# Councils and charities quietly scale practical welcome for asylum seekers amid protests



Sanctuary city initiatives and local welcome networks around the UK are quietly expanding a patchwork of practical support for people seeking asylum, according to a report in the Express. Across towns and cities, councils and community groups are using libraries, theatres, schools, universities and voluntary organisations to offer everything from language tuition and digital skills training to mental‑health support, social events and sporting activities intended to help newcomers settle and take part in civic life.

Many of the schemes reported are run in partnership with established grassroots networks. The City of Sanctuary movement coordinates scores of local groups that provide advocacy, cultural activities and integration projects, and it runs an awards programme that recognises exemplary organisations working with refugees and people seeking asylum. Local authorities have leaned on that kind of partnership to scale up practical offers quickly rather than create parallel services from scratch.

London boroughs provide clear examples of how practical concessions are being used to encourage inclusion. Richmond upon Thames operates a Fairer Access scheme that gives people in emergency accommodation and sanctuary seekers a free concession card for swimming, gym sessions and group exercise at council leisure centres, while Wandsworth’s Access for All programme lists concessionary travel and a new 50 per cent discount on hired e‑bikes and e‑scooters for eligible cardholders as part of its inclusion and active‑travel strategy. Councils present these measures as ways to reduce barriers to activity, health and work while encouraging social contact and wellbeing.

Other local programmes tap into grant funding and community partnerships to broaden their reach. Cambridge City Council has launched resettlement community grants, offering tiered awards — including larger grants of up to £30,000 — for projects prioritising English‑language learning, skills development, arts and wellbeing activities designed to build community cohesion. In some larger urban areas, councils or partners also run organised leisure trips and recreational sessions — the Express notes examples such as trampolining and theatre visits in Birmingham — as part of an effort to provide normalising, social opportunities.

Northern and midlands authorities are likewise offering tailored help. Newcastle City Council runs targeted teams — including a Refugee Move On Team — that give housing advice, benefit support and referrals to employment and training hubs; libraries and local partners provide digital‑skills drop‑ins and language support. Manchester officials, the report says, work with community organisations to co‑ordinate advice and services, demonstrating the hybrid public–voluntary model many councils are relying on.

Those welcome efforts are unfolding against a backdrop of public unease and localised protest. The Express, citing GB News and council statements, reports a string of demonstrations outside hotels being used for interim asylum accommodation; in one case Epping Forest District Council lodged documents at the High Court seeking an interim injunction to stop asylum placements at the Bell Hotel in Epping. Council leader Chris Whitbread said in a council statement that the use of the hotel risked causing “irreparable harm to the local community.”

The scale of recent small‑boat crossings has sharpened political debate. The Express reports Home Office figures showing more than 50,000 detections since the Labour party won the general election on 4 July 2024 — including a single‑day count of 474 arrivals that the article said brought the total to 50,271. The paper also quoted Labour’s Baroness Smith of Malvern describing reaching that milestone as “unacceptable”, and Conservative leader Kemi Badenoch as saying Labour’s manifesto promise to “smash the criminal boat gangs” had been “just a slogan” and that crossings were “so much worse” than before the vote. Government weekly summaries themselves note that operational small‑boat figures are provisional and updated regularly.

Taken together, the picture is one of local authorities and voluntary groups attempting to square two urgent priorities: meeting immediate humanitarian and integration needs, and addressing strains on services and community cohesion. City of Sanctuary and council webpages emphasise inclusion, wellbeing and partnership working as the rationale for local schemes, while government data publications make clear that operational totals and trends are subject to frequent revision — a reminder that both planning and political debate are being shaped by rapidly changing figures.

As the national conversation continues, the balance between local welcome initiatives and community concern will be tested by both operational pressures and shifting numbers. Councils and grassroots groups say they are trying to keep integration practical and visible — through classes, leisure access and employment support — even as legal challenges and public protests underline the tensions that accompany rapid, highly visible arrivals. Readers seeking the most current operational totals should consult the government’s weekly small‑boat summaries, which are the source of the provisional figures often cited in media reporting.

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## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/2095072/sanctuary-cities-supporting-asylum-seekers-map), [[2]](https://cityofsanctuary.org/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[2]](https://cityofsanctuary.org/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.richmond.gov.uk/fairer_access), [[4]](https://www.wandsworth.gov.uk/access-for-all/access-for-all-offers/), [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/2095072/sanctuary-cities-supporting-asylum-seekers-map)
* Paragraph 4 – [[5]](https://www.cambridge.gov.uk/resettlement-community-grants), [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/2095072/sanctuary-cities-supporting-asylum-seekers-map)
* Paragraph 5 – [[6]](https://newcastle.gov.uk/services/communities-and-neighbourhoods/asylum-and-immigration), [[2]](https://cityofsanctuary.org/), [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/2095072/sanctuary-cities-supporting-asylum-seekers-map)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/2095072/sanctuary-cities-supporting-asylum-seekers-map), [[7]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/migrants-detected-crossing-the-english-channel-in-small-boats/weekly-summary-of-small-boat-arrivals-and-preventions)
* Paragraph 7 – [[2]](https://cityofsanctuary.org/), [[7]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/migrants-detected-crossing-the-english-channel-in-small-boats/weekly-summary-of-small-boat-arrivals-and-preventions), [[3]](https://www.richmond.gov.uk/fairer_access), [[4]](https://www.wandsworth.gov.uk/access-for-all/access-for-all-offers/), [[5]](https://www.cambridge.gov.uk/resettlement-community-grants), [[6]](https://newcastle.gov.uk/services/communities-and-neighbourhoods/asylum-and-immigration), [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/2095072/sanctuary-cities-supporting-asylum-seekers-map)
* Paragraph 8 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/2095072/sanctuary-cities-supporting-asylum-seekers-map), [[2]](https://cityofsanctuary.org/), [[7]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/migrants-detected-crossing-the-english-channel-in-small-boats/weekly-summary-of-small-boat-arrivals-and-preventions)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/2095072/sanctuary-cities-supporting-asylum-seekers-map> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://cityofsanctuary.org/> - City of Sanctuary is a UK movement dedicated to building welcome for refugees and people seeking asylum across towns, cities, schools and universities. The organisation coordinates local networks made up of hundreds of community groups, libraries, theatres, schools and higher education institutions to provide practical support, advocacy and cultural activities. It describes programmes for inclusion, mental wellbeing, language learning and community events, and runs Sanctuary Awards recognising exemplary organisations. The site explains how councils and voluntary groups collaborate to offer integration, training and social opportunities, and provides resources for groups wanting to establish local sanctuary initiatives and projects across Britain.
3. <https://www.richmond.gov.uk/fairer_access> - Richmond upon Thames Council’s Fairer Access scheme offers discounted or free leisure centre access to residents on low incomes and sanctuary seekers. Sanctuary seekers and people in emergency accommodation can apply for a free concession Richmond Card that provides free swimming, gym sessions and group exercise classes at borough leisure centres. The page details which facilities participate and how to apply, listing acceptable proof such as Home Office letters or ARC cards. It emphasises inclusion and wellbeing, explaining the scheme’s aims to reduce barriers to physical activity and support integration by enabling sanctuary seekers to take part in sporting activities.
4. <https://www.wandsworth.gov.uk/access-for-all/access-for-all-offers/> - Wandsworth Borough Council’s Access for All scheme offers discounted and concessionary travel and leisure benefits for eligible residents, including sanctuary seekers. The council page outlines a new deal giving 50% discounts on Lime, Voi and Forest e-bike and e-scooter hires for Access for All cardholders, alongside other local concessions. It explains application steps and verification requirements and situates the offer within the council’s wider active travel and inclusion policies. The initiative is presented as a measure to improve access to work, health and social opportunities while promoting sustainable transport and reducing barriers to participation for residents locally.
5. <https://www.cambridge.gov.uk/resettlement-community-grants> - Cambridge City Council’s Resettlement Community Grants fund projects supporting refugees and people with experience of seeking asylum. The council launched the programme to back grassroots activities that promote resettlement, integration and wellbeing, offering tiered grants up to £30,000. Priorities include English language classes, skills development, arts and cultural projects, gardening and wellbeing activities, and initiatives that build community cohesion. The page sets out eligibility rules, application rounds, match‑funding requirements for larger grants and how groups can apply through the council grants portal. The scheme aims to help new arrivals settle and connect with local communities in Cambridge and improve lives.
6. <https://newcastle.gov.uk/services/communities-and-neighbourhoods/asylum-and-immigration> - Newcastle City Council provides a range of services for asylum seekers and refugees, including housing advice, help with benefits, and signposting to local support organisations. The council’s asylum and immigration pages describe the LAASLO team and the Refugee Move On Team, which assist people leaving asylum accommodation to find housing, apply for benefits and access employment, training and education. Libraries and local partners offer digital skills, language support and employment hubs. Contact details and referrals to voluntary sector organisations such as North of England Refugee Service and West End Refugee Service are provided to help with integration and practical advice.
7. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/migrants-detected-crossing-the-english-channel-in-small-boats/weekly-summary-of-small-boat-arrivals-and-preventions> - The UK Government’s weekly small boat summary on GOV.UK publishes provisional operational figures for migrants detected crossing the English Channel. The dataset and accompanying pages set out weekly arrivals, boats, and preventions, with daily time series from 2018 onwards, and advise users that figures are provisional and subject to revision. The pages are updated frequently and underpin media reporting of milestones such as totals since particular dates. They explain definitions used, data sources from UK and French operational partners, and caution that final authoritative totals appear in the quarterly Immigration system statistics and include a downloadable time‑series spreadsheet for reference.