

This response was submitted to the **Equality and Social justice Committee** on the **inquiry into Social Cohesion**

**SC 05**

**Ymateb gan: Oasis**

**Response from: Oasis**

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## **1. About Oasis**

- 1.1. Oasis is a charity based in Splott, Cardiff, offering a warm Welsh welcome to asylum seekers and refugees. We welcome around 150 people to our centre every day which equates to around 3500 people each year. We offer a safe space and integration support including case work, ESOL and WSOL, hot food, activities and trips .
- 1.2. Our consultation response focuses on the impact of the increasing hostility towards asylum seekers and refugees and how place-based interventions can play a role in enhancing social cohesion and overcoming tension. We also identify some of the barriers to overcoming these tensions.

## **2. Impact of community tensions on asylum seekers and refugees**

- 2.1. We hear regularly from clients (and volunteers and staff) about discrimination and prejudice they experience, from micro-aggressions to hate crimes. While we don't collect data on this directly, there was anecdotal evidence of an increase of hate incidents during the incitements to hatred and violence directed at asylum seekers in the wake of the Southport murders. Examples include:
  - 2.1.1. A GP telling one of our clients, a patient, that it was good what was happening [with the riots] because there are too many 'of them' here.
  - 2.1.2. Filming and insults directed at a woman and child outside her asylum accommodation
  - 2.1.3. Abuse directed towards a women wearing a headscarf while she was shopping that caused her to abandon the shopping trip
  - 2.1.4. Several individuals reported to us that they were fearful of leaving the house or attending regular sessions at Oasis due to the violent rhetoric.
- 2.2. While we encourage and support clients should they want to report hate incidents, there is significant reluctance to do so, in some cases because of negative experiences with the police in home countries or in the UK. This means incidents are under-reported.
- 2.3. We conducted extensive surveys and interviews with Oasis clients in 2024 as part of a strategy development process. 96.2% of respondents thought keeping sanctuary seekers safe was the biggest priority in Wales for creating a Nation of Sanctuary, with building trust coming in second (76.9%). While not conclusive, this implies that people often do not feel safe or trust the institutions responsible for protecting them



and that more focus should be placed on these areas in the Nation of Sanctuary Action Plan delivery.

### **3. Basic needs and initial integration support as a prerequisite for community cohesion**

- 3.1. As a new asylum seeker, integrating into a new community is challenging when basic needs (healthcare, food, accommodation, mental health support, legal representation, transport and digital access) are not met, and integration services are not available.
- 3.2. At Oasis, we play a strong role in supporting integration from day one which clients have identified as important for integration:
  - 3.2.1. **Basic needs:** When the basic needs of people seeking sanctuary are not met, it puts wider community cohesion at risk. For example, clients who don't receive adequate support for mental health needs struggle to find the headspace for integration activities, whereas when that support is provided, it can make a huge difference. Oasis' Mindspring programme is one example of this:
    - 3.2.1.1. 313 graduates have completed a Mind-Spring course (a preventative mental health and wellbeing programme delivered in a group setting in participants' mother tongue) with Oasis since 2021.
    - 3.2.1.2. While the percentage change in well-being scores using the WHO-5 metric varied, several participants experienced a significant positive change, up to 96% improvements in one case.
    - 3.2.1.3. *"I have lost my home, but I have found warmth and comfort in this group where we are heard and understood. Sharing our struggles makes them lighter. I can now express myself without tears because I know I am not alone. Step by step, I have become calmer and stronger."* **Natalie from Ukraine**
  - 3.2.2. Lack of access to transport and wi-fi means that spending time socially in the wider community (in education settings for example) is extremely difficult. The late delivery of the promised Welcome Ticket set to provide free bus transport for asylum seekers continues to frustrate integration efforts.
  - 3.2.3. **Community integration:** our clients identified the importance of support we give at Oasis in helping them get to know an area, but also to understand and share cultural practices. Art, culture



and sports activities are flagged as extremely important in this space, as is volunteering.

- 3.2.4. **Education and play:** Access to education and play opportunities (for younger children) is identified by clients as essential to integration. For adults, ESOL is fundamental but also opportunities to convert qualifications or build new skills.
- 3.2.5. **Careers:** Our adult clients ask for step-by-step employment integration, from access to education (along with childcare for those with children), conversion courses in different skill areas, understanding the employment landscape, networking and mentoring.

#### **4. Place-based approaches to enhancing community cohesion**

- 4.1. Aside from the general basic needs and integration steps outlined in point 3 that are essential for integration and, so, community cohesion, place-based approaches that bring members of the local community and our Oasis community together in different ways have a positive impact on community cohesion.
- 4.2. The strength of place-based approaches, such as at Oasis, provide opportunities for members of different communities to meet, learn about each other and build relationships.
- 4.3. Each community in Wales is different - a key advantage of place-based approaches is that they adapt to the local circumstances and involve grassroots partnerships. For example, Oasis works with multiple local organisations in Splott that bring together the different communities living here together for sporting, art and cultural activities. .
- 4.4. **Volunteering together:** We have over 250 volunteers at oasis, 39% of them with lived experience. This provides opportunities for our sanctuary-seeking community to volunteer alongside local community volunteers, which breaks down barriers and builds lasting friendships. This video of two of our volunteers talking shows the [power of volunteering together.](#)

“We need each other - that's what society's about.”

In [this video, volunteers talk](#) about their positive impact on each other.

Another volunteer said: “Oasis is an amazing place and I always feel better after I've been there. I now feel part of a community and when I am walking in Cardiff I am greeted by people from Oasis, I feel I have started to make friends.”



4.5. **Volunteering in the community:** One tried and tested approach is volunteering in the community. Oasis' Action Asylum project connects asylum seekers with volunteering opportunities in the community. This includes a weekly litter pick, often partnership with Splott Community Volunteers, which over the course of a year engaged roughly 60 participants collecting 110 bags of rubbish around Splott. A quote that sums up the impact of volunteering comes from the hosts of an environmental volunteering day, bracken bashing in Monmouthshire:

"The asylum seekers and refugees who were there worked harder than any volunteer group we've ever worked with, by quite some measure."

They showed the sort of kindness, sharing food, etc, that I recognise from my youth growing up in a very poor Welsh hill farming community. They were genuine and lovely people.

"I was ignorant to the extent of how difficult their lives are made by our governments and procedures. I knew the narrative was being skewed and that the hateful rhetoric against them was untrue, I didn't know just how much.

You've opened my eyes. The narrative has often been weaponised against sanctuary seekers but they are people with stories and skills who can bring so much to their communities."

4.6. **Community activities, events and outreach:** Outreach, activities and events that bring together members of the community, especially over food and music, can be powerful ways to bring people together and break down stereotypes. In one example, the Oasis band, Y Gambas, has played at a number of venues, including the opening of Tafwyl. Excellent engagement with local schools also supports cohesion.

## 5. Barriers to community cohesion

5.1. The rise of extremism directed at asylum seekers and refugees has a negative impact on community cohesion, felt in terms of real-world increase in hate crime (see 2.1) and harder-to-see decreases in confidence getting involved in local communities. This also has a significant knock-on effect on staff and volunteers in the sector (many of whom have lived experience themselves) as they negotiate online threats and pitfalls. Previous common actions to promote cohesion (for example, sharing inspiring stories from Schools of Sanctuary) can be hijacked by the far right and make it much more challenging and



hostile for positive and welcoming content to be shared, as was experienced by the Welsh Refugee Council recently when a video falsely attributed to them was distorted and shared on Twitter and retweeted by Elon Musk ([Elon Musk: Welsh Refugee Council staff 'harassed' after X post - BBC News](#))

- 5.2. Exacerbating 5.1 is the lack of Local Authority and community consultation by the Home Office about the location of asylum accommodation. The tensions in Llanelli around Stradey Park are a prime example of the impacts of a failure to engage in community cohesion initiatives or to meaningfully engage communities in any way
- 5.3. Outside of devolved competency, but having a huge impact on community cohesion is the way in which asylum seekers are moved around, often with very little notice. Individuals and families tell us about the impact of becoming settled in a community, building friendships, then being moved at short notice. Widening dispersal has exacerbated the situation as people are often moved to places with no infrastructure, and where there is more hostility towards people seeking sanctuary. The lack of place-based funding for support services in some of the newer dispersal areas is felt particularly keenly, with locations like RCT, Caerphilly and Gwynedd seeing increases in the numbers of people seeking sanctuary without the supporting resource to provide services. We're in regular contact with several clients who have been dispersed who talk of the loneliness and lack of access to services. We also hear from Local Authority staff who do a fantastic job with the limited resources, but recognise the gaps in provision.
- 5.4. The lack of the right to work for most asylum seekers, and for refused asylum seekers who have no recourse to public funds and no ability to leave the country or to work are particularly damaging for community cohesion, hugely increasing the chances of exploitation and modern day slavery.
- 5.5. Across the third sector, the funding landscape is increasingly challenging which will be further exacerbated by real living wage and National Insurance rises coming in April. As demand and costs are rising, available funds are decreasing. When demand for basic services is so high, it can be difficult to find the resources to do community cohesion well. Where community cohesion efforts are funded, this is often at a small or pilot phase with no funding for scaling up successful initiatives.