

PLATFORM



IMPLEMENTING THE HEART OF HELP

Next steps for building trauma-informed support for
sanctuary seekers

2025

Written by Sabiha Azad

Sanctuary Coalition Cymru Coordinator

Implementing the Heart of Help: Next steps for building trauma-informed support for sanctuary seekers

Executive Summary

The Heart of Help report, commissioned by Platform and conducted by the Welsh Refugee Council, sheds light on the experiences of sanctuary seekers in Wales. It evaluates the systemic barriers they face and provides recommendations to enhance trauma-informed care through a relational approach centred on empathy, shared power, and cultural sensitivity.

Key Findings

Sanctuary seekers reported challenges such as dehumanisation, stigma, prolonged asylum processes, and limited access to mental health support. These issues often hinder healing and integration. Participants emphasised the importance of consistent relationships, autonomy in decision-making, and culturally aware services. Peer support and safe, private environments were identified as essential for fostering resilience and trust.

Next Steps

To operationalise the values outlined in the Heart of Help report, focus groups were conducted with individuals who have lived experience of seeking sanctuary. These discussions highlighted nuanced challenges and practical methods for implementing trauma-informed practices in Wales.

Key insights include:

- Empathy and connection: Sanctuary seekers value understanding and patience in interactions with service providers.
- Safe spaces: Confidential, private environments are essential for sharing sensitive experiences.
- Peer support: Structured networks led by individuals with lived experience can reduce isolation and build trust.
- Barriers to access: Language difficulties, limited transport options, and cultural misunderstandings hinder effective support.

Immediate Actions

To address these challenges, the report recommends the following: 1. Consistent case management: Assigning dedicated caseworkers to build trust and reduce the need for repeated storytelling.

2. Reflective staff training: Providing regular trauma-informed, culturally sensitive training co-developed with sanctuary seekers.
3. Improved communication support: Expanding access to interpreters and cultural advocates to bridge language and cultural gaps.

Long-term Goals

The report outlines long-term objectives for creating a more inclusive, compassionate support system:

1. Peer-support networks: Establish formal structures to foster community connections and reduce isolation.
2. Streamlined processes: Simplify service delivery, reduce waiting times, and create safe employment or volunteering opportunities to promote independence.

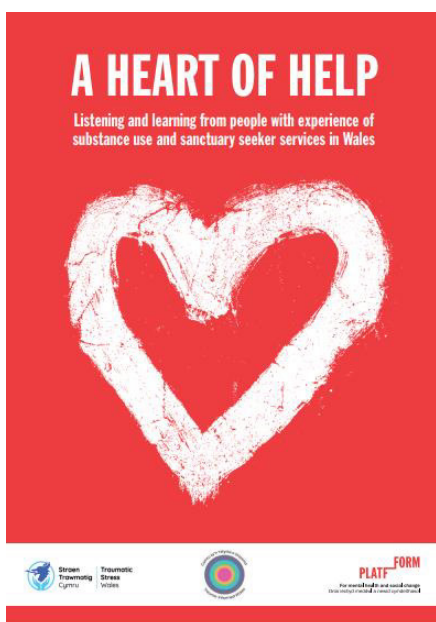
A Holistic Framework

The Heart of Help report proposes embedding trauma-informed principles across services, from individual interactions to systemic policies. These values will be implemented through further research, detailed action plans, and ongoing feedback from sanctuary seekers.

Conclusion

Implementing the Heart of Help recommendations will require sustained commitment to creating a compassionate, inclusive support system. By prioritising connection, respect, and empowerment, Wales has the opportunity to set a national standard for trauma-informed care, fostering dignity and resilience for sanctuary seekers.

Introduction



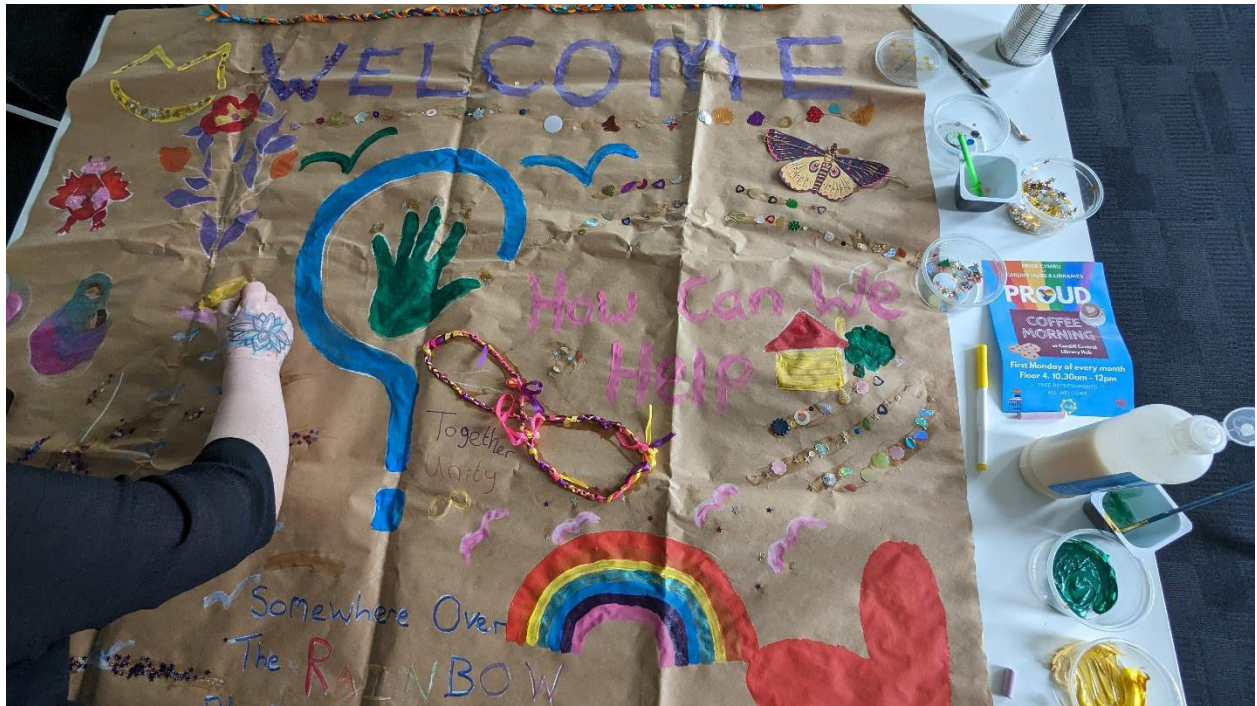
The Heart of Help report highlights the importance of listening to and learning from sanctuary seekers in Wales to deepen understanding of their experiences with the Trauma-Informed Wales Framework. Commissioned by Platform, and conducted by the Welsh Refugee Council, this research gathered insights from sanctuary seekers using their services, offering valuable perspectives on how Wales might create the conditions needed for relational, trauma-informed support.

By amplifying the voices of those with lived experience of seeking sanctuary, the report sheds light on systemic challenges that frequently obstruct the compassionate, holistic support intended within the Trauma-Informed Wales Framework.

Sanctuary seekers shared powerful, deeply personal accounts of their experiences with support services—stories often marked by feelings of dehumanisation, stigma, and re-traumatisation. Time and again, they expressed a profound need for something beyond mere assistance: a genuine sense of connection, empathy, and respect. One participant captured this longing in a single, poignant phrase, the desire for a "Heart of Help." Their testimonies highlighted a stark reality: systems that should foster healing and resilience too often lack the warmth, humanity, and understanding essential for rebuilding lives.

Looking ahead, Platform is committed to taking practical steps to embed, implement, and review the recommendations of the Heart of Help report. These efforts align with the Trauma-Informed Wales Framework. They aim to transform support services to meet immediate needs and promote long-term well-being and recovery. This is about building a more inclusive, compassionate Wales where everyone gets the support they truly deserve.

Crucially, individuals with lived experience of seeking sanctuary must be at the heart of shaping and further developing these recommendations. This report also explores, with sanctuary seekers, the next steps for embedding and implementing the findings rooted in reality, as well as assessing their suitability and effectiveness.



Background

In A Heart of Help, Plattform advocates a trauma-informed approach to systemic change, using a “compass” metaphor rather than a rigid “map” to guide services in supporting trauma-affected individuals. This flexible approach underscores relational values such as compassion, connection, and active listening, which are crucial in addressing the complex and unpredictable needs of those who have endured trauma.

The compass model promotes empathy and adaptability, fostering human-centred connections across services and systems. Key values include prioritising meaningful relationships, ensuring safety and stability, and recognising the overwhelm experienced by both service users and providers.¹

¹ [A-Heart-of-Help-Digital-English.pdf](#)

Imagine living in a constant state of limbo—waiting, hoping, yet feeling utterly stuck. For many sanctuary seekers, this is their daily reality. Prolonged asylum processes, financial struggles, and crushing social isolation create a sense of being "frozen" in life, trapped by uncertainty and delays that erode self-worth. The report uncovers a deep emotional toll, where the lack of timely support leaves individuals feeling invisible and powerless. On top of this, housing insecurity looms large—unstable, temporary accommodations in overcrowded spaces add yet another layer of stress, taking a severe toll on mental health. This is more than hardship; it's a relentless struggle for stability, dignity, and hope.

Amid the loneliness of social isolation, the longing for connection burns brighter than ever. Sanctuary seekers aren't just looking for safety—they crave community, family, and the deep bonds that make life meaningful. The desire for reunification is more than a wish; it's a fundamental need for their well-being. Yet, restrictive employment policies turn ambition into frustration. These individuals are ready to contribute, eager to put their skills to use, but legal barriers keep them sidelined, fueling a sense of helplessness and dependence.

Mental health is a pressing issue for this group, and the report underscores a crucial need for trauma-sensitive support—care that is both compassionate and non-intrusive. But the challenges don't stop there. Language barriers remain a major hurdle, making it harder to access essential services and truly integrate into the community. Access to language classes is highly valued, as it not only improves communication but also connects sanctuary seekers with their communities.

At the heart of Platform's **trauma-informed approach** is a powerful commitment to shared power, peer support, and storytelling—elements that sanctuary seekers see as vital to their healing. For many, true recovery is not just about receiving help; it is about reclaiming autonomy and agency in their own lives. They do not want to be defined by their struggles or feel trapped in systems of dependency. Instead, they long for opportunities to work, contribute, and build their futures on their own terms. Being labelled as "vulnerable" can feel like a weight, stripping away their sense of strength. That's why they advocate for support that doesn't just see their challenges but champions their resilience, skills, and potential.²

Ultimately, A Heart of Help champions a compassionate, adaptable system across Wales, one that values empathy, shared power, and storytelling as central to genuine support. This approach challenges hierarchical structures that can stifle effective assistance and promotes a more inclusive, relational model aligned with sanctuary seekers' lived experiences and aspirations for integration and self-reliance.

² [A-Heart-of-Help-Digital-English.pdf](#)

The research identified key relational values and framework recommendations to strengthen trauma-informed practices for those seeking sanctuary.

Relational Values

1. Connection, compassion, and care: Highlight the importance of genuine human connections in service delivery, challenging practices that hinder this.
2. Safety, stability, and autonomy: Ensure individuals have safe, stable environments and the freedom to decide when and how they explore their trauma.
3. Understanding overwhelm: Recognise the reality of overwhelmed staff supporting people in overwhelming situations.
4. Value of peer support: Foster support led by peers with shared lived experiences.
5. Equitable Power-Sharing: Promote fair distribution of power within support systems for balanced relationships.
6. Healing through storytelling: Encourage storytelling as a therapeutic tool, offering a pathway for individuals to share and process their experiences.
7. Addressing systemic barriers: Identify and challenge systemic obstacles to supportive interactions and effective care.
8. Allowing time for recovery: Ensure individuals have the time and space needed to recover, even after reaching key milestones.
9. Reflective training: Implement training that nurtures reflective capacity and empathy in practitioners.
10. Multi-layered trauma-Informed Practice: Recognise the need for nuanced, contextually adapted trauma-informed approaches.
11. Understanding trauma in context: Acknowledge that trauma can be active or residual, shaped by both internal and external factors, including broader social influences.
12. Addressing social determinants of mental health: Prioritise a rights-based mental health approach that respects choice and avoids unnecessary medicalisation.

Framework Recommendations

1. Implementation guide: Develop a practical guide to ensure consistent, system-wide adoption of the Trauma-Informed Wales Framework.

2. Awareness of structural challenges in implementation: Build an understanding that systemic barriers often impede change, necessitating reflection at both organisational and individual levels.
3. Prioritise storytelling for healing: Centre storytelling in reform efforts, capturing lived experiences beyond quantitative data.
4. Relational and reflective training: Emphasise training that builds relational and reflective skills over technical knowledge alone.
5. Relationship-focused service commissioning: Ensure that procurement processes prioritise the development of meaningful relationships within services.
6. Learning from peer support: Incorporate insights from peer-led support to shape trauma-informed practices.
7. Trauma-informed policymaking: Design policies that embed trauma-informed principles across public services and communities.
8. Reflective tools for engaging with difficult experiences: Provide tools that enable practitioners to reflect openly, especially when processing challenging client experiences.
9. Research across sectors: Explore whether these relational values resonate across other professional fields to broaden their application.

These values and recommendations promote a holistic and relational approach. They integrate trauma-informed care at all levels, from individual interactions to policymaking and systemic change. To bring these principles to life, the Welsh Refugee Council conducted further research to identify practical methods for implementing these values. This next-step research was essential in exploring how to put trauma-informed care into practice.

At the heart of this approach is a deep commitment to holistic, relationship-centered care. These values do not just exist in theory—they shape real-world change, from personal interactions to policy decisions and systemic transformation. To turn principle into practice, the Welsh Refugee Council conducted in-depth research to identify practical and effective ways to bring these values to life.

Focus groups

In an insightful 90-minute focus group, we had the privilege of hearing directly from five individuals with lived experience of seeking sanctuary.

Their perspectives offered invaluable guidance on shaping more trauma-informed and compassionate services across Wales. Through candid discussions, they shed light on the challenges they navigate within the current support system, revealing critical gaps and opportunities for meaningful change. Their voices not only deepened our understanding but also reinforced the importance of embedding the values and recommendations outlined in the Heart of Help report to enhance care and support for those in need.

The discussion delved into the experiences of sanctuary seekers, exploring whether they felt safe, respected, and truly understood in their interactions. At its core, the conversation centered on fundamental relational values—connection, care, choice, and respect—shedding light on how these shaped their encounters with service providers. Participants also uncovered critical barriers to support, ranging from accessibility and language obstacles to cultural misunderstandings and systemic challenges that continue to obstruct their access to essential care.

Through powerful personal stories, participants shared moments when they felt truly supported and overlooked—offering invaluable insights into creating more trauma-responsive services. Their voices shaped a compelling discussion, culminating in thoughtful recommendations on improving accessibility, embedding trauma-informed practices, and strengthening peer support networks. Every piece of feedback was handled with the utmost confidentiality, ensuring that these lived experiences drive real, meaningful improvements in the support available to sanctuary seekers across Wales.

Accessibility and basic needs fulfilment

Sanctuary seekers often find reliable support in securing essentials like food and shelter, ensuring a foundation of stability. However, a critical gap remains in mental health services, where long waiting times and scarce resources create significant barriers to well-being. This shortfall not only delays crucial care but also amplifies the challenges faced by those seeking refuge. Addressing these deficiencies is essential to fostering a truly supportive environment for sanctuary seekers.

“It’s hard to wait for weeks or even months for mental health support when you’re already struggling.”

One participant expressed the urgency perfectly: “It’s incredibly difficult to wait weeks—or even months—for mental health support when you’re already struggling.” This stark reality highlights the critical need for timely, trauma-informed care.

Sensitivity to personal histories and trauma

Sanctuary seekers greatly valued the empathy and patience demonstrated by many service providers, recognising these qualities as vital in creating a safe and supportive environment. However, their experiences also highlighted a significant gap—the need for more culturally aware and trauma-informed training. By equipping service providers with these skills, we can enhance the quality of care, ensuring responses that are not only compassionate but also deeply attuned to the diverse needs of those seeking refuge.

Participants strongly emphasised the vital importance of embedding lived experience within support services. They advocated for the direct employment of individuals who have personally navigated the challenges of seeking sanctuary, ensuring that their insights shape and enhance service delivery. Additionally, they proposed the establishment of mentorship programmes led by those with firsthand experience. Such initiatives would not only foster a deeper sense of understanding but also equip service providers with the communication skills and empathy needed to engage meaningfully with sanctuary seekers.

Additionally, participants advocated for training programmes to be co-designed with individuals who have lived experience, ensuring authenticity and relevance. They urged organisations and services to join forces in shaping these opportunities, emphasising that the responsibility must rest firmly with these institutions.

"Sometimes they just don't understand what we've been through," this is a call for service providers to go beyond basic support, to truly recognise and honour each individual's journey. Only by doing so can they ensure that the care they offer is not just available but genuinely attuned to the lived realities of those they serve.

“

Sometimes they just don't understand what we've been through

”

Safety and respect in service interactions

“

When they listen and don't rush me, I feel more respected.

”

For those seeking sanctuary, feeling safe, respected, and truly heard is paramount. Positive experiences often arose when service providers demonstrated cultural awareness and took the time to listen attentively. However, language barriers frequently

hindered the development of trust, and the presence of interpreters, while necessary, sometimes disrupted the authenticity of relationships. As one participant expressed, “When they listen and don't rush me, I feel more respected.”

The need for culturally sensitive and trauma-informed environments is undeniable. These spaces must foster trust, ensuring that neither language nor procedural hurdles stand in the way of dignity and genuine human connection.

Challenges in accessing services

Language, transportation, and cultural understanding emerged as major obstacles for sanctuary seekers. Limited English proficiency makes it difficult to express complex needs, especially in legal and medical contexts. “I try to explain, but sometimes they don't understand,” one sanctuary seeker noted. Additionally, limited public transport or lack of affordable options hinders access to remote services, further complicating their efforts to seek help.

“

I try to explain, but sometimes they don't understand

”

Genuine care and consistent relationships

“

"Sometimes I feel like just a number,"

”

Sanctuary seekers spoke of moments when they truly felt valued—times when service providers transcended routine procedures to offer genuine empathy and kindness. These experiences stood in stark contrast to the all-too-common inconsistency in service quality.

Many described interactions that felt detached and impersonal, eroding any sense of being genuinely cared for. “Sometimes I feel like just a number,” one participant reflected. Establishing continuity through consistent caseworkers could foster lasting, compassionate relationships—an approach that resonates with the Heart of Help’s advocacy for meaningful human connections.

Autonomy and decision-making control

Participants expressed a compelling need for greater autonomy in decisions affecting their support. They emphasised the importance of having a say in crucial choices—such as selecting interpreters, determining appointment times, and navigating healthcare options. By actively involving sanctuary seekers in these decisions, we not only empower them but also affirm their right to shape their own journey with dignity and independence.

“

Often, decisions are made for me, not with me

”

"Often, decisions are made for me, not with me," one participant noted. Providing clear explanations of available options would empower sanctuary seekers. This approach would help them feel respected and confident in navigating their support.

Peer support and community connection

The profound impact of connecting with others who have faced similar experiences was unmistakable. For sanctuary seekers, these connections provided not just comfort, but a deep sense of strength and solidarity. "Knowing that someone truly understands makes all the difference," one participant shared. Their words underscored the immense power of shared experiences—offering reassurance, resilience, and a reminder that no one has to navigate their journey alone.

Sanctuary seekers highlighted that these connections are largely informal, often leaving individuals without reliable support. They emphasised the need for organised peer-support groups, which could foster a stronger sense of belonging. By providing structured networks, such groups would not only help reduce isolation but also create consistent, welcoming spaces where sanctuary seekers can share experiences, build relationships, and truly integrate into their community.

Systemic challenges and barriers

“
*It’s like we’re just being
processed,”*
”

Many sanctuary seekers face systemic barriers, including language difficulties, long waiting times, limited work opportunities, and impersonal, standardised support. One participant shared, “It’s like we’re just being processed,” emphasising how these challenges often leave them

feeling invisible. Streamlining processes, reducing wait times, and offering safe work or volunteer opportunities could help realise the Heart of Help’s adaptable, holistic approach.

Sanctuary seekers highlighted that their connections are largely informal, leaving many feeling isolated.

They voiced a strong desire for well-organised peer-support groups—structured networks that would not only foster a sense of belonging but also create reliable spaces for mutual support, shared experiences, and meaningful connections within their community.

Trauma sensitivity and healing spaces

Participants strongly emphasised the vital need for trauma-informed support within environments that prioritise both safety and privacy. They deeply valued service providers who demonstrated patience and unwavering consistency, fostering a sense of trust and stability. This approach not only reassured them but also spared them the emotional strain of repeatedly recounting their experiences, allowing for a more compassionate and effective support system.

“
I want to see the same person each time. It’s hard to build trust with someone new
”

"I want to see the same person each time. It's hard to build trust with someone new," shared one sanctuary seeker. Quiet and private spaces were seen as essential for creating a more supportive and healing-focused environment.

Timeliness in support and system efficiency

The prolonged asylum process and extensive wait times for essential services place immense strain on sanctuary seekers, hindering their ability to rebuild their lives. Many describe how these delays create a state of uncertainty, making it nearly impossible to focus on healing and integration. As one individual expressed, “I cannot plan for my future because I have no idea what will happen next.”

A more efficient asylum system—one that ensures timely decisions and swift access to mental health support and other vital services—would provide much-needed stability. With this foundation, sanctuary seekers could engage more fully in their communities, contributing their skills, talents, and aspirations with confidence and hope.

“
I can’t make any plans for my future because I don’t know what will happen next.
”

However, achieving this requires systemic change beyond the control of individuals. Sanctuary seekers expressed a strong wish for service providers to understand their frustration. They noted that this frustration often comes from ongoing uncertainty. Even a simple verbal acknowledgement of their struggles would be appreciated.

Suitability of the heart of help principles and values

The themes emerging from the focus groups resonate deeply with the Heart of Help values, championing empathy, safety, cultural understanding, peer support, and systemic efficiency. These priorities underscore the essence of relational care, highlighting the transformative power of human connection. If embraced wholeheartedly and integrated with a people-centred approach, they have the potential to bridge critical gaps and fortify the support system, ensuring that every interaction is meaningful, compassionate, and effective.

Suggested steps for embedding principles and values

To enhance support for sanctuary seekers, we recommend a set of key actions, carefully structured into two categories: 'immediate steps' for swift, tangible improvements and 'long-term actions' for lasting, transformative change.

Immediate steps focus on building trust and strengthening communication. We propose dedicated case management, specialised staff training, and enhanced interpreter support to ensure that every individual receives the assistance they need with dignity and clarity.

Looking ahead, our long-term goals aim to foster deeper community integration and create more efficient, streamlined service processes. By implementing these measures, we can build a more inclusive and supportive environment for sanctuary seekers, both now and in the future.

Immediate steps

✓ Consistent case management:

In an ideal world, every sanctuary seeker would have a dedicated caseworker—someone who truly understands their journey, providing continuous, personalised support. This consistent point of contact would not only foster trust and stability but also spare individuals the emotional toll of repeatedly recounting their stories. It would create a sense of continuity, allowing people to build a meaningful, supportive relationship with someone who is invested in their wellbeing.

However, in high-demand settings where dedicated caseworkers may not always be a viable option, practical solutions must be in place to ensure support remains seamless and compassionate. A well-maintained, secure case management system could be invaluable, enabling staff to swiftly access an individual's history, needs, and progress. This would help prevent the frustration of repetition and ensure individuals receive informed, uninterrupted support, even when multiple staff members are involved.

Beyond systems, adopting a person-centred approach is crucial. Equipping all staff with trauma-informed and culturally competent training would help ensure that every interaction remains sensitive, respectful, and attuned to the individual's unique circumstances. And where assigning a single caseworker is not feasible, a team-based continuity model—where small, dedicated teams or designated points of contact provide ongoing support—could help preserve a sense of familiarity and consistency. In doing so, we can ensure that every sanctuary seeker receives stable, coordinated, and dignified care, no matter the challenges of the system.

✓ **Reflective training programmes:**

Deliver dynamic, trauma-informed, and culturally sensitive training for all frontline staff on a regular basis. This essential training will not only enhance empathy and relational skills but will also equip staff with the confidence to engage with sanctuary seekers in a truly compassionate and informed manner. Through interactive role-playing exercises and co-produced sessions led by sanctuary seekers themselves, staff will gain invaluable, real-world insights into their experiences and needs. The success of this training will be measured by staff confidence levels and direct feedback from sanctuary seekers, ensuring continuous improvement. Regular surveys can be used to assess empathy levels, with the goal of minimising misunderstandings and reducing complaints, fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for all.

✓ **Expanded interpreter and cultural support:**

Enhancing communication requires broadening access to interpreters and cultural advocates, ensuring every interaction is both seamless and culturally attuned. To achieve this, language service providers, recruitment teams, and cultural advocates will collaborate closely, fostering a unified approach to breaking down language and cultural barriers. Their collective expertise will drive meaningful engagement, making services more inclusive and responsive.

To measure success, robust metrics will track interpreter utilisation, assess comfort levels in communication, and identify any instances of misunderstanding. This strategic approach guarantees interactions that are not only effective but also culturally sensitive, significantly elevating the quality of service and strengthening trust within diverse communities.

Long-term actions

✓ Structured peer support

To enhance social integration and reduce isolation among sanctuary seekers, organisations should establish formal peer-support networks. These networks provide a vital platform for fostering meaningful connections and a sense of belonging within the community.

To ensure effectiveness, organisations should implement robust evaluation methods, including participation tracking and satisfaction surveys. Additionally, measuring the impact on social wellbeing and mental health through pre- and post-surveys will provide valuable insights into the programme's success and areas for improvement.

Integrating these steps within the Heart of Help report is vital to building a support system that sanctuary seekers themselves have identified as indispensable. Rooted in compassion, respect, and empowerment, this framework not only nurtures healing but also strengthens community integration across Wales, ensuring that every individual feels valued and supported.

Interviews

To delve deeper into this topic, we conducted in-depth, one-on-one interviews with three remarkable individuals. Each of them has firsthand experience of seeking sanctuary and now plays a pivotal role on the frontlines of asylum seeker and refugee organisations. Drawing from their own journeys, they provide vital, hands-on support to those navigating the asylum process, offering empathy, guidance, and hope to fellow sanctuary seekers.

Building trust and consistent relationships

A consistent and trustworthy relationship with a familiar support worker was described as essential by several interviewees. One explained the comfort of familiarity, noting, “When I see the same person each time, I don’t have to start from the beginning; they already know my story.”

“
When I see the same person each time, I don’t have to start from the beginning; they already know my story.
”

Another added, “If I have to explain myself over and over, it makes me feel like just a case. But when they remember my details, it feels like they actually care.” For continuity, one interviewee suggested gradually introducing multiple caseworkers, accompanied by a clear explanation for the change: “We could say, sometimes X won’t be here, so someone else will also know your story to support you when she isn’t available.” They emphasised that this approach helps clients feel cared for, even if their main caseworker is away, and suggested it as a simple yet effective way for services to build trust.

Creating safe, confidential spaces

The importance of private, secure spaces was emphasised repeatedly. One interviewee noted: “Sanctuary seekers should have an isolated, safe environment to air their views and concerns. Privacy is essential in building trust.”

“*Sanctuary seekers should have an isolated, safe environment to air their views and concerns. Privacy is essential in building trust.*”

Another interviewee highlighted the differences between locations. They mentioned: “In Cardiff office, everything’s open, so it’s harder to feel safe talking about personal issues. Here, the private rooms make a huge difference.”

Participants stressed that open spaces could make sanctuary seekers hesitant to share sensitive information. They feared eavesdropping or a lack of confidentiality. One participant suggested improving these spaces. They recommended: “Quiet rooms for one-on-one meetings, away from others, so people can share without worry.”

Empowering through choice and shared decision-making

Empowerment and shared decision-making emerged as a central theme. One interviewee observed, “*They come expecting us to fix everything, but we have to show them their options and let them decide. That way, they feel more in control.*”

“*They come expecting us to fix everything, but we have to show them their options and let them decide. That way, they feel more in control.*”

For sanctuary seekers who often feel disempowered by external decisions, being able to make choices about their care is crucial. Another participant suggested offering small choices where possible: “*Explaining why we’re involving another caseworker or why we’re suggesting another service can help them feel they’re part of the decision.*”

To foster shared power and autonomy, this approach offers a simple yet meaningful way to help sanctuary seekers regain control over their interactions. A practical step towards this is providing them with clear choices in their support options—allowing them to decide on appointment times, preferred communication methods, or even the staff member they feel most comfortable with. By embedding choice into their experience, we create an environment where sanctuary seekers feel genuinely heard, valued, and respected.

Addressing the impact of language barriers

“

When someone speaks their language and listens to them, it makes a big difference. They feel seen.

”

Language is crucial in helping sanctuary seekers feel comfortable and understood. One interviewee explained, “When someone speaks their language and listens to them, it makes a big difference. They feel seen.” Another participant emphasised the value of face-to-face interactions over phone translations.

They said, “In person, they can see your expressions and know you’re there for them. Over the phone, it’s harder to connect and fully understand.”

Language barriers often add stress to an already overwhelming experience. A caseworker noted, “We sometimes use interpreters over the phone, but it’s just not as personal. People want to see who they’re talking to and feel someone is truly listening.” Interviewees stressed that budget constraints often force reliance on services like language lines. This limits relationship building between services and sanctuary seekers. Speaking directly to sanctuary seekers and mimicking signs can build trust. Unfortunately, this is not always possible with phone-based services.

Incorporating peer support and shared lived experiences

Peer support from those with similar experiences was considered crucial. One interviewee explained, “they don’t want to talk to someone who hasn’t been through it. They want to talk to people who understand.”

Another added, “when they see someone who’s been through it and come out the other side, it gives them hope. They realise they’re not alone and that they too can make it.” Another participant proposed structured peer-support sessions for sanctuary seekers to connect informally.

“We could organise drop-in sessions where people share their experiences, learn from each other, and support one another. Sometimes, it’s just comforting to talk to someone who really understands.”

“*when they see someone who’s been through it and come out the other side, it gives them hope. They realise they’re not alone and that they too can make it.*”

The interviewee also highlighted the value of partnerships between organisations and asylum seeker groups in running these drop-ins. By working together, they could identify key individuals to upskill in supporting sanctuary seekers—strengthening trust, enhancing expertise, and expanding support networks more effectively.

Providing staff support and training for mental health awareness

“*training shouldn’t just be online. It needs to be face-to-face with real, helpful activities. These could help us de-stress.*”

The emotional strain on staff, especially those with lived experience, was acknowledged as challenging. One participant commented on the work environment: “our work can be overwhelming. This is particularly true when clients share traumatic stories. Regular well-being support would help us cope better.” Another

suggested on-site mental health training for caseworkers. They explained, “training shouldn’t just be online. It needs to be face-to-face with real, helpful activities. These could help us de-stress.” Another participant proposed appointing a mental health liaison in each office. They stated, “like we have fire and safety officers, we could have a mental health officer. This would support both clients and staff. Caseworkers would then have someone to turn to during difficult cases.”

Recognising the importance of trauma awareness and sensitivity

Supporting sanctuary seekers effectively demands a trauma-informed and **culturally sensitive** approach—one that fosters trust and promotes healing. Participants emphasise the importance of creating safe, predictable environments where individuals can feel at ease and be treated with dignity. Empathy plays a vital role in this process, as one participant shared: “Approach with calmness and empathy, especially when someone is distressed. They need to feel heard without judgement.” Providing clear explanations and offering choices can further empower individuals, helping to reduce feelings of helplessness and restore a sense of control over their own journey.

Cultural sensitivity is vital, recognising that mental health discussions may be difficult or stigmatised in some cultures. A practitioner explained, “In the Middle East, mental health talk is often taboo. We must reassure it’s safe to share.” Using interpreters trained in trauma-informed care, respecting gender preferences, and acknowledging spiritual practices creates a sense of value and safety.

Trauma manifests in diverse ways across cultures, often defying conventional Western mental health frameworks. For this reason, practitioners remain attuned to the many ways distress may be expressed, ensuring no voice goes unheard. By offering resources in native languages and respecting cultural traditions, they create an environment of trust and understanding. When appropriate, integrating familiar healing practices can strengthen the connection between support and cultural identity, reinforcing a sense of belonging.

Through a compassionate and culturally informed approach, practitioners empower asylum seekers, affirming their worth and resilience. This commitment not only upholds their dignity but also lays the groundwork for meaningful recovery and successful integration.

Ensuring sufficient time for sanctuary seekers to share

Several participants voiced concerns about limited appointment times. They felt it hindered sanctuary seekers from sharing their full stories. “When people feel rushed, they can’t say everything they need to,” one interviewee explained. “Sometimes they just need more time.”

Another mentioned that scheduling follow-ups could provide ongoing support for clients. “A simple follow-up call lets them know we’re still here for them,” they said. “It makes them feel remembered.”

“
A simple follow-up call lets them know we’re still here for them
”

Allowing sanctuary seekers ample time and future appointments shows a focus on compassionate, sustained care.

Fostering resilience and hope

“
It’s vital to help them realise they have choices and can build meaningful lives.”
”

Building resilience by helping sanctuary seekers envision a hopeful future was identified as a key approach. One interviewee said, “Many arrive feeling hopeless, but seeing others succeed gives them belief in possibilities.”

Empowering sanctuary seekers to join community activities, education, or volunteering was suggested as a practical step. One participant explained, “It’s vital to help them realise they have choices and can build meaningful lives.” They added, “It’s about providing the tools they need to move forward with confidence and purpose.”

Supporting caseworkers with self-care and stress management

In tackling workplace challenges, participants strongly emphasised the need to prioritise caseworker well-being. One interviewee passionately advocated for regular stress-reduction training, stating, “Caseworkers should have monthly sessions dedicated to well-being—whether through exercise, creative activities, or mindfulness.” They underscored the intensity of the role, adding, “This job is demanding, so structured support like this is not just beneficial; it’s essential.”

Another interviewee highlighted the importance of simply taking time to unwind. "Even a few hours off each month could make a real difference," they noted, stressing that improved well-being ultimately benefits both caseworkers and the clients they serve.

"If they come and feel we're here to help, they open up more. It's about showing humanity before anything else."

"When we say, 'Here's an option, but it's up to you,' they feel respected. They know we're not just making decisions for them."

A recurring suggestion was the introduction of shared relaxation initiatives or 'wellbeing days'. These could include team exercises, reflective group discussions, or even informal tea gatherings—practical yet powerful ways to lift morale and alleviate stress.

Participants widely agreed that fostering a culture of support and relaxation would enhance resilience and effectiveness in this challenging field.

Creating a truly compassionate and inclusive environment for sanctuary seekers isn't just a box-ticking exercise—it's a commitment that requires deep investment and unwavering dedication. Organisations supporting these communities must go beyond surface-level initiatives, embedding relational values at their core.

"When we show them options for volunteering or courses, it helps them see a future here. It's about showing that they can have a life, not just survive."

This means securing robust funding for top-tier training, fostering reflective practices, and championing peer-led support initiatives that empower both staff and service users. But it doesn't stop there. Flexible, people-centred systems that prioritise genuine human connection, empathy, and empowerment are essential.

With the right resources, trauma-informed approaches become more than just policy—they become second nature, ensuring that every interaction is grounded in understanding and care. By weaving these values into the fabric of public and

community services across Wales, we can build a support network that truly meets the complex and evolving needs of sanctuary seekers.

Conclusion

Bringing the Heart of Help report to life demands more than just policy—it requires a united, passionate commitment. At its core, this approach must amplify the voices and lived experiences of sanctuary seekers. A Trauma-Informed Implementation Guide will serve as a beacon, offering clear, practical steps to cultivate safe and supportive environments—spaces where sanctuary seekers are not just seen, but truly understood.

Training rooted in reflection and relationships will equip frontline staff with deep cultural empathy, patience, and a keen understanding of trauma. This is not just about knowledge—it's about fostering genuine human connection. With the right support, every interaction becomes an opportunity to uphold dignity and respect, ensuring that sanctuary seekers feel heard, valued, and empowered.

But true support goes beyond individual encounters. By formalising peer support networks, we can help sanctuary seekers build meaningful connections, reducing isolation and strengthening resilience. Expanding interpreter and cultural support services will break down communication barriers, ensuring people can express themselves fully and access the help they need without fear or frustration. Meanwhile, consistent case management, led by dedicated caseworkers, will build trust and eliminate the distress of having to repeat painful stories time and again.

Yet, to create real change, we must address the deeper, systemic obstacles that stand in the way. Long waiting times and bureaucratic red tape create unnecessary hardship. Advocating for faster asylum processing and safe employment opportunities is not just beneficial—it is essential. When sanctuary seekers can actively contribute to their communities, they regain their sense of self, purpose, and dignity.

The physical spaces we create also matter. Trauma-sensitive environments—designed with privacy, safety, and respect in mind—can offer solace and security. Beyond that, a unified trauma-informed policy framework must shape all public services, ensuring every interaction is guided by cultural sensitivity and genuine care. And this commitment cannot be static; regular feedback and evaluation will allow us to refine our approach, ensuring that as needs evolve, so too does our support system.

By taking these steps together, Wales can lead the way in building a truly trauma-informed support network—one that not only meets immediate needs but also lays the foundation for long-term inclusion, dignity, and empowerment. With unwavering commitment, we can foster a society that champions connection, respect, and shared humanity. This is more than just policy; it is a movement towards a kinder, more compassionate future—one where every sanctuary seeker is given the space, support, and respect they deserve.

Appendix 1 - Glossary

Sanctuary seeker - a person who leaves their home country to find safety and protection, often due to threats like war, persecution, or violence, and seeks refuge in another country.

Trauma-informed framework - a national initiative to support individuals and communities across Wales impacted by trauma. It emphasises five core principles:

- 1. Universal:** Accessible support for all without harm.
- 2. Person-Centred:** Involving individuals in decisions and providing tailored support. 26
- 3. Resilience and Strengths-Focused:** Building on existing strengths for coping.
- 4. Inclusive:** Support regardless of background or identity.
- 5. Relationship-Focused:** Emphasising safe, supportive relationships.

It outlines four practice levels for organisations:

- 1. Trauma-Aware:** Recognising trauma's existence and effects.
- 2. Trauma-Sensitive:** Responding sensitively to avoid re-traumatisation.
- 3. Trauma-Responsive:** Integrating trauma support into policies.
- 4. Trauma-Informed:** Embedding trauma understanding throughout organisational culture.

Culturally sensitive - being respectful and understanding of someone's cultural background, beliefs, and practices. For asylum seekers, this involves recognising and valuing their unique experiences, traditions, and languages, and ensuring they feel safe, respected, and understood, without pressuring them to change or hide parts of their identity.

Appendix 2 - Focus Group Questions

Building Trauma-Informed Services for Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Wales

We want to hear from you—your experiences, needs, and ideas on how services can become more compassionate, supportive, and trauma-informed.

This focus group focuses on *relational values*, such as connection, respect, and empowerment. These values highlight the importance of feeling safe, understood, and genuinely cared for when accessing public services (like healthcare, housing, and social services) and support from third-sector organisations (like charities and community groups). By understanding your experiences, we aim to guide these services in fostering more meaningful connections, providing choice, and ensuring that support is both humane and responsive. When answering the questions, think about all the services sanctuary seekers access whilst we are supporting them.

Your responses will remain confidential and will directly inform efforts to make services across Wales more welcoming and respectful for those seeking sanctuary. Thank you for sharing your voice and helping to make a positive change!

Here's a cohesive survey that integrates your questions with the additional relational values and recommendations feedback, ensuring a smooth flow.

Section 1: Personal Experience and Current Support

Do you have lived experience of seeking sanctuary?

- Yes ☐ No

Can you describe how supported sanctuary seekers feel by the services they currently access?

In what ways have these services felt sensitive to sanctuary seekers personal history and experiences? Are there any aspects where you feel they could improve?

How safe and respected do sanctuary seekers feel when interacting with service providers? Are there particular experiences that have made them feel comfortable or uncomfortable?

What challenges, if any, have sanctuary seekers encountered when trying to access services (e.g., language, cultural understanding, location)?

Section 2: Feedback on Relational Values in Services

Connection, Love, and Care

Do you feel the service providers genuinely care about the well-being of sanctuary seekers? Can you share any examples where they felt cared for or times this was lacking?

Safety, Stability, and Freedom to Choose

Do you feel that sanctuary seekers have the freedom to make choices about the support they receive? How could service providers better support them in feeling in control of their own care?

Peer Support

Have you been able to connect with our clients who share similar experiences? How has this been helpful (or not), and what could be improved in this area?

Power Sharing

Do you think sanctuary seekers feel included in decisions about their care and support? How could services work better with them to make decisions together?

Storytelling and Being Heard

Do you think sanctuary seekers sharing personal stories and experiences with service providers is helpful? How has this experience impacted you, and are there specific things that would help you feel safer or more supported in sharing?

Systemic Challenges

What do you feel are the biggest challenges or barriers within the current system that affect sanctuary seekers ability to get the support you need?

Time for Healing

Do you feel that sanctuary seekers have enough time to work on healing and address needs? What would an ideal support timeline look like for them?

Section 3: Recommendations for Service Improvement

13. Support and Compassionate Service What would make sanctuary seekers feel more supported by the services available to them? Are there specific changes that would make a difference in your experience?

14. Accessibility and Connection

How could service providers make it easier for sanctuary seekers to connect with them and receive help?

15. Embedding Trauma-Informed Practices

How can services better recognise and support the impact of trauma on sanctuary seekers? Are there specific approaches that would help you feel safer and more understood?

Section 4: Final Thoughts

15. In your opinion, what is the most important change needed in the system to better support sanctuary seekers?

Thank you for sharing your experiences and suggestions. Your input will help shape services that are more compassionate, understanding, and supportive. This survey is anonymous, and your responses will directly contribute to making trauma-informed care more effective.

Appendix 2

Introduction to the Research on Relational Values in Trauma-Informed Practice

In our ongoing journey to improve support and service design, we have undertaken research to identify what we term "relational values" within trauma-informed practice. These values arise directly from the experiences and stories of those who have engaged with support systems, offering us a grounded perspective on what truly matters in fostering effective and compassionate interactions.

Our focus on relational values goes beyond merely creating guidelines; it is about rethinking how individuals, organisations, and systems can better connect with and respond to those seeking help. These values are intended to guide every level of service—whether one is involved in direct support, organisational management, or policy and programme design.

Why This Matters

This research recognises that people are not just passive recipients of support but are actively shaping their own paths to recovery. By highlighting relational values, we aim to inspire a shift towards practices that honour people's unique experiences, foster genuine partnerships, and work collaboratively towards meaningful change. As we explore these values together, our goal is to create a more person-centred, responsive, and respectful approach to support.

Interview Questions for Implementing and Developing Relational Values

On Connection, Love, and Care

How can support services help foster meaningful relationships with people seeking asylum and refugee support?

On Safety, Stability, and Choice

What are the most important things that help you, or others in your situation, feel safe and secure in a support setting?

1. How can services offer more freedom and options for dealing with trauma or finding the right kind of help?

Understanding Overwhelm

How does the current system recognise the challenges and stress faced by both those seeking support and the people providing it?

2. What changes would help reduce stress for everyone involved in the support process?

Value of Peer Support

3. In your opinion, how important is support from others who have similar experiences?
4. How could services add more opportunities for people to connect and support each other?

Sharing Power

How can services balance power so that those seeking help feel more involved in decisions that affect them?

5. What practical steps could help promote shared decision-making in services?

Healing Through Storytelling

How important do you feel storytelling is as part of healing from trauma?

6. What would make storytelling safe and helpful for people who wish to share their experiences?

Addressing Systemic Challenges

7. From your perspective, what are the biggest challenges or barriers in the current support system?
8. How can people or organisations speak up about these issues in ways that encourage real change?

Allowing Time for Healing and Recovery

How can services ensure people have enough time to heal, even after reaching certain goals?

9. Are there any examples or ideas that could help services work at a pace that respects individual recovery timelines?

Building Reflective Capacity in Training

10. What do you think is most important for training staff in trauma-informed approaches that focus on empathy and connection?
11. How could training go beyond expertise to include practices that encourage understanding and reflection?

Layered Trauma-Informed Practice

12. How can trauma-informed practices be developed at different levels, like with individuals, within organisations, and in larger systems?
13. What could help ensure that these approaches are aligned and consistent at each level?

Contextual Understanding of Trauma

How can support services be better at recognising and responding to different types of trauma that people have faced?

Considering Wider Determinants of Mental Health

14. How do external issues like housing, poverty, or legal status affect people's mental health and their ability to engage with support services?
15. How can services take a rights-based approach that avoids stigmatising trauma and focuses on understanding people's experiences?

Appendix 3 - Information Sheet

Title of Research: Exploring Relational Values in Trauma-Informed Services for Sanctuary Seekers

Purpose of the Research

Thank you for considering participating in this research. Our goal is to understand how trauma-informed services in Wales can better support people seeking sanctuary by incorporating relational values. We want to learn from your experiences to help improve services and make them more welcoming, safe, and supportive. Your insights are valuable to creating more compassionate and effective services for everyone.

What Will the Research Involve?

As a participant, you'll be asked to take part in an interview or focus group where we will explore your thoughts on how trauma-informed services could improve. We'll discuss topics such as:

Your experiences with services

How services could focus more on your personal needs and respect your background

What qualities and values make you feel supported and safe in a service

Suggestions for improving relationships, safety, and inclusivity in services

Each interview or focus group session will last approximately 45-60 minutes. We aim to make this process as comfortable and flexible for you as possible.

Why Have I Been Invited?

We are inviting sanctuary seekers as your perspective is essential to understanding what works and what needs improvement. By sharing your experiences and ideas, you will be helping shape services to better meet the needs of sanctuary seekers.

Do I Have to Take Part?

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You are free to choose whether or not to take part. If you decide to participate, you can still withdraw from the study at any time, without needing to provide a reason. Your decision to participate or withdraw will not affect any current or future support you receive.

What Will Happen to the Information I Share?

Your responses will be recorded and kept confidential. We will anonymise your information, meaning that any personal details will be removed so you cannot be identified in the report. The data we collect will be securely stored and used solely for the purposes of this research. We may use quotes in our report, but we will not use your name or any identifying information.

What Are the Possible Benefits of Taking Part?

By participating, you have the chance to share your thoughts and help improve the support available for sanctuary seekers. Your feedback could lead to practical changes that make trauma-informed services more responsive to the needs of people seeking sanctuary, fostering safer, more compassionate environments.

What Are the Possible Risks of Taking Part?

While we aim to create a safe space, discussing past experiences may feel emotional or bring up difficult memories. If at any point you feel uncomfortable, you can pause or stop the interview. You are not required to answer any question that you find distressing. We can also provide information about support services if needed.

What Topics Will the Interview Cover?

The interview will explore how to embed relational values—like storytelling, peer support, shared decision-making, safety, and respect—into services that understand and recognise the effects of trauma. By focusing on these values, the goal is to create supportive environments that prioritise emotional safety and help prevent further harm.

Support and Contact Information

If you have any questions about the research, please feel free to reach out to us. We are here to ensure you feel comfortable and supported throughout the process.

Contact Information:

Sabiha Azad

Sabiha@wrc.wales

Welsh Refugee Council

Thank you for considering being part of this important research. Your insights are crucial in helping to create a supportive, trauma-informed environment for people seeking sanctuary in Wales.

Consent Form for Research Participants

Consent Statements

1. I have read and understood the information sheet and had a chance to ask questions.
2. I understand my participation is voluntary, and I can withdraw at any time without consequences.
3. I understand my responses will be anonymised and kept confidential.
 4. I agree to the interview or focus group being audio-recorded.
4. I agree that anonymised quotes from my interview may be used in the final report.
5. I understand I can pause or stop the interview if I feel uncomfortable.
6. I agree to take part in this research

Participant's Name (Printed): _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Thank you for your participation.