



WELSH REFUGEE COUNCIL ANNUAL REPORT

2021

WELCOME TO THE WELSH REFUGEE COUNCIL

OUR VISION

Our vision is to create a Wales where asylum seekers and refugees are welcomed, respected, and access protection, safety, and dignity.

OUR MISSION

To improve the lives of asylum seekers and refugees by delivering specialist advice and practical support and speaking out to positively influence public perception.



Andrea Cleaver
Chief Executive Officer

FOREWORD

I am enormously proud of the Welsh Refugee Council's resilience and determination to support those forced to seek safety.

The Covid-19 crisis has spurred innovation and strengthened teamwork. With closed offices, on-line and telephone services were quickly put in place and follow up calls made to maintain contact and give advice. The move to video conferencing has reinforced teamworking across our four offices in Wales, enabling caseworkers to share experience and refer clients to those with specialist knowledge.

Improved communication has brought staff from our Move-On and Asylum Rights Programme together and led to the development of a more holistic way of providing our services, taking into account wellbeing, employability and language provision.

For asylum seekers and refugees, the restrictions of lockdown and social isolation have been particularly tough. Through our daily contact with clients, our staff have been very aware of the increased stress, poverty, and impact on people's mental health. Aware of pressing unmet needs, we redoubled our fundraising efforts, achieving an additional £400,000 over the year.

A fundamental key to our work is the trust we have built with the people we serve, based on our staff's professionalism, diversity, cultural understanding and knowledge of 30 languages. An amazing team with great leadership.

We have established new projects and strengthened partnership working, which has proved vital to finding housing and tackling destitution, working closely with Local Authorities, the Welsh Refugee Coalition, and the All-Wales Strategic Migration Partnership.

Partnership also featured in reaching out to deliver services to asylum seekers housed in the army camp at Penally in unsuitable accommodation. We will continue to argue for an asylum system that upholds human rights and is based on the principles shown in Wales's aspiration to become a Nation of Sanctuary.

The information and figures in this annual report are the result of long hours of work by staff, volunteers, and trustees, together with the support of our funders, partners, and Welsh government. By transforming services, we provide the expert guidance and advocacy that is our purpose, and I would like to thank everyone who has made this possible during such a challenging year.

Harry Iles - Chair Welsh Refugee Council
Andrea Cleaver, CEO



ASYLUM RIGHTS PROGRAM (ARP)

We lead the Asylum Rights Programme, a partnership of six organisations created to promote and ensure the rights of people seeking asylum in Wales.

This year our service had to adapt rapidly to meet the extreme needs of our most vulnerable clients. The ARP moved to a remote telephone service within days of the national lockdown being announced and ensured continuity of casework support across Wales. We continued to tackle challenges, identify trends and issues, and provide professional casework services to asylum seekers across Wales.

Our caseworkers provided both emotional and practical support with asylum seekers' applications and appeals to the Home Office. In total, they delivered 5,695 sessions to clients speaking over 40 different languages and from 50 different nationalities.

November 2020 saw the inception of the Home Office 'Contingency Initial Accommodation' in Penally, Pembrokeshire. This decommissioned military barracks was designed to be 'home' to up to 200 asylum seekers while their application for Home Office support was processed. Our team launched a Penally Outreach Service and worked collaboratively with key stakeholders across Wales to ensure that the needs of the clients in Penally were met.

We worked strategically with both Welsh and National partners to lobby and campaign for the closure of the barracks and were delighted to see the barracks close in March 2021.

The Asylum Rights Programme has continued to meet – and exceed – its anticipated milestones through this challenging year.

NAVIGATING ASYLUM PARTNERSHIP (ASYLUM GUIDES)

In 2020, we began working with Refugee Action to deliver the Navigating Asylum Partnership project funded by Comic Relief. This partnership aims to address the individual, organisational, policy and bureaucratic barriers to a fair, just and effective UK asylum system. We will be recruiting and training peer-led guides to help ensure those going through the asylum system feel supported.

COMMUNICATIONS AND INFLUENCING

We held two ‘Meet Your Senedd member’ events involving Jayne Bryant, MS for Newport West, John Griffiths MS for Newport East, Jo Stevens MP for Central Cardiff.

We have developed a new series of online events with asylum seekers, refugees, Members of Parliament and Senedd Members of Wales. The sessions aim to give asylum seekers and refugees the opportunity to share their experiences with decision makers, and better understand the political landscape of Wales and the role of Welsh politicians on asylum issues.

During these events, participants expressed their desire to be able to work and contribute to society in the UK and Wales while they are waiting for their applications to be decided, a process which often takes years. A recent report found that allowing asylum seekers to work could have a cost benefit to the UK of £97.8 million.

As a team, we:

- Supported participants to develop questions relevant to their experiences,
- Raised awareness of asylum seekers and refugees' experiences with the Senedd Members, and
- Provided opportunities for asylum seekers and refugees' voices to be heard.

One participant, Mohammad from Syria says:

"I was very excited to be involved in the session. It gave Refugee and Asylum Seekers the chance to share their experiences and problems and raise awareness of these issues. It shows that people in power like MPs are trying to be inclusive, and they are committed to give opportunities for Refugees and Asylum Seekers to be listened to.

Jo Stevens MP, who took part in the event, said:

"I believe that Wales is a welcoming place for asylum seekers and refugees, and I welcome the opportunity to listen to people's experiences and to better understand how our role as politicians can positively influence the asylum system in Wales"

REFUGEE WEEK WALES 2021

Refugee Week Wales is a celebration of the contributions of refugees and asylum seekers in Wales and an opportunity to raise awareness of their diverse experiences with the wider public. In 2021, the planning team consisted of 11 organisations with 15 online events across Wales.

The aim was to celebrate the strength and resilience of refugees and asylum seekers and practice solidarity with them via the theme of 'We Cannot walk Alone'. Refugee Week Wales 2021 generated 10 media stories, including:

- An interview with Joseph Gnagbo, a rap artist who has learned fluent Welsh in a year, on S4C's Heno (Tonight) programme about the importance of welcoming people in Wales.
- Another S4C interview, this time with volunteer and asylum seeker Mostafa Alahmad, for a special Refugee Week Wales news piece about asylum in Wales.

- A think piece for the Institute of Welsh Affairs, penned by Welsh Refugee Council, about the challenges of providing services and support to asylum seekers and refugees in Wales during Covid-19. [Read the article here](#)

- An online Q&A with the Bevan Foundation to discuss the impact of Covid-19 on asylum seekers and refugees in Wales, how we adapted our services and what a trauma-informed asylum system might look like.

- An article in WalesOnline featuring two refugees who have made their home in Newport over many decades.

HATE CRIME AWARENESS PROJECT

From November 2020 – March 2021, the Hate Crime Awareness Project:

- Delivered 9 online sessions with 44 people
- Shared Anti-Hate Crime booklets in 5 languages
- Created a play based on a hate crime scenario in partnership with Forum Theatre facilitator Iwan Brioc and asylum seekers and refugees.
- Delivered a session with 15 Welsh Refugee Council employees and volunteers to help them better understand how to support clients.
- Included South Wales Police and Victim Support in the delivery of two sessions to raise awareness of the support they provide and how to access it.

- Shared an online information video about crime in Wales.
- We provided mobile data allowance to 5 participants who attended the sessions. Unfortunately, the face-to-face activities had to be postponed due to the pandemic.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYABILITY

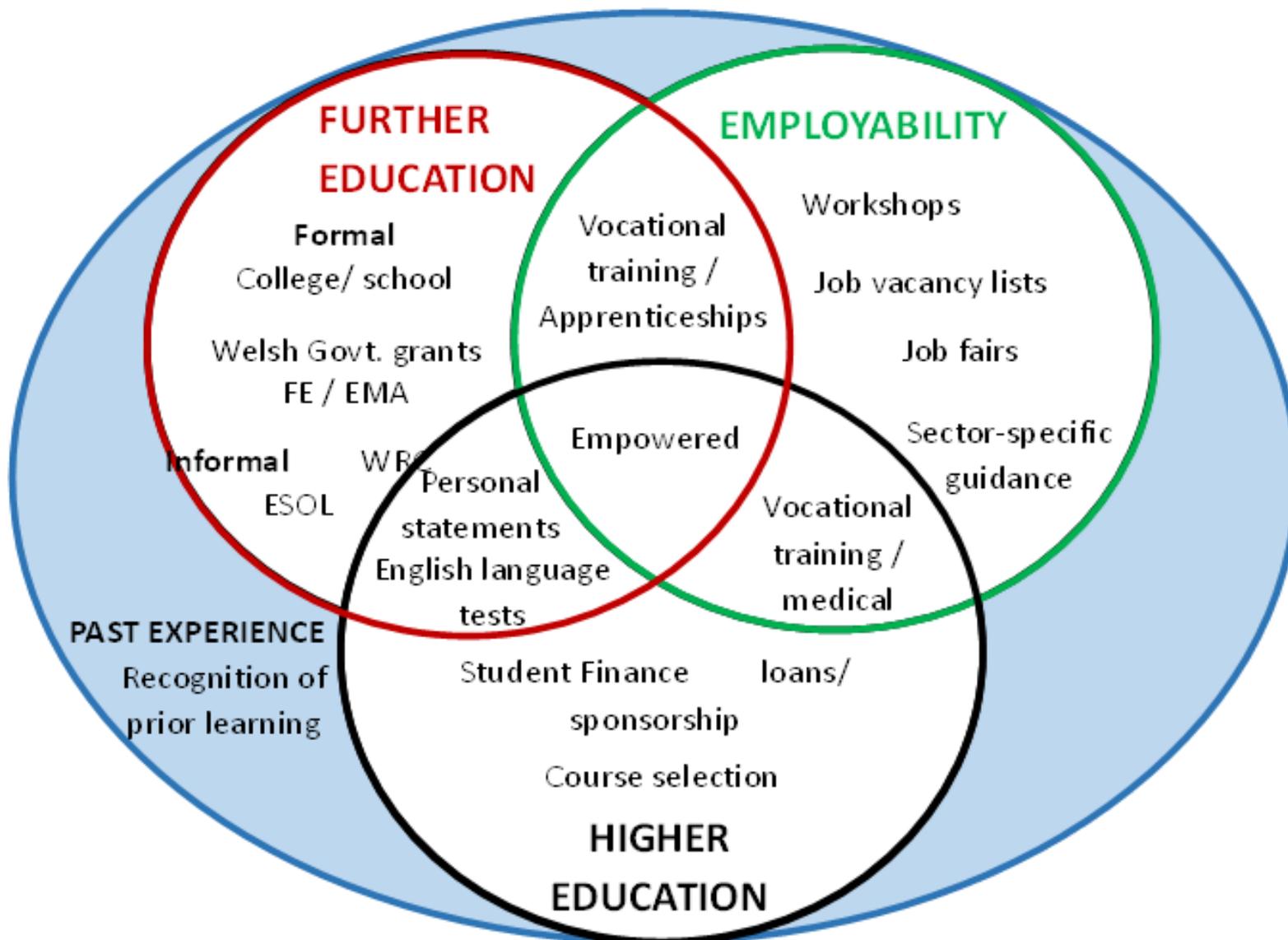
NET Education and Employability (E&E) Project

We launched a new education and employability project in October which has supported 95 clients and delivered 19 workshops with 36 participants.

Our project covers three broad areas: further education, higher education, and employability. Clients sought advice and support across a range of topics in three main areas: higher education, further education and employability

The support we provided led to clients feeling more empowered in their choices, as illustrated in the diagram on the following page.

Several clients wished to pursue careers in the field of medicine – i.e., as a nurse, doctor, psychiatrist, pharmacist, or vet, and sought specialist knowledge to assist them in their ambitions. The project was truly fortunate to be able to draw upon the expertise of a volunteer whose specialism is in nursing and who also has delivered language and cultural awareness training for international medics.



We continued our partnership with the Displaced People in Action (DPIA) and referred clients to the Wales Asylum Seeker and Refugee Doctor and Dentist (WARD) Group. The group is aimed at those medics with prior qualifications and experience and offers classes for the as well as opportunities for members to meet, support each other, and share experiences.

ENGAGEMENT

Our Engagement Officer started in October, and quickly began to identify powerful client stories, listen to clients carefully and respectfully, and help build their confidence to share their experiences.

As part of the project, we delivered:

- **9 consent sessions** to ensure that participants fully understood what giving consent means.
- **8 story sessions** in which participants could take the time they needed to tell their stories.
- **Working closely** with a small group of 8 asylum seekers and refugees.
- **20 powerful stories and case studies** illustrating the diverse experiences of asylum seekers and refugees.
- **2 media training sessions** in which a BBC journalist and WRC Communications Officer answered questions about the process of sharing a story with the media, even if individuals did not want to share their stories at this stage.
- **Collecting Stories and Case Studies session** for WRC staff in collaboration with a Cardiff PhD student on the importance of ethics and the complexities of collecting stories and case studies.

Using a narrative approach, individuals shared stories of their journeys of living in Wales – from their arrival, their experiences to this day, and shared their hopes and dreams for the future. Stories were told by mothers, a single parent, young people who have experienced homelessness, and an older person. Stories revealed experiences of identity, belonging, racism, housing, education, accessing health services, and being on the move.

By working closely with Asylum Seekers and Refugees in this project, we have increased their confidence to share their stories with the audiences that matter to them.

Global Majority Fund (GMF)

In partnership with Comic Relief, Bawso and Race Council Cymru in we launched a grant programme to support Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic led community organisations in Wales that were impacted by Covid-19. Organisations could apply for grants up to £20,000 from a total fund of £256,000.

To aid organisations applying for the grants, we delivered two pre-application workshops to build confidence and understanding. As a result, 84 groups applied, with 31 groups being awarded grants. This is an exciting time for community organisations who might otherwise experience barriers in receiving grants to support the work they do.

Since then, we have:

- Created a database to identify ways we can support groups
- Delivered an online induction session
- Delivered two safeguarding workshops
- Held two online networking sessions

We have planned many future events, each of which is shaped by the needs identified by the grantees to help them make successful bids for funding.

HOUSING

Our housing project is designed to reduce the number of homeless refugees and asylum seekers in Cardiff and increase the number who have secured tenancies.

The project has four main aims:

- To support those with no recourse to public funds
- To engage with landlords/agencies to increase access
- To liaise with housing providers to increase understanding of refugee and asylum seekers' needs
- To give clients a voice via the Housing Forum to understand barriers and challenges.

We have observed the following challenges:

- Reluctance of landlords to rent to recipients of Universal Credit without a guarantor.

- 28-day eviction period is too short meaning some can't access bond schemes as housing checks take too long, properties don't pass checks, or properties get referred late in the period.
- Lack of affordable housing.

Despite the challenges over the past six months, 32 refugees have secured tenancies in 28 private rental properties, 11 clients have accessed the Cardiff Local authority Bond Scheme and we have built relationships with 13 landlords and four estate agents who are willing to rent.

Our approach is having an impact – we are beginning to change perceptions by talking to landlords directly and honestly and explaining the barriers refugees are faced with when entering the private rental sector and what help and support is available to them.

Positive feedback received from a landlady whose current tenant is a service user:

Hi C, I would just like to say that I wish all tenants were as pleasant as S! I still have the other double room available if there are more like her :-)
Best wishes, A

A strong working relationship has also been established with Cardiff Council's Housing Options Centre, with housing staff regularly holding meetings to discuss and resolve client issues.

For example, where a service user is having difficulty understanding any requests made to them, these meetings act as a forum where the Housing and Landlord caseworker can advocate on their behalf by raising these questions and then feeding back to client directly and clearly.

We held our first Housing Forum, with the aim to involve clients in influencing around housing related issues.

MOVE ON PROJECT

Our Move On Team continued to provide support to clients and their families during the pandemic. We provided remote advice and support on financial assistance, rights and entitlements, accommodation, job support and supported clients to develop financial stability in those critical four weeks. By working with Migrant Help, each client is referred internally to the Move On Team, ensuring a rapid and smooth referral process.

During the year we provided information and advice for refugees about changing rules and regulations as many people were allowed to stay in Home Office accommodation even after being granted refugee status due to the pandemic.

Although remote working was challenging, cross-team digital connectivity enabled caseworkers from across Wales to share cases, learn from each other, and share their workload. Key external partners attended our weekly team meetings, creating knowledge exchange and opportunities to learn for both our caseworkers and external agencies.

Remote working also posed challenges for clients in accessing the full range of our services. We introduced a free helpline which enabled our clients to call us for support and advice free of charge, which naturally caused an increase in workload.

Through OAK funding we recruited the vital post of housing and landlord caseworker. The purpose of this post is to ensure a smoother client journey in transitioning from Home Office accommodation to community housing via support with contacting agencies, landlords and housing options.

Our future ambitions are to continue developing and honing the services we offer as part of Move On, and to continue to provide expert advice and support to refugees during and beyond the transition period from asylum seeker to refugee.

PLAY AND DEVELOPMENT

Every child needs a safe place and the opportunity to play and experience fun. But the pandemic has exposed the deep disadvantages experienced by many children from asylum seeking and refugee families – including access to toys and play equipment.

With support from Children in Need, the Play Development Team sent out weekly texts to 130 families offering support during this difficult time. During periods of isolation and lockdown we also made phone calls to children and families to check on their wellbeing.

Many families needed help accessing food, clothing, free school meal vouchers, uniform grants, essential equipment, and digital support and we made 322 referrals to specialist services on their behalf.

Given the challenges of the pandemic – and the difficult situations many of them were experiencing - we needed to be flexible and creative in the ways we could bring fun into children's lives, giving them the opportunity to explore, use their imagination and grow in confidence.

To do this, we delivered toys and resources to 198 children and young people, meeting up with them in doorstep visits and bringing the most vulnerable to specialised play sessions. We used a bespoke approach to meet all our children's needs and interests, from creating different craft projects and cookery packs to sourcing suitable toys for children with additional needs.

This year we delivered:

243 doorstep visits

4 play in the park sessions

744 phone contact sessions

4 toy collection days

681 toys

35 play sessions

384 craft kits

2 specialised play therapy sessions

81 cooking kits

We contacted schools and organisations on behalf of some of our children, and supported others to share their stories of how the pandemic had impacted them, helping to raise their voices.

RESOURCES DEPARTMENT

We undertook a tender exercise to find auditors for a new three-year period, and Bevan Buckland were appointed.

Thanks to a previous investment from The National Lottery Community Fund, our staff were already using quality laptops, Office 365 and cloud-based software. This meant when the pandemic hit we could swiftly transition to home-based working. In collaboration with our IT provider, we also arranged an IT survey to check-in with staff and identify areas to improve.

VOLUNTEERING AND PARTNERSHIPS

While face-to-face volunteering was paused at the height of the pandemic, other avenues to support sprang up.

Some of our volunteer translators were able to adapt to three-way telephone calls. Our ESOL language provision was offered through Zoom classes instead and a WhatsApp group provided a very valuable means of communication and support for both clients and volunteers.

We opened a new ESOL class for asylum seekers and refugees in Wrexham that was run by a tutor based in Portugal!

Our Volunteering Manager kept in touch with the volunteers, assuring them that they would be back in operation as soon as conditions allow. We also had a high level of new applications to volunteer with us, and we are excited to see what experience and skills they will provide in the coming year(s).

FUNDRAISING AND BUSINESS

DEVELOPMENT

Finally, with the pandemic changing the way we delivered our services and highlighting inequalities, we reached out to new funders.

We were thrilled to be able to attract new funding from Community Foundation in Wales, WCVA, The National Lottery Community Fund, Migration Exchange, Oak, National Emergencies Trust, Screwfix, and the Moondance Foundation. We are particularly thankful for how quickly funders adapted their grant programmes, the brevity of their new application processes and the speed in which decisions were made.

The year saw us form grant funded partnerships with Refugee Council in England, Scottish Refugee Council, and Refugee Action to deliver projects related to the Covid-19 pandemic.

We recognised the need to support grassroots charities, and with funding from Comic Relief we also formed a formal partnership with BAWSO and Race Council Cymru. Our Global Majority Fund project provides small grants to community groups that are Black, Asian, minority and ethnic led. This ensured that grassroots community groups could apply for vital funds to tackle challenges posed by the pandemic.

Improving the way we work

This year we invested in Donify, a database to manage membership subscriptions, grants, and donations. Our donations stayed the same as the previous year, which reflected our focus on securing much needed high-level grants. We are proud that our overall income grew by 35% in a particularly challenging period.

**THANK YOU FOR
READING**

