



*CITY OF SANCTUARY*  
Wakefield District

[Year]

# Annual Report 2020

WAKEFIELD DISTRICT CITY OF SANCTUARY

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On January 20, 2020, Wakefield District City of Sanctuary (WDCofS) became a registered charity, including the Asylum Seekers Support Fund (ASSF) and the Clothing Store.

As we became a charity, the local movement was thriving and looking forward to entering a new era. Each week WDCofS ran seven drop-ins, the Sanctuary Garden, the Clothing Store and distributed support through the Asylum Seekers Support Fund. The IT Coordinator was maintaining and developing a WDCofS's online communications and the Arts and Culture Coordinator was encouraging agencies to be inclusive of asylum seekers and refugees. The Art House was a Studio of Sanctuary, Theatre Royal Wakefield was a Theatre of Sanctuary and the Central Library was working at becoming a Library of Sanctuary. WDCofS was a centre for community activity and was eager to benefit from having a Trustee Group responsible for good governance and the wellbeing of the local movement.

At that point, all sections operated on a structure of Lead Volunteers supporting groups of volunteers to run sessions and programming events. WDCofS had over 70 volunteers engaged in a wide variety of activities. The activities ranged from face-to-face signposting, encouraging people to engage in art projects to helping people create beautiful craft work or grow vegetables. Volunteers supported the Clothing Store and Asylum Seekers Support Fund by shopping, washing clothing and repairing items as diverse as coats, toys, phones and bikes. Added to all of this countless Knitters of Sanctuary continued to make beautiful garments, toys and blankets for the Welcome to the World packs.

At the beginning of March 2020 virtually everything came to an abrupt halt as a pandemic resulted in a total lockdown. All the drop-ins and sessions closed and the only venue to remain open was the Clothing Store at 86, Kirkgate.

## **The Clothing Store**

The Clothing Store had only moved to 86 Kirkgate at the end of November 2019. The four months from November 2019 to March 2020, not only included the settling of the Clothing Store, the usual Christmas rush, but also saw the closure of Custom House, the venue for the Clothing Store Household and Bedding. Whilst in the process of transferring items to Kirkgate, Custom House was locked down. All items had to remain at Custom House until the lockdown was lifted.

Throughout the lockdown, with a minimum of volunteers, the Clothing Store remained open and 86 Kirkgate became the focal point for WDCofS. The Clothing Store continued to offer emergency and support clothing to initial accommodation on a request and delivery basis. The ASSF food store morphed into a registered foodbank and offered a delivery system for people registered with the ASSF and for struggling asylum seekers in the community. Thanks go to the volunteers and drivers who managed to continue to support the ASSF people throughout the pandemic.

During all the ups and downs of the pandemic, signposting continued from 86 Kirkgate. There was an active two-way connection with several agencies which enabled people to get

some help with legal, housing, homelessness and other issues. Being able to keep the Clothing and Food Store open, WDCofS was able to help and respond with practical and moral support.

Around the end of the first lockdown, WDCofS was offered 88 Kirkgate as a replacement venue for Custom House, and the Clothing Store Household and Bedding move was completed. We seemed to have adequate space to develop the Household and Bedding element of the Clothing Store for new refugees and asylum seekers in dispersed accommodation. However, this situation was short lived.

Added to this strange and turbulent year, with three weeks' notice the Clothing and Food Store had to move out of 86 Kirkgate by the 1<sup>st</sup> of November 2020. Not having anywhere else to go we moved into 88 Kirkgate. The logistics of moving the Clothing Store, whilst keeping volunteers socially distanced and sanitized, was somewhat challenging – even if we were only moving next door. However, with very few volunteers we managed to move the shelving and the content of the building within the time frame. We also managed to continue to deliver all the request to the initial accommodation venues. Many thanks go to resilient volunteers who made an 'ant run' of IKEA shelving and banana boxes.

Funding to improve the running of the Clothing Store included a computer and internet connection. The ultimate aim is to have a dedicated email address for clothing requests and an online recording system for the Clothing Store 'request and delivery' system. This would enable more than one person to access and process the requests. It would also record the items distributed. Having a record of the level of items needed will aid funding bids and campaigns for supporting asylum seekers in initial accommodation.

### **English Classes Online**

It became apparent that the pandemic would affect social activities for an extended period. We were pleased to be offered resilience funding by several funders and charities. The aim of this funding was to help agencies re-imagine way to offer support. Having surveyed WDCofS volunteers, the consensus was to develop online activities. Initially, this led to the setting up of an online English group. Currently, this group is successfully offering a range of zoom English sessions to people in initial accommodation and in the community. The team of tutors is going from strength to strength and has a sustainable work model. Well done to all involved in this initiative.

### **Resource Centre**

Funding enabled us to establish a Resource Centre with the aim of offering online signposting and to facilitate Zoom, Skype and Team-time. The Resource Centre has now developed to a point where people can be connected to other agencies and receive advice on an appointment basis. Nigel, IT Co-ordinator, will also be available to assist. The current facilities include photocopying, printing and access to downloading and saving information. People could book time to complete job searches, join the online English and explore other options such as filling in forms, driving theory etc. A component of the funding was to develop a WDCofS signposting webpage; this is work in progress.

The necessary safety precautions meant the Resource Centre was restricted to opening three days a week, Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays 10am – 12pm and 2pm – 4pm with Wednesday morning as the online version of the Signposting drop-in. Since the January lockdown, we regret the facility has had to be closed.

## **Initial Accommodation**

Due to the combination of a campaign from outside Wakefield, and a serious Covid outbreak, Urban House was temporarily closed. As part of the local third sector group, coordinated by the Council, WDCofS continued to offer support Urban House and to all initial accommodation. Urban House reopened in October 2020. Though most of the building accommodates families, only a few rooms have on-suite facilities. Though the facilities at Urban House are improved, nationally initial accommodation facilities reflects the Home Offices' intention that durations of stays should be short term.

In the summer, WDCofS was asked by the Council to facilitate the provision of outside garden furniture and toys at Urban House. The funding came from Public Health and the bulk of this project was undertaken by Nigel. It culminated in the opening of a Sensory Garden.

A considerable amount of work has taken place at Urban House to ensure people have access to proper sanitizing facilities and adequate space to socially distance. Public Health sanctioned the reopening of the building and the Home Office will introduce small payments to some asylum seekers. However, people are having to stay there for extended periods. The problems of finding dispersed accommodation for families has been exacerbated by the pandemic and the resulting closures of none-essential services.

Due to the risk of spreading the virus, outside groups are not being allowed into initial accommodation venues.

Along with other groups WDCofS is looking at alternative ways to offer a welcome and support. Currently, we are offering activity pack, games, books and access to the online English. We are also offering age-appropriate toys, books and games to families and are delivering these items with the clothing requests via an established safe route. As support for people who don't request clothing we are sending in extra toys and activities to be given out.

## **Home Office**

Though the Coordinator's annual report traditionally highlights what the local movement has been doing, during the pandemic the actions of the Home Office has had an influence on the type of welcome and practical support needed in community. As the ramifications of the pandemic became apparent, the Home Office initially seemed to take compassionate action, and helped destitute asylum seekers to access support and accommodation. The Home Office also stopped evicting people who received a negative decision, and reporting restrictions were conducted by phone.

However, the hostilities have resumed. The debate about evicting asylum seekers from asylum housing continues and some asylum seekers were again required to report in

person despite being in tier 3 area. Needless to say, along with the Right To Remain, These Walls Must Fall and other campaigning groups, the City of Sanctuary movement is calling on the Home Office to reconsider its position.

## **Current Position**

In all the pandemic turmoil and restrictions, WDCofS volunteers have been continually active and have been very innovative. Sincere thanks go to the many Knitters of Sanctuary who have knitted and crocheted not only items for the Welcome to the World packs but have also made children's jumpers and hats for all sizes of people. Thanks go to everyone who has made face coverings to give out and have sent in items for activity packs. Thanks also go to Lead Volunteers and others who have reached out and kept in touch with volunteers in their teams and other people who regularly attended sessions. Though many people have had to isolate, to a great extent, phone calls and social media has enabled people to keep WDCofS community in touch. This has meant a great deal to many of the volunteers.

There had been some casualties of the pandemic – sadly, we have had to give up the Sanctuary Garden. Despite all efforts, trying to run the garden first in flooded conditions then under Covid-19 restriction proved to be a challenge to far. Sincere thanks go to Frances and to everyone who has been involved over the years. However, there is hope that we will be able to be part of a joint project with Incredible Edible and keep a gardening component within the WDCofS profile.

Studio 3 at The Art House has not been forgotten. Once it is safe to develop the Creative Crafts group, Maya will take the project forward. We are also hoping to develop and facilitate the making of activity packs to be sent into the initial accommodation venues. Currently, Maya is making some craft packs and a volunteer is printing some of the simple activity packs at the Resource Centre. As a non-technical way of offering a welcome, sending activities to people seems a good way to go forward. The response from people in initial accommodation is very positive.

Though the Food Store is now crammed at the top of the Clothing Store, it is still opening three afternoons a week and offering request and collect access to the Clothing Store for local people. Mears, the dispersed housing provider, is putting WDCofS information in all of the local asylum properties. A growing number of new asylum seekers are calling for food support, clothing and bedding. This is an encouraging development and helps us to offer a welcome to newly arrived people.

## **Looking Ahead**

Regarding future developments, the tenancy of 88, Kirkgate is precarious. Worryingly, three of the main WDCofS sections are housed in one building. We are aware that someone has made enquiries regarding 88, Kirkgate. I would suggest that looking for alternative premises and potential funding becomes a group priority.

The Food Store is cramped, and we have to be cautious of Foodbank regulations. Talks with HAWWA Appeal regarding the potential of a shared space to run the Food Store are taking place. Talks have also started with St Michaels Church and we are looking at the church hall as an option to develop a more permanent space for the Clothing Store.

Compared to the space we have for both parts of the Clothing Store this building would be very small. Undertaking such a major project would involve long term partnership funding bids.

As a contingency plan for the Resource Centre, Dick **Davies** has tentatively negotiated a space with Wakefield Council's outreach coordinator Karen Quigley. The Art House has also been approached regarding space to house the Resource Centre, the Clothing Store and the Food Store. However, anything free in the Ridings would be unstable.

The Asylum Seekers Support Fund continues to be a vital part of our work to help refused asylum seekers and destitute people from the refugee community. We rely on donations and fundraising activities. We are grateful to all those individuals and organisations we have relied on for many years. The ASSF requires continuing funding as a matter of urgency. Supporters can see how to become a regular donor on the WDCofS website.

In this new era the Trustees are reviewing WDCofS policies. Needless to say, as we move forward, policies and training will have to reflect our new range of engagement with people. Potentially, we will have more of an online presence, and develop activities which involve people meeting outside of venues and drop-in. Policies and training programmes will have to reflect this. Day to day use of some policies, such as the Lone Working and the Safeguarding policies will be more relevant to a greater number of volunteers. Currently, we are looking at offering zoom and online induction training to all volunteers.

At the beginning of this report, I said we were looking forward to a new era as a charity. We are still looking forward to a new era – it promises to be very different one from the one anticipated. Going forward the challenge will be to physically engage with people as well as technically engage with people. Going forward, we will have to look at new ways of offering a welcome and new ways of volunteering. We will have to capitalize on the creativity and ingenuity of WDCofS community. As a way forward we will have to learn to truly value small diverse projects as well as the larger established projects. This new beginning will have challenges. However, it will offer people opportunities to create new ways of developing community and building friendships.

**Sincere thanks to all volunteers for your support, and for persevering through difficult times. Despite the pandemic you have kept Wakefield a City of Sanctuary.**

Many thanks and all good wishes, Linda (**Fielding**)

WDCofS Coordinator January 2021