

Libraries of Sanctuary

John Vincent specialises in tackling social exclusion in libraries, archives and museums through his involvement in The Network. Here he looks at Libraries of Sanctuary and explains how they offer a new way to support communities.

AS always, what we do in libraries is both shaped by and shapes society around us. As I started to write this article about the role of public libraries as places of sanctuary, the world suddenly changed: the killing of George Floyd has, quite rightly, focused attention yet again on racism – and the need to fight it.

Across the libraries and heritage sector, organisations are responding.¹ CILIP's BAME Network has issued a powerful statement which includes:

"We demand justice for George Floyd and for all those who have gone before him and we stand in solidarity with the statement of the Black Caucus of the American Library Association. We encourage our members and supporters of anti-racism to consider the recommendations of the Black Caucus to amplify their voice against racism and injustice.

"George Floyd's death is also a symbol, one of those watershed moments that publicly confronts the global racism which has been faced by black people and people of colour for generations and demands that we acknowledge racism's very existence; that we genuinely commit to dismantling it. However, there will be no change without our collective action."^{2,3}

and concludes:

"Library, information and knowledge professionals have a key role to play in dismantling racism. The CILIP BAME Network calls on professionals to pro-actively deliver collections, services, space and teaching with the objective of creating an anti-racist society. We ask everyone to personally reflect and take action."

The commitment to tackle racism (and other forms of discrimination) forms a central part of CILIP's policy paper, *Libraries, information and knowledge change lives*.⁴



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One of the areas where it is clear that there is still a huge amount to do in the UK is around migration.

Creating sanctuaries

Since the 1960s, there has been opposition to immigration into the UK, with "[...] high [levels] in 1964, 1966 and 1979 with 85-86 per cent of people at each of those times reporting that there were too many immigrants in Britain."⁵

Whilst these attitudes may have lessened more recently, nevertheless, there is still considerable opposition, and growing evidence that new arrivals face discrimination because of their ethnicity, nationality, religion, language or accent.⁶

It is within this context that public libraries have been continuing to develop their plans to become Libraries of Sanctuary, and to support this we launched a resource pack in late May 2020.

The Libraries of Sanctuary resource pack,⁷ written by myself and published by City of Sanctuary, is available online as part of the City of Sanctuary's new web resource.⁸

Public libraries' work to support refugees and asylum-seekers (hereafter described as 'people seeking sanctuary'), migrant workers and other new arrivals to the UK has been spasmodic since the 1960s, often driven by local (and national) political and economic priorities.



Artwork by Grmalem Goneste.



Oldham Library learning circles.

However, at the same time, there is a strong thread of provision running through many library services – some of this work was noted during the Welcome To Your Library project,⁹ and then, more recently in 2017, by the recognition by the City of Sanctuary movement of Sandwell’s Thimblemill Library as the UK’s first ever “Library of Sanctuary”.¹⁰

The City of Sanctuary movement in the UK:

“[...] holds the vision that our nations will be welcoming places of safety for all and proud to offer sanctuary to people fleeing violence and persecution. In order to realise this vision, City of Sanctuary UK supports a network of groups, which includes villages, towns, cities and regions

across the UK, and others engaged in Streams of Sanctuary, Sanctuary Awards and activities intended to welcome people seeking sanctuary.”¹¹

City of Sanctuary includes a number of Streams of Sanctuary, such as Arts, Gardens, Health, Schools, and Universities – and now Libraries.

The *Libraries of Sanctuary resource pack*:

“[...] is aimed at public library staff, but is designed to be shared with all frontline staff and volunteers, council colleagues and elected members, and other stakeholders – as part of a briefing, to inspire and spread good practice, and to provide a starting point for conversations about local needs and solutions.” [Introduction]

It includes background information on why a library might wish to become a Library of Sanctuary, particularly the benefits to local communities and to the library service itself.

It also looks at the three processes that underpin the commitment to become a Library of Sanctuary:

- **Learn:** learning what it means to be seeking sanctuary; in general and particularly in the context of mental wellbeing and information/support needs.
- **Embed:** taking positive action to embed concepts of welcome, safety and inclusion within the library, including, but not limited to, other library users and library staff and volunteers.

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● **Share:** sharing your vision, achievements, what you have learned, and good practice with other library services, the local community and beyond. [p3]

It has lots of case-study of the kinds of activities that libraries have successfully developed – a couple of examples of which are:

“Greater Manchester Libraries of Sanctuary is a joint project between Manchester, Oldham and Bolton local authority library services. The project is funded by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Through this project we aim to help build the confidence, self-esteem and resilience of local communities, to provide opportunities for people from different communities and backgrounds to mix socially and build relationships, by offering a programme of activities, supported by staff training and a volunteering programme. Nine Greater Manchester libraries, across three local authorities, will become Libraries of Sanctuary, with learning shared across all Greater Manchester authorities.” [p8]

“Aberdeenshire Libraries organised a project with Syrian New Scots, ‘A Taste of Syria’ – they supported the group to make a film about the Syria they had left behind for a Book Week Scotland event. One of the young boys had limited English, but they arranged for an interpreter who translated his story, and ‘there wasn’t a dry eye in the house’. The film wasn’t perfect, but it did make those viewing it think more deeply about the New Scots they had in their communities.

“About a year later, they organised another three events in the communities where Syrian New Scots were living, but this time they provided lovely Syrian sweets themselves. The same young man who did not have the words in English to tell his story previously now had the ability to do so on his own” [p13]

It also notes the importance of involving people seeking sanctuary from the start – and getting feedback on their experience of doing so. Newcastle Libraries provide digital training to local residents, and one of their volunteers is someone seeking sanctuary – he has written movingly about his involvement:

“I am willing to share my experiences as a volunteer at the Newcastle City Library. I enjoy my volunteering role as an IT support worker helping all Ages, Gender and Nationalities. I studied computing previously but because of my prolonged on-going asylum case, I’m not able to utilise my skills, and the role I play in Newcastle City Library helps me keep up to date with my skills, thanks to the opportunity that Lisa gave me to be part of her amazing team helping the community from all backgrounds



Meet Try Learn sessions held at Batley Library, one of Kirklees Libraries. #Kirkleeswelcomes #KirkleesLibraries

and religions. And I feel so good putting smiles on our attendees’ faces by helping with whatever IT issue, even the challenging issues, because I’m surrounded by skilled volunteers.

“This opportunity has improved my social life greatly by interacting in society. I’ve also learned of so many social opportunities that I could get involved in to become a valuable member of society. I would always be grateful as I used to feel neglected and excluded from the society because of the prolonged asylum case and am still living in limbo not knowing what the future holds.” [p10]

The pack also outlines how to apply to become a Library of Sanctuary (and there is further, detailed information available on the website about how to apply for the Award¹²).

In terms of people seeking sanctuary themselves, the pack includes a brief overview of the global picture, and gives brief definitions of some of the main terms used.

It then looks at some of the library and information needs of new arrivals (a handy reminder of just what a library service can provide); and a key section on identifying barriers to the take-up of library services by people seeking sanctuary – and how we can start to overcome these.

Finally, there is a short list of other resources, and details of some key organisations where we can find information and support.

Producing this resource pack has been a rewarding experience, particularly helped by the enthusiasm of the partners (Arts Council England; Birmingham City Council; Bolton Council; City of Sanctuary; Coventry Libraries and Information Service; Libraries Connected; Manchester City Council; Oldham Council) and the huge contribution from those who contributed case studies and examples of their work.

We had intended to hold a launch event for the pack at the start of Refugee Week (15-21 June 2020), but, obviously, this was unable to go ahead, so we have had a ‘soft’ launch in May, and intend to plan for a bigger launch event when we are able to.

In the meantime, we do hope that people download and start using the pack and web resources – and, of course, come back to us with any questions, comments, suggestions. **IP**

● <https://arts.cityofsanctuary.org/libraries-of-sanctuary>

Reference

www.cilip.org.uk/references_ip_aug-sep_pp44-46