



# City of Sanctuary

**Report from John Mellor, Chair of Ripon City of Sanctuary, 24 April 2018**

On September 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015 Alan Kurdi the Syrian toddler was drowned. On that date Members of Allhallowgate Methodist Church were meeting to discuss how we in Ripon might best help the many asylum seekers and refugees coming to the UK. Rapidly the Group developed, receiving support from diverse parts of the community, including the wider Ripon and Lower Dales Methodist Circuit, Ripon Cathedral, Holy Trinity Church, St Wilfrid's Church and Churches Together in Ripon and secular organisations such as the Bread and Life Foodbank and Ripon Rotary Club. We are most grateful to all those organisations and individuals who have given us support whether through donations or by working alongside us.

In June 2016 in recognition of the wide support coming from the community of Ripon and the surrounding area we decided to formalise our existence by becoming the Ripon City of Sanctuary Group, one Group alongside another 100 or so, forming the national network of City of Sanctuary. We are pleased to report that we have embraced the philosophy of City of Sanctuary: 'We welcome refugees.' In particular, we have been delighted to support NYCC and the Refugee Council in welcoming 3 Syrian families to Ripon and have enjoyed supporting them by hospitality, assistance with English and providing signposts to allotments, fishing and finding friends.

The 100 Groups of City of Sanctuary nationally divide into two main categories. There are those Groups like Ripon based in areas where asylum seekers are not dispersed and the number of refugees is usually small. In contrast the second category concerns Groups based typically in large towns or cities where dispersal of asylum seekers leads to drop-in centres assisting hundreds of asylum seekers and refugees. From the first meeting of our Group we wished not only to give our full support to the Syrian families and to be at hand when issues of health, education and possible employment were encountered, but we wished to assist asylum seekers and refugees remote from Ripon. The scheme of Resettlement bringing the Syrian families to Ripon represents a small fraction of the numbers of both asylum seekers and refugees now present in the UK. As we know from the recent media exposure the Government has been emphasizing a policy of creating a hostile environment with respect to many immigrants. There are those not recognised as British from the Windrush of 1948, or those seeking family reunion in recent times, or the majority of asylum seekers who fail to receive a welcome from the Home Office. Our philosophy of wishing to welcome and support refugees has led us to respond to not only the needs of Syrian families in Ripon but also those living in Hull and Wakefield.

In our reports we will describe our activities having a local impact, but also those concerned with a wider impact. Chris will explain our support of the local Syrian families. Yvonne will describe a further local activity, the promotion of Schools of Sanctuary in the local area. Sara will present our campaigning efforts both directed towards local people, but through contact with our MP relating to national issues. Nicola will summarise our events programme. Here again the initial impact was observed in Ripon but our work has had an impact further afield including in Parliament.

In 2015 when our activities commenced, there was a developing Craven Refugee network based in Skipton. Through contact with the Ripon Group, Harrogate formed a City of Sanctuary Group and in 2017 as a result of Syrian families arriving in Northallerton and Richmond, we now have local Groups to the North with whom we have contact. Since we started we have given talks in Bedale, Grewelthorpe, Masham, Pateley Bridge and Snape. We are delighted to thank those not just in Ripon but those in the wider Ripon area, who have consistently given very generously much needed clothes, toys, pushchairs and other items badly needed by recently arrived asylum seekers. The collection centres in Ripon were mainly Allhallowgate Methodist Church and the Cathedral. We are thankful for those who gave the clothes, those who collected the clothes and those who made journeys to Hull and Wakefield to deliver the clothes. Most clothes went to Open Doors, the main drop-in centre of Hull, which welcomes over 250 asylum seekers and refugees each Thursday and to Urban House, Wakefield which receives 100 new asylum seekers each week. A small percentage of our clothes went at a time of great need to Calais and Lesbos via the Richmond Hill Centre, in Leeds, which is now closed.

My thanks since Ripon decided to support refugees, go out to the Members of the Ripon City of Sanctuary Management Committee, who have made large commitments in their support and to the many who have donated, funds, food for events and in particular their time. It has been a great pleasure to work in a group where it was so evident that the purpose of the work was to achieve goals, not for our glorification but to improve the circumstances of those refugees living alongside us and to assist in delivering a clear message, 'We welcome refugees.'

A summary of all the reports will be made available in May.

John Mellor

Chair of Ripon City of Sanctuary Group

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