in. But they could see we were a family. Our daughter was keen to have everybody to play with her. It broke the ice'. They were part of the Catholic Worker Movement, which he described as 'a radical Christian hospitality movement. It was based on the Catholic worker model but we weren't Catholic so it was an ecumenical thing'.

Craig and his friends also set up a bail group. Asylum seekers were being held in prisons because detention centre were full. They also set up a drop-in run by volunteers for asylum seekers in a Jesuit church. The group also wrote a newsletter called 'The Sanctuary'. Craig met Inderjit at a Catholic Peace and Justice Network meeting and gave him a copy of the newsletter. Craig describes how Inderjit wrote to them to encourage their good work. Craig describes how he was getting 'burnt out because we had two children under two, all the other activities and living in the house of hospitality, and two friends had moved away. In 2004, we decided to move to Sheffield because my wife's parents lived here and we thought we'd get free babysitting. Which was the number one priority'.

Inderjit and Craig joined forces in Sheffield. Craig describes being a little downhearted when he arrived because ASSIST already existed and he was not sure what he could contribute to the city. 'I was like what am I going to do because this had been my whole life and identity doing this community and work with asylum seekers and at first in Sheffield I was like oh – there is this really big community of support for asylum seekers already – everything that I'd set up in Liverpool was already here. ASSIST, conversation clubs. There was already a community and an infrastructure. And I wondered what the point of me being here was. And I was casting around for what I could offer. I had meetings with Inderjit about what Sheffield needed and what I could do.'

In particular, Craig describes the comparison of Sheffield and Liverpool was a key element that he discussed with Inderjit. 'Sheffield really stood out. Sheffield has got something that we can be proud of. We are not murdering refugees and having pogroms and smashing windows and the rest of it – there is already community support here. So I said to Inderjit, maybe that is something we can build on and celebrate and that being an aspiration for our city, as being a city of sanctuary. A place that is proud to be welcoming and inclusive and the rest of it'.

Inderjit describes how 'I said to him there's a history of sanctuary churches and you can have a sanctuary house just imagine if a city was a city of sanctuary. What would that take? And so we thought that we would convene a meeting of all the people who worked with refugees in Sheffield'. Inderjit describes how he brought together everyone working on asylum seeker issues on 15th October 2005. At this meeting, he presented his idea about Sheffield becoming a 'City of Sanctuary'. He describes how he congratulated everyone on the good work that they were doing 'but if we worked together we could all shift the culture of the city. We talked about the ancient tradition of sanctuary that had been in this country. It goes back 8000 years before Christ where the children of Israel were coming out of Egypt and they established City of Refuge for people who were in danger. So the rule was – an eye for

an eye and a tooth for a tooth but if somebody wanted to take your life if you had knocked their tooth out – to prevent that kind of revenge and crime the City of Refuge was set up. And if you were in there you would be safe. Not to avoid the law but to wait until your case had been processed. We could work towards Sheffield being a City of Refuge but we'll call it 'City of Sanctuary' to give it a modern turn. Everyone knows what a sanctuary is. There are sanctuaries for birds and for donkeys, whatever and we don't have to explain what it is. It's about protecting those who are vulnerable and bruised. And everybody got it. I didn't need to explain it. So really I've just been making it up as we go along'.

The first aim of City of Sanctuary was to get as many people as possible to sign up to the idea that they wanted to promote 'a culture of welcome' in the city. Then they would go to the City Council and tell them that the residents wanted to be a City of Sanctuary. Inderjit later described this idea as akin to the 'Fair Trade City' idea, where enough people in the City sign up to a certain aspiration and then the City helps them to achieve it.

The sanctuary group included, Inderjit Bhogal, Craig Barnett, Akoi Bazzie who was a refugee from Liberia working for the Refugee Council, Pat Midgley a local councillor and Briony Broome who worked with elderly people. Inderjit describes how he persuaded SCC, 'I had contacts and my job was to speak to people in corridors of power who I had links through my ministry here. And others worked at different levels. In 2006, my local councillor Jackie Drayton became Lord Mayor. Jackie made her office into a City of Sanctuary shrine. So she did a huge amount'.

To the surprise of those involved Sheffield declared itself a City of Sanctuary just two years later in 2007. Inderjit describes 'the Lord Mayor came out of the town hall on the first day of Refugee Week and declared that Sheffield was a City of Sanctuary. Inderjit was shocked and surprised 'I wasn't even here and somebody rang me and I thought oh my god, what do we do now? We haven't really worked out what it was all about'.

There was some uneasiness about City of Sanctuary from established organisations. One ASSIST volunteer stated, 'we are the doers. We put the put the food on the table. We put the roof over their heads'. However, this attitude has changed because 'people have understood the value of an organization that is dedicated to creating a broad welcome for wider group of people'. Another reservation surfaced around stretching volunteers and dividing charitable donations. This came to a head when City of Sanctuary had the opportunity to rent a building from the Methodist Church in Chapel Walk in the centre of the city (see below).

Volunteers from ASSIST were also keen to stress that they had done a lot of groundwork to change attitudes with members of SCC. Jackie Drayton, as Lord Mayor was a keen supporter of Homeless and Rootless at Christmas and a similar event they held at ASSIST over Christmas. One ASSIST founder stated 'So they [the Council] were already kind of well prepared on the asylum seeker issue. And so when City of Sanctuary came along with kind of more support with all of these organizations that had signed up and with Inderjit's kind of charismatic ways and Jackie kind of being so on board, and was it like a natural progression. It was an open door'.

Founders of SYMAAG also described they had an integral part to play in SCC's support of City of Sanctuary. One founder stated 'we'd been badgering the leader of the Council, it was Jan Wilson, to attack the national government on these issues, particularly asylum seekers being able to work. But they didn't want to upset Blunkett. So instead, Inderjit comes along and says will you be a City of Sanctuary they said yeah, yeah, well, we can do that. We cope with that. I heard that Blunkett was ambivalent'.

SCC didn't advertise its declaration as a City of Sanctuary. Instead, Inderjit publicised it by giving interviews on Sunday for BBC Radio Four and writing articles in the local newspaper. Inderjit described how people all over the country began to get in touch with him after this publicity. The City of Sanctuary movement took on a life of its own.

### **From awareness raising to creating 'welcome'**

A key development for City of Sanctuary Sheffield (COSS) came in 2009, when they employed Sarah Eldridge as a co-ordinator of the organisation. She was working at ICAR in London and had previously delivered media training to refugees and asylum seekers. As she described 'I was really keen to be working on the ground with people rather than some place in London where we had no contact with the people we were talking about. My role was to develop teams of sanctuary advocates who have lived experience of going through the asylum system, building up teams and enlisting groups and faith groups, community groups and have the team come and talk to them and win over the hearts and minds that way'. She noted that a lot of organisations had signed up to the idea of supporting Sheffield as a City of Sanctuary but she felt the movement could do much more than collecting pledges. As she describes 'it seemed to me that we needed to work with people to get them to understand what they were actually doing rather than getting another notch on the list'.

Sarah worked with SCC who at that time still had an asylum seeker team. They set up a 'welcome project' for volunteers to meet newly arrived asylum seekers after they had their first health check at the Mulberry Practice, a GP practice in the centre of Sheffield. A pivotal moment emerged in 2010 when the then Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government ceased directly funding local government asylum teams. G4S, an international private security firm, won the contract. As Sarah described, 'the Council asylum team used to do a lot more than just manage asylum housing. They had wrap around support. They had people there who cared and they would do the extra mile. All sorts of problems started coming out of the woodwork when they closed. G4S got the contract and got the cheapest housing they could find. People were sharing rooms.'

The asylum team had also previously funded a multi-agency drop-in centre at the Methodist Town Hall in the centre of Sheffield. There were various discussions about who might manage the drop-in. Some volunteers in ASSIST were keen to take it on but others were concerned that it was beyond their remit. COSS decided they would coordinate the screening desk with volunteers because no one else was in a position to do it. Sarah described this as a turning point because 'other groups and partners began to look to us to take the lead for coordinating things around the city'. Slowly, COSS became the umbrella organisation for the refugee sector in Sheffield. As Sarah described 'we have never been a service provider. We're more a facilitator. It's been more making sure of the networking – making sure that all the partners know what each other are doing and are working together'.

SCC still fund the drop-in but through the public health budget rather than the asylum team. As one volunteer describes, 'COSS got a small amount of money from SCC. The director of public health was an ally at the time and he agreed to put it in. The argument was the risk of communicable diseases. There are all these people in the city and they won't have access to health care. If we have the drop-in we know where they are and we can support them but it was also like a monitoring aspect'. SCC also started the Refugee and Migrant Forum, chaired by Sarah Eldridge. This forum brought together all organisations working on refugee and asylum seeker issues in the city.

More established organisations in Sheffield, particularly grassroots community organisations led by racialized minorities became dismayed at the particular dynamics around organisations that sprung up to support asylum seekers and refugees and the funding relationship between migrant organisations and SCC. A director of a self-identified BAME organisation stated that Sheffield became a refugee destination but that 'it wasn't well thought out'. Funding became available for refugee and asylum seeker services throughout the 2000s. Organisations sprang up that have all subsequently closed. As one director described, 'for me, there was not a professionalisation, but certainly an industry that had emerged that was just resourcing itself, not the beneficiaries. Yeah. So I have this thing, you know, which have to be careful how I say it. But, you know, we got into a thing where we're farming the poor which is very paternalistic, very kind of, we can do it for you. And this creeping sense of actually, the only reason we're applying funding is to sustain ourselves. That is the context the refugee sector was in'.

### **Northern Refugee Centre closure and 'The Sanctuary'**

Two major events occurred in Sheffield in 2015 that changed the shape of sanctuary in Sheffield. First, the picture of Alan Kurdi was met with an outpouring of emotion from Sheffield residents. Sarah describes how 'we were inundated with phone calls from people wanting to volunteer and wanting to help Syrian children and families'. Second, at the end of 2015 the NRC folded sending shockwaves around the sector for two reasons. First, it left a large gap in service provision and second it was the most well established organisation in the sector and others began to worry about the stability of their own organisations. As one former employee of NRC stated, we'd been going for about 38 years at that time. And we're really well established. So I think everybody else thought, oh my god, we're so much smaller, and not so established, if that can happen to them, it can happen to us'.

Sarah describes 'we heard about the closure just before Christmas. We had a meeting of the Refugee Forum and it was a particularly big meeting. And from that point we got together a steering group to look into how we could react to that closure and what we could do. And we managed to get some money from the Council to commission a needs review. We commissioned it and it was carried out pretty quickly.

One of the recommendations was for asylum seekers and refugees to have a building. In particular, destitute asylum seekers needed somewhere safe and warm to stay during the day when the night shelter closed. Sarah describes how COSS was the only organisation that was willing to take on the risk of managing a building. She recalled 'I'd been talking to the Methodists. They have always been very supportive because Inderjit was a minister and it was his office that we were using all of this time'.

A further interviewee commented on the large organisational challenge that COSS took on at this moment 'it is far greater than running your own service, it requires the coordination between the complex needs of diverse service providers and diverse users all in one relatively small space, with limited resources. The lack of experience in doing this, not even recognising what a massive challenge it was. There would inevitably be conflicts and tensions. There was a lack of capability to deal with them, and limited awareness that it was needed'.

A building became free in Chapel Walk, adjacent to the Methodist Church where the weekly drop-in was held. City of Sanctuary managed to secure the building the second time the lease became available. Sarah describes, 'we had a window of six weeks to get enough money to give our board the confidence so we did that. We raised 70,000 in that time. And bid for the lease and got it. We called it

'The Sanctuary'. Since then we've been trying to find the money to keep it going. We've got other tenants here now who are helping to pay the rent'.

The building has caused tension between other organisations. For example, before COSS, ASSIST was the main recipient of charitable giving in the sector in Sheffield (see above). The key issue for ASSIST was, unlike City of Sanctuary, they could not apply to a charitable trust for funding because their clients are placed outside the law. 'So it has to come from private individuals and churches, and so the idea of a public appeal to support City of Sanctuary was challenging. However, ASSIST also wanted there to be a space for people. But it's been hard for ASSIST to reconcile. I think the relationship has got a lot easier. I think it's about the availability, and the openness, really. Any ASSIST clients can go in anytime. But it's not open in the evenings, which is the other key things that ASSIST clients need'. Further, ASSIST had committed at that time to an expansion of its own premises. It had taken on a whole corridor in Victoria Hall, and had invested in a new suite of interview and meeting rooms for their clients.

The building has caused other tensions. One SYMAAG volunteer described that SYMAAG helped COSS get started in the building, 'we were fixing things – computers, removals, hired vans, cleaned the place up – all of that. We helped with the day-to-day running. But we didn't ask for any money'. SYMAAG uses The Sanctuary to hold meetings. However, as COSS needs funds to pay the rent, they prioritise paying groups. One SYMAAG volunteer described his perspective 'we are non-financial. We don't have any money. So it's a funny relationship. We're offering something that maybe they don't want. They want money from us... So tomorrow we've got a meeting at our usual time of 6:30pm but there is a paying group so we moved the meeting time to 7:15pm. That's the downside of not taking money and being principled'. As another SYMAAG volunteer stated, 'we have real problems trying to get permanent kind of footing in The Sanctuary. We have no money so we can't afford to pay for the membership but our members actually helped to raise the money to get the building. But that's not our main reason. We just think we should have proper facilities in there. And we row with them. But in the end we were told, "this isn't a place for people like SYMAAG. You're political. You're not advice and you're not a helping kind of organisation". However, SYMAAG and COSS do work together on specific campaigns and share information.

COSS maintain that they are a coordination and not a service-providing organisation. However, they do receive project funding. For example, when the NRC closed COSS took on the subcontract for a refugee health and wellbeing project. As one COSS employee describes 'in recent years there's been a shift. At first, they always said, we're not the delivery organization, we're a movement. That changed gradually. The board changed, because they were very much we don't deliver anything. But actually, they were delivering a project and they were delivering a service even though they didn't think of it like that... So it's good that we are the one stop shop, we've got lots of organizations coming in, to deliver their services here. But we do deliver some things. We do the drop-in. We do the health project. With volunteers we run the clothes bank. And now we've got this place. So we do we do deliver to a degree, but not probably as much as you know, some other organisations'.

Reflecting on this move away from mass education towards service provision, others commented that Inderjit's original idea was not carried out to help bridge the gap between established and newer residents. As one volunteer stated 'this is where I think City of Sanctuary has fallen down in not pursuing that sort of agenda strongly. It's difficult, very difficult, because the Tenants and Residents Associations as a whole are failing. So you have to find some place in that area where people are

meeting. So initially they did very well. Rodrigo did a lot of the talking<sup>12</sup>. And he is very good at talking to people and to school children. I think this is partly why they have been not so successful lately. When I was working, you know, with Rodrigo sometimes a party of 12 asylum seekers would go into the school and talk to every year in one day. And of course that needs to be kept up with the same cohort each year and really push the school because they are really struggling to fit you in.'

One COSS board member described the shift, 'we have lost a lot of what we used to do in terms of creating a culture of welcome. We are doing more of the frontline umbrella work of coordinating the different organisations who are service providers. We are having these conversations in the board. We want to do the welcoming work and we want to continue doing the organising and humanitarian work'.

SCC also described how its relationship with City of Sanctuary has changed. SCC has fostered a stronger funding relationship with COSS. For example, SCC funds the drop-in service and a development worker who completed specific pieces of work for SCC. This funding relationship has also caused controversy. Some in the sector do not believe COSS can hold the Council to account when they have such a strong funding relationship. In addition, the COSS Director sits on all three levels of City Council meetings on migrant issues (see following section).

## **Migration and Cohesion in Sheffield**

Community cohesion emerged and developed in Sheffield in response to national government policy. The PREVENT (Preventing Violent Extremism, PVE) policy was developed in 2003 as part of an overall post 9/11 counter-terrorism approach (CONTEST) and published in 2006, with the aim of preventing the radicalisation of individuals to terrorism. In 2008, PVE was introduced in Sheffield along with many other UK cities.

In 2007, South Yorkshire Police (SYP) representatives made two presentations to Sheffield Faiths Forum (SFF) about the strategy to garner implementation support. The chair of the SFF at the time commented that the group was uneasy about the strategy but that it was very new and no one knew anything about it apart from what the police had told them. Although the strategy did not explicitly target any group, it emerged that the amount of funding was proportional to the size of the Muslim population in the city. While some members of the group did not see anything 'toxic' about the strategy, SFF followed the guidance of the two Muslim members who considered the strategy to be anti-Muslim.

After consultations with the BME (Black Minority Ethnic) Network, two community conferences about the PVE Strategy were organised. The first was with non-statutory organisations and the second with statutory organisations including the police and SCC.

As stated in 'History and Lessons from the Life of the PVE Advisory Group'<sup>13</sup> the outcome was that non-statutory organisations could work with the strategy if the police and SCC adhered to a 'Sheffield Model'. Organisations should focus on all forms of violent extremism; existing good practice for creating cohesive communities would be followed and a 'Preventing Violent Extremism Advisory Group' was set up initially comprising of the chair and vice chair of the BME Network and Faiths Forum.

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<sup>12</sup> Rodrigo Edema is a political refugee from Uganda who worked for COSS for more than a decade. He left the organisation in 2020 after being unhappily employed there for several years.

<sup>13</sup> On file with the author

In 2011, SCC invited the group to change its name from 'Preventing violent extremism advisory group' to the 'Cohesion Advisory Group' (CAG) because the funding to Sheffield SYP/SCC had ceased and as there was no local Prevent programme, there was no need to have a group holding them to account on this. When a revised Prevent strategy was published, it did not include funding for community development work and was no longer focussed on 'violent' extremism. By this time, the Cohesion Advisory Group (CAG) had broadened its remit and dissociated from the Prevent agenda<sup>14</sup>. SCC had also developed a Community Cohesion strategy, which has had many iterations and revisions. From the outset, SCC and the South Yorkshire Police decided that PVE would be kept separate from this new Community Cohesion Strategy because it was seen as controversial.

In 2017, Cohesion Sheffield was established to implement a new citywide Cohesion Strategic Framework. This was a joint strategy written by the CAG and SCC. The most recent Community Cohesion Charter was published in October 2018<sup>15</sup>.

City Council officer, Angela Greenwood, was given the job to bring together the city's structure around cohesion and the separate refugee and asylum seeking structure. This took the form of creating the three-tier framework that continues in SCC currently. COSS chairs the Refugee and Migrant Forum that is open to any representative from an organisation in the city serving these groups<sup>16</sup>. The operational tier is called the 'Cohesion, migration partnership group' and includes city council officers and some directors of prominent organisations in the City. Angela Greenwood chairs this meeting and organisations are invited to attend. The strategic decision making group is called the 'Cohesion Migration Integration Strategic Group' which is chaired by SCC's Chief Executive, elected City Councillors, and the Chief of Police. The COSS director and Co-chair of CAG and member of CS management team sit at this table.

In this context, SCC has made some key decisions that have been identified as fulfilling their 'City of Sanctuary' status. For example, when the Home Office was bringing in legislation that would remove funding from families with children if they were refused asylum, John Mothersole, the Chief Executive, reportedly was 'adamant and determined' and was not going to have children sleeping on the streets of the city. The Co-chair of CAG described 'it is a very business-like meeting and people don't talk emotionally but that was going too far. I thought that was really important in that context'. He also describes the importance of the faith community 'who bring a value system to these discussions. It's not that these people don't have it, they need reminding of it. Because they are doing 'the business' as it were. Sheffield was not going to stand for that. The Home Office never implemented it. It was a step too far'.

In my interviews with SCC employees I was often told that a key marker of their City of Sanctuary status was that they did not apply for the enforcement strand of the 'Controlling Migration Fund'. This has been referenced many times within organising groups throughout South Yorkshire as several other councils (such as Barnsley) did apply for these funds. This takes on salience in the context of austerity and the hostile environment (see next section).

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.meshccs.org.uk/cag/>

<sup>15</sup> <http://democracy.sheffield.gov.uk/documents/s32561/Cohesion%20Charter%20Report.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> SYMAAG refused to attend the Refugee Forum until it supported their anti-G4S campaign. Sarah invited G4S to attend and SYMAAG found it useful to confront them there. Sarah withdrew any formal cooperation with G4S. A SYMAAG member stated they have found the RF useful in recent years as a vehicle to educate other groups in the realities of outsourcing asylum contracts and hostile environment policies. Sarah did share information with SYMAAG which was useful in campaigning.

## The shifting nature of the hostile environment

From 2010 there has been a rapid rolling back of migrants' rights and the creation of an overtly 'hostile environment' (now 'compliant' environment). First, local authorities have seen a marked decrease in their national government grants. The austerity agenda has touched all parts of society and increased the already widening inequalities in the city. There is a general atmosphere of scarcity, which has been exploited by the media to turn people against newcomers and others they identify as different. Second, changes to immigration regulations and the increasing complexity and cost to ensure regular status have pushed increasing numbers of people into a precarious and potentially 'deportable' migration category.

Third, nationally and locally, immigration is increasingly entwined with securitization and increasing internal surveillance. Nationally, this can be seen through the policy structure of 'Prevent', 'Contest' and the 'hostile environment'<sup>17</sup>. At the local level, the 'hostile environment' turns residents into border guards promoting suspicion and requiring individuals to prove their entitlement in many aspects of daily life.

In response to the increasing attacks on migrants' rights, several organisations emerged in Sheffield. SYMAAG organised a large meeting at the University of Sheffield with medical students, STAR and John Grayson invited his long-time friend and colleague Frances Webber a human rights lawyer and member of the Institute of Race Relations. Gina Clayton, who resided in Sheffield and author of the OUP textbook of Immigration and Asylum Law was also a main speaker at the event. At this meeting, lawyers involved (working pro-bono) developed the idea into a charity that is currently based in The Sanctuary called South Yorkshire Refugee Law and Justice. It also involves local students studying law, International Development and others. Other groups including These Walls Must Fall/Right to Remain now has an organiser based in Sheffield who coordinates grassroots campaigning in the city against migrant detention.

In 2017, the election of Donald Trump and his attack on sanctuary cities did not escape those in SYMAAG who used the moment where sanctuary cities gained national and international recognition to begin to link non-cooperation with sanctuary. John Grayson (see above) wrote, 'Briefing on a Sanctuary Cities campaign' where he detailed the activities of the Home Office and their growing enforcement presence within local authorities and local police. He also recorded the number of unlawful deportations of EU citizens and the role of the 'Controlling Migration Fund' which began in 2017 as a fund for local authorities to increase their surveillance capacity and become more deeply entwined with Home Office processes<sup>18</sup>. This document also uses the term 'ICE' Immigration and Customs Enforcement to describe UK Border Agency staff crystalizing the link between US and UK border enforcement tactics. While Grayson mentions SCC refused to apply for the enforcement strand of the Controlling Migration Fund he notes that increasingly the NHS Trusts in the region have already signed up to the 'real-time telephone checking service to identify overseas visitors and those without appropriate paperwork who are seeking treatment. The note ends with calling on UK Cities of Sanctuary to become more like US style Sanctuary Cities and openly oppose the Hostile Environment and the activities of ICE teams (10th October 2017).

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/shine-a-light/meet-uk-s-latest-weapon-against-organised-crime-and-asylum-seekers/>.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/controlling-migration-fund-prospectus>

## City of Sanctuary and Non-Cooperation

In 2019, SYMAAG mounted a case against the SCC for allegedly applying for funding from the Home Office to resource new Private Housing Officers who would report tenants to UK Border Force officers. On 28th August SYMAAG posted a blog entitled 'When Is a City of Sanctuary not a City of Sanctuary'<sup>19</sup> and laid out a challenge to the SCC. The blog was provoked by a report to the Director of Housing and Neighbourhoods Service regarding the approval of the grant application. The report was dated, 11th March 2019<sup>20</sup>. The report included several sentences that SYMAAG interpreted as SCC colluding with Home Office enforcement.

At this point, SYMAAG crystallised the link between City of Sanctuary and non-cooperation policies. They referred to other local governments (that are not necessarily Cities of Sanctuary) who passed resolutions of non-cooperation. In particular, these local governments affirmed that they would not share the data of their rough sleeping population with the Home Office because of concerns that this would lead to deportation<sup>21</sup>. A member of the national City of Sanctuary movement pointed out that many City's of Sanctuary had applied for the 'Enforcement' strand of the Controlling Migration Fund. There is no link between national City of Sanctuary and non-cooperation with national immigration enforcement.

SYMAAG highlighted parts of the SCC report, which suggested that there was cooperation between SCC and the Home Office such as, 'this funding has been granted by Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) to fund additional staff recruitment to the Private Housing Standards (PHS) team, primarily to focus on intelligence-led work in the East of the city where poor housing conditions are believed to be linked to recent migration in to the area' (emphasis in original). Another section states, 'We have particular concern over recent undocumented, unlawful immigration into the area, linked to private rented accommodation which is often of a very poor standard. Officers from the Private Housing Standards (PHS) team undertaking inspection work in the area over the past three years have made several referrals to the UKBA, and had suspicions about other individuals who disappeared from premises immediately after initial visits had been attempted. Such situations were often found to occur in flats above restaurants, with the tenancy of the flat above and occupation in the restaurant below interlinked'. The funding would be used for 'more coordinated work between PHS officers and partner agencies to address wider issues in the neighbourhoods, with improved information sharing and joint working protocols established'<sup>22</sup>.

SYMAAG highlighted that 'In the original bid by SCC for Controlling Migration Funding it's pointed out by the Private Housing Standards team that many private landlords are not carrying out the Right to Rent procedures with tenants'<sup>23</sup>. SYMAAG refer to the current legal case brought by Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants that deem the Right to Rent to be discriminatory<sup>24</sup>. SYMAAG conclude that

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.symaag.org.uk/2019/08/28/sheffield-hostile-environment-or-city-of-sanctuary/>

<sup>20</sup> <http://democracy.sheffield.gov.uk/mgIssueHistoryHome.aspx?Id=29001>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/jul/17/councils-refusing-to-share-personal-data-of-rough-sleepers-with-home-office>

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<http://democracy.sheffield.gov.uk/documents/s35111/PHS%20Controlling%20Migration%20Fund%20BID%20Report.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> <http://democracy.sheffield.gov.uk/documents/s35113/Appendix%20A%20-%20CMF%20Bid%20LACEast%20280918.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.ein.org.uk/news/jcwi-appeal-supreme-court-after-court-appeal-finds-right-rent-scheme-not-unlawful#:~:text=JCWI%20to%20appeal%20to%20Supreme%20Court%20after%20Court%20of%20Appeal,Rent>

this is clear evidence of the Labour Council embracing the Hostile Environment policies of the Coalition and Conservative governments. They consider these actions not to be compatible with Sheffield's status as (the first) City of Sanctuary and are a political choice. As they state 'We call on the Council to Act like Sheffield really is a City of Sanctuary. Stop collusion with Immigration Compliance and Enforcement to deport Sheffield residents and Oppose the Hostile (or Compliant) Environment in all your policies'.

SYMAAG presented their case to the Refugee and Migrant Forum in August 2019. SYMAAG also held an open public planning meeting on Tuesday 17th September and held a demo on 19th September before making a petition to the Safer and Stronger Communities Scrutiny Committee at the Town Hall.

The CAG, put together a report in response to this petition. In their own words to representatives of the City Council: 'Sheffield Cohesion Advisory Group believe that important issues are raised that need to be discussed, but take a more nuanced and collaborative approach'.

The key issues for CAG include what information SCC staff are sharing with SYP or UKBA. The CAG did not agree with the complaint about the Controlling Migration Fund. But they agreed that this report surfaced several key issues including, the Council's need to define who their proposed partner agencies are and whether they ensure that appropriate support is put in place if vulnerable individuals are identified. They also identified that an Equality Impact Assessment had not been conducted. The justification for this was given in the Reports to Director of Housing & Neighbourhoods (11th March and 8th August 2019) that both state that "The Council is not required to consult on this proposal" and that an Equality Impact Assessment is not necessary because "accepting the grant will not directly impact of anyone or anything that supports the services that are accessed by our customers/tenants etc". The CAG identified that the Council must extend their Equality duty to all residents of Sheffield and not only Council tenants and customers.

The CAG report also requests further information about the possible collusion between SYP and the UK Border Force. They recommend that a full policy review is needed so SCC is clear on what is and what is not to be reported. The CAG believe that although the challenge was to the SCC, COSS should lead the review because 'otherwise others are defining what a city of sanctuary is'. They also believe that SYMAAG has 'an important role in contributing to the review'.

The key issue that CAG identifies is that this challenge from SYMAAG raises a much larger question – one for City of Sanctuary, not only SCC but for the wider movement that includes all sectors: To what extent should organisations and groups in a City of Sanctuary cooperate with Immigration Enforcement?

In order to clarify this question the CAG lists the original meaning of City of Sanctuary that was agreed in the 'Birmingham Declaration' in 2014 <sup>25</sup>. The report also fully states that the version of sanctuary cities developed very different in the USA, clearly making the point that SYMAAG are applying a different version of 'City of Sanctuary' for political purposes. The CAG report states that it is time to have a broader conversation in Sheffield about what exactly 'City of Sanctuary' means.

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[%20scheme%20is%20not%20unlawful&text=The%20Joint%20Council%20for%20The,Rent%20scheme%20is%20not%20unlawful.](#)

<sup>25</sup> The core principles in the Declaration are: 1. All asylum seekers, refugees and migrants should be treated with dignity and respect. 2. A fair and effective process to decide whether people need protection should be in place. 3. No one should be locked up indefinitely. 4. No one should be left sick or destitute in our society. 5. We should welcome the stranger and help them to integrate.

[https://www.cityofsanctuary.org/files/the\\_birmingham\\_declaration\\_-\\_nov-15th1\\_0.pdf](https://www.cityofsanctuary.org/files/the_birmingham_declaration_-_nov-15th1_0.pdf)

This report was discussed at the Scrutiny Committee on 19th September. At this meeting, SYMAAG posed a series of questions to Councillor Paul Wood, the responsible SCC Cabinet Member. He confirmed he would approach the policy team and find out how many of those arrested were handed over by the Private Housing Standards team; pledged that he would take to the Cabinet a proposal that Sheffield should move to non-compliance with the Home Office along the lines of the other 11 Labour councils. He also apologised for the language that had been used by the Controlling Migration Fund application. In the words of one SYMAAG organiser they felt that this was 'significant progress'.

In addition, at a 'Big Conversation' event in the Sanctuary on 1st October 2019 a member of SYMAAG asked Paul Blomfield MP about the role of SYP in immigration enforcement. A Constituency Labour Party meeting passed a resolution asking for clarification from Councillor Paul Wood about the funding application. In response, he again apologised for the derogatory language used in the funding application. Most importantly, he assured the Labour members that, 'I have re-iterated our policy to officers that we report no one who is undocumented or residing without correct paperwork unless major criminal activities can be reasonably verified. I will look at bringing a resolution to council in the near future to re-enforce the position alongside other authorities' (email sent on 3rd October 2019).

Following a verbal response that SYMAAG organisers found hopeful regarding the City's stance on updating policy and practice on undocumented migration, they were dismayed by the formal written answers to their questions that were circulated on 17th October before the Safer and Stronger Communities Scrutiny Committee, on 24th October 2019. Five questions were addressed the Controlling Migration Fund grant and how it was being used, SCCs positions on right to rent checks and whether they will cooperate with the Home Office. Despite seemingly positive developments, the responses were taken as a statement of 'business as usual'. The Private Housing Standards team denied ever handing any person to the Home Office. However, they did confirm that if an officer suspects someone has been trafficked they would share information with appropriate agencies.

When specifically asked if Sheffield would join the 11 Labour Councils who are refusing to share personal data of undocumented migrants with the Home Office without explicit consent, SCC refused to join these councils stating that they have a statutory duty under section 129 of the Nationality and Immigration Asylum Act 2002.

The written response also clarified the Council's position on Right to Rent checks. It states that while the right to rent scheme was declared incompatible with Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, the declaration of incompatibility does not affect the ongoing validity of the Immigration Act 2014 and so the right to rent checks remain the law and 'Councillor Curran... wants to see Council policy upheld'.

Further questions were put to Councillor Paul Wood in person at the 24th October Scrutiny meeting. In particular, John Grayson asked Councillor Wood to confirm that in the process of inspections from 2014 to the present, council staff did pass on information to their statutory partner the UKBA, as well as the police, the DWP, the Modern Slavery Hotline, the Salvation Army and the Gangmasters agency. John Grayson also asked for the Council not to proactively, even when not receiving a request, supply information to the Home Office without the persons' permission (along with 11 other Labour Councils).

SYMAAG believed that there was a disconnect between the elected members and the municipal officers who may have been operating on an ad hoc basis without a clear policy and taking direction from national government. Concurrently, Councillor Paul Wood had also attended a national conference in October in Cardiff where he realised that most cities had protocols on undocumented people, whereas Sheffield City Council does not.

In response to these different strands of organising, Paul Wood engaged with SYMAAG, City of Sanctuary and ASSIST to put together a cross party open meeting. He committed informally to ensuring that private housing officers and elsewhere have a clear policy on information sharing. He also stated that he was also trying to make more funds available to address this issue. However, this funding is increasingly uncertain in a post Brexit, coronavirus era. In addition, as SCC's main funding relationship on asylum seeker issues is with COSS, it is considered that this is where any new funds will be directed. Some in the group do not believe that this is where the funds are best placed. While the formal policy has not been brought to the City Council to be passed in a resolution, it seems as though there has been an identification of the issue and some informal policy change.

SYMAAG and other political organisations in Sheffield such as These Walls Must Fall (TWMF) are still coordinating discussions around what a City of Sanctuary means in Sheffield. City of Sanctuary as an organisation has stated that it does not have the capacity to be lead these conversations. In January 2020, this group convened to talk about what had happened over the last few months. City of Sanctuary, SYMAAG, Faithstar, TWMF and others came together to discuss how to progress.

The leadership of COSS changed in October 2019 and the new director was keen to establish a 'principled' stance. As part of this commitment, the new COSS director stated that the organisation would 'not only deliver services and raise awareness in the city but also have accountability with the Council'. The new director highlighted to me that that this potentially puts COSS at risk because they receive funding from SCC. However, the new director felt it was important and a marker of their new direction.

## **Final Remarks**

Some key issues are now at the forefront for Sheffield. Organisers have identified that one of the key stumbling blocks in the city for migrants and racialized minoritized groups are frontline staff and their lack of training of the complexities of migration regulations. Coupled with the hostile environment and a decade of austerity, there is a culture in local authorities of risk aversion and denying services to save money. In addition, Brexit, racism and the idea of scarcity is in danger of being exacerbated in the context of the coronavirus pandemic. Whilst organisations have identified that training frontline staff is crucial, there is little political leadership, no framework to take that forward, nor any organisation that is well-placed to provide this training even if resources were available. There are also continuing debates within COSS regarding its mission between awareness raising and service provision. It also continues to receive criticism from other groups in Sheffield because of the demographics of its paid staff which no longer includes anyone from a racialized minoritised background.

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