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## **Expanding sanctuary: the City of Sanctuary movement in London**

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### **Abstract**

The City of Sanctuary (CoS) UK aims to create a culture of welcome for asylum seekers and refugees. This is a politically limited approach because it overlooks the effects of other hostile immigration policies. The emergence of the sanctuary movement as ‘Boroughs of Sanctuary’ (BoS) in London brings these shortcomings into sharp focus, as many residents have other precarious immigration statuses. This article examines the extent to which the Lewisham and Southwark BoS initiatives have successfully negotiated and reconfigured sanctuary at a local level to address this urban complexity. In doing so, it engages with different actors, institutions and factions involved in building sanctuary. While the CoS’ exclusionary politics of asylum is still being reproduced in many ways, people with precarious immigration status are co-opting and reconfiguring the sanctuary framework in ways that expand the asylum-oriented focus of the movement and address the broader violence of the hostile environment.

### **Keywords**

Political Sociology, Urban Sanctuary, Hostile Environment, Activism, Migration, Refugees, Solidarity

### **Introduction**

In the UK, the *City of Sanctuary* (CoS) is largest collaborative attempt between municipalities and civil society to support people with precarious immigration status. CoS first emerged in Sheffield in 2005, and soon spread to other cities in the north of Britain, which were experiencing a sudden increase in the number of asylum seekers due to the Home Office’s

policy of ‘dispersal’ (Darling, 2010)<sup>1</sup>. Since then, the sanctuary movement has grown considerably. There is now a central organisation, which engages in campaign work at a national level and coordinates a network of around 120 affiliated sanctuary groups. These groups are relatively independent, and their activities vary according to the interests of participants and the particularities of the local context. In addition to ‘Cities of Sanctuary’, initiatives now exist as ‘Towns’ and ‘Villages of Sanctuary’, as well as the Wales ‘Nation of Sanctuary’ (Bernhardt, 2020). At the urban scale, the movement has also begun to emerge in London as ‘Boroughs of Sanctuary’ (BoS).

There is a rich body of academic literature on the sanctuary movement in the UK, especially in urban contexts (see Bauder, 2017). These studies have mostly engaged with the well-established initiatives in cities in the north of the country, and have highlighted the ambivalent, at times contradictory, politics of the movement (Bagelman, 2013; Darling 2010; Darling and Squire, 2013; Squire and Bagelman, 2012). This article contributes to these discussions by focusing on the formation, meaning, and practice of sanctuary in London, specifically in the neighbouring boroughs (municipalities) of Lewisham and Southwark in the south-east of the city. London offers a particularly interesting context in which to enact and study sanctuary because of its so-called ‘superdiversity’ (Vertovec, 2007).

Superdiversity refers to a type of urban complexity characterised by a wide range of national, racial or religious identities among residents, but also by the varying and fragmented legal statuses within and across these communities (Hall, 2017). Although this displays itself in varying degrees depending on the borough and neighbourhood, Lewisham and Southwark are exemplary of London’s superdiversity. In each borough, over thirty-five per cent of residents are born outside the UK (ONS, 2021), and at least twenty-five thousand people are undocumented (Jolly et al., 2020). As a result, there are thousands of people affected by a wide range of immigration policies. This includes *inter alia* deportation raids, illegalised

employment, inaccessible housing, healthcare charges, and, of particular focus in this article No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF). These policies have been developed as part of the UK government's determined attempt to create a 'hostile environment' for specific types of racialised and classed people. Although the effects of these policies on people living in London do not necessarily contrast with people living in other cities (of sanctuary) in the UK, they are especially pronounced and complex in the capital due to its superdiversity. I explore how this urban complexity has both enabled and constrained the formation of a more progressive and politically effective urban sanctuary movement.

I begin the article by discussing the discourses, policies, and practices of the CoS movement at a national level. I build on previous research to show how the movement's focus on creating a 'culture of welcome and hospitality' (CoS, 2020a), specifically for asylum seekers and refugees, creates hierarchies between worthy and unworthy forms of mobility and 'rightful presence' (Squire and Darling, 2013). I demonstrate how this framing of sanctuary reproduces mainstream narratives of the 'good' and 'bad' migrant, which undergirds much of the design and justification behind the UK's hostile immigration policies and rhetoric. I embed this analysis in relation to the NRPF and Section 17 policies, which, at both national and local government, have been implemented alongside the stereotype of the economic and criminal migrant. NRPF is particularly relevant to this article because it is affecting thousands of people living in London, and has become important feature of imagining and enacting new articulations of urban sanctuary in the capital.

I then explore how, and to what extent, the concept of a sanctuary borough has been mobilised to challenge these discriminatory policies in Lewisham and Southwark. I draw on research undertaken between in 2019-2020, during which period I participated in BoS steering group meetings, local events, and public assemblies. I also interviewed nineteen BoS participants, whose names have been changed to SP.1-SP.13 (Southwark Participant) and LP.1-

LP.6 (Lewisham Participant). These participants were either active in one of the sanctuary groups (SP.1-SP.4 & LP.1-LP.3), had attended some BoS activities/meetings (SP.5-SP.9 & LP.4-LP.6), and/or were engaged in migrant activism outside the sanctuary framework (SP.8, SP.12-SP.13, LP.3).

Drawing on these interviews, as well as other CoS and council resources, I first explore the use of ‘sanctuary’ as a political rhetoric by Southwark and Lewisham Councils, and how local practitioners and members of the BoS groups have responded to this. I then engage with the organisational structures of each BoS group, and to what extent current members perceive people with precarious immigration status as political actors. I find that people with precarious immigration status are routinely seen as exterior to the identities and performances of the sanctuary builders. In spite of this, however, I highlight how people with precarious immigration status have used the sanctuary to bring about meaningful change to longstanding issues around NRPF, expanding the scope of the sanctuary movement. This more expansive idea and practice of sanctuary addresses many of the exclusions within the movement, and challenges the hierarchies of rightful presence that underwrite the hostile environment. By claiming the sanctuary framework to address issues around NRPF, migrant activists in south London have highlighted the ability and potential of the CoS movement to challenge the full scope of hostile immigration policies in the UK, and bring these to the attention of the wider public.

### **Urban Sanctuary**

The CoS movement has received criticism for promoting forms of solidarity that activate many of the same logics undergirding the UK’s hostile environment legislations, policies, and rhetoric (Squire, 201; Bagelman, 2016; Wilcock, 2019). Scholars have shown how the articulation of the movement in terms of creating a culture of welcome and hospitality for refugees and asylum

seekers is politically and ethically limited, insofar as it is predicated on the rights of the host to delimit the space and place being offered to guests (see Darling, 2010; Squire and Darling, 2013). This creates hierarchies between citizens, recognised as generous hosts, and non-citizens, as indebted guests, in ways that are bound to the rationalities upon which sovereign power rests (Squire and Bagelman, 2012). Indeed, hospitality, at a theoretical level, means to select, filter or choose—a basic function of the border itself (see Derrida, 2002). This is because hospitality bears the ever-present possibility of turning into hostility, when the host feels their capacity to welcome the stranger has reached its limit. As such, hospitality risks creating hierarchies not only between citizens and non-citizens, as Squire and Bagelman (2012) demonstrate, but also between worthy and unworthy migrants, in order determine who is deserving of the citizen/state-qua-host's generosity.

These hierarchies are often grounded in static conceptions of need, vulnerability and apolitical existence. The object of sanctuary politics is indicative of this, representing 'sanctuary seekers' as innocent victims in need of saving, rather than rights-bearing individuals (Wilcock, 2019). The Birmingham Declaration (CoS, 2014: 1)—the first formal articulation of the movement's defining values and aims—states:

“We can no longer just watch in silence as millions flee Syria only to be warehoused in refugee camps and thousands drown in desperate attempts to reach the Western world across the sea [...] We commit ourselves to work together to ensure that our great country continues to be a safe place for those fleeing persecution”

In several ways, this statement points to the limitations of the movement in offering social and political alternatives to mainstream discourses around the nation and migration. It erases the violent colonial history of British immigration law (El-Enany, 2020), which has

meant that the UK has very rarely been a ‘safe place for those fleeing persecution’. It also represents people in need of sanctuary as a mass of suffering bodies, with a distinctively nationalised character in line with commonly accepted perceptions of ‘genuine refugees’. Moreover, the representation of sanctuary seekers as new arrivals in the UK overlooks the ways the hostile environment is also targeting (mostly racialised) people who have lived in the UK for many years, even racialised British citizens (Wooley, 2019). Articulating and enacting sanctuary in relation to these specific figures of migration serves only to reinforce and legitimise the exclusionary structures underlying the entire immigration regime (El-Enany, 2020). Overall then, the movement’s focus on asylum overlooks other aspects of the hostile environment that are affecting (thousands more) people across the UK. Moreover, this asylum-oriented conception of sanctuary, which relies on vulnerability and victimhood to build support, may also discourage people, who may not perceive themselves in these terms, from engaging in the movement as political participants, as Houston and Morse (2017) observe in sanctuary movement in North America.

Indeed, in the UK, sanctuary groups “are almost always established and run by [...] those who are neither seeking asylum nor with irregular status” (Wilcock, 2019: 143; Hintjens and Pouri, 2014). This runs contrary to the purported goals of the movement “to ensure people seeking sanctuary are involved in all decision making” (CoS 2020: 2. The national network has attempted to rectify this with the ‘Experts by Experience Advisory Group’. The purpose of which is to “provide a mechanism for people seeking sanctuary to inform and influence CoS work at an operational level” (CoS, 2022: 9) However, this ‘advisory’ role can still be seen to limit migrants’ involvement in the core political action of the movement. The emphasis on ‘lived experience’ risks reducing migrants’ role to storytellers, rather than acknowledging their capacity to engage analytically in complex legal, political and social activism. The result is that the sanctuary movement is positioning so-called ‘sanctuary seekers’ as perpetually exterior to

the identities and performances of the citizen-qua-host, the ‘sanctuary builders’. This is being reproduced at a local level in Southwark and Lewisham.

### **The Good and Bad Migrant: The policies and procedures of NRPF and Section 17**

Before turning to examine the discourses, actors, and practices of the sanctuary in south London, let me briefly sketch out the legislative and discursive terrain around immigration in the UK, otherwise known as the ‘hostile environment’. The legal and governing structures of this regime have been developed in response to different racialised migration movements to the country (El Enany, 2019). Irrespective of which political party has held government office, the intention has been to make the UK a hostile place for specific groups of non-(national-)citizens to live (Squire, 2020).

The expansion of policies with these objectives has increasingly relied on the discursive construction of the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ migrant (Squire, 2016). This narrative constructs an understanding of un/worthy and il/legitimate presence to justify increasingly harsh immigration controls. On a basic level, a ‘good migrant’—other than people with specific economic, racial, and national profiles—is predominantly recognised in public, political and legal realms as someone in need of protection from a ‘rogue state’ or ‘barbaric culture’ (Squire, 2016: 3). This figure is commonly described as the ‘genuine refugee’. Understanding ‘rightful presence’ (Squire and Darling, 2013) in these terms not only affirms the morality of the host state (Darling, 2010), but also equates ‘good migrants’ with innocence, vulnerability, and apolitical existence, rather than as rights-bearing individuals (Ticktin, 2005).

Crucially, the figure of the ‘good migrant’ has been constructed and valorised alongside the ‘bad migrant’, who is believed to come to the UK simply to take state benefits, often through criminal practices of deception and fraud (Squire, 2016). In this narrative framework, hostility towards this ‘economic’ or ‘illegal migrant’ is not only permissible, but necessary for welcome



to be possible at all to those that ‘really need it’. Here, we can see the selective logic of hospitality and the border converge. Indeed, the UK government has long framed its commitment to “welcom[ing] genuine refugees”, alongside an emphasis on “root[ing] out abuse of the system” (Home Secretary Charles Clarke in Squire, 2016: 82). As then Home Secretary, Theresa May, remarked: “There are people who need our help, and there are people who are abusing our goodwill—and I know whose side I’m on. Humane for those who need our help, tough on those who abuse it” (in Wilcock, 2019: 145).

An exemplary case of this logic in policy and practice is No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF). This is a restriction on access to all welfare benefits, including homelessness assistance, social housing, and government funded childcare schemes. It automatically applies all grants of ‘limited leave to remain’, as well as people without any documentation. The policy is a direct response to the narrative described above, in that it is designed to be ‘tough’ on ‘bad economic migrants’, preventing them from accessing the welfare resources that are supposedly (ab)using. NRPF has created soaring levels of destitution across the UK (Hoelzle and Beech, 2021), which has been exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic (Dickson *et al.*, 2020).

Since NRPF was introduced, local authorities have become increasingly concerned with their NRPF residents. This is because under *Section 17 (S.17)* of the *Children Act 1989* they must provide housing and/or financial support to (the carers of) children who are (at risk of becoming) homeless or destitute, irrespective of immigration status. The legislative matrix of NRPF and S.17 has “effectively create[d] a parallel welfare system for those the NRPF policy is otherwise designed to exclude; but a welfare system that is funded by local rather than a central government” (Price and Spencer, 2015: 20). Consequently, the financial demands placed on councils have increased significantly.

In 2013, for example, the year after NRPF was expanded to apply to more categories of leave to remain, Lewisham Council’s S.17 spending more than doubled to £5.3 million (in

Jolly 2019:11). To limit costs many councils introduced measures to prevent people accessing S.17. Lewisham Council was one of the most aggressive examples of this, introducing a pilot project that promoted a “robust front-door approach” to S.17 claimants (Lewisham Council, 2015: 5). The new approach led to 88% of S.17 applicants being refused support at the initial triage assessment, predominantly on the grounds that they were ‘fraudulent’ (Murtagh, 2018). Under judicial review, Lewisham Council have been found on more than one occasion to have acted unlawfully. In one case the judge noted that

Lewisham have fallen into a trap of considering that this is a battle between themselves and the claimants’ mother and that she has an agenda which means that she is cynically putting her children, who she otherwise cares for, at risk. (in Murtagh, 2018: 18)

This judgement points to the ways that local authorities also use and reproduce the figure of the ‘bad migrant’, as someone who is deceptive, fraudulent, immoral, and uncaring to further their own fiscal interests. It also shows how the hostile environment is implemented at both a national and local level in similar ways, creating distinctions between ‘genuine refugees’ and ‘illegal migrants’. These figures are constructed through static conceptions of vulnerability on the one hand, and racialised notions of criminality and immorality on the other. This is not to say that the treatment of refugees or asylum seekers in the UK is commendable. Indeed, the scope for being recognized as a ‘genuine refugee’ is increasingly slim. Nevertheless, it is significant that the State and CoS share the figure of the vulnerable refugee as the worthy object of care, and the implications this has on people who do not fit this mould. As Wilcock (2019:147) rightly notes,

[The CoS'] persistent re-telling of the classic refugee tale which portrays a very narrow picture of rightful presence does not unsettle the binary subjectivities set out in the hostile environment but upholds them.

There is a huge need for further research around NRPF, which this paper does not attempt to begin. What I want to bring to the fore in this section is the selective logic of the border, which determines the forms of mobility and presence deemed un/worthy and un/rightful, and how the CoS movement, in its current articulation, reproduces these hierarchies and distinctions. In order to reshape the terrain of these immigration debates, refashioned approaches and narrative frames that can cultivate sanctuary in more expansive ways are required (Houston and Morse, 2017). The way the movement is emerging in London points the potential opportunities and limitations of achieving this.

### **The Sanctuary Pledge**

Thirteen BoS initiatives have formed in London since 2015. This format may appear to enact sanctuary at a more local level than other CoS projects, given that they are organised regionally within a single city. However, the sanctuary movement places an emphasis on building a relationship with local authorities (CoS, 2020b). In London, these are divided into thirty-three Borough Councils. Lewisham, followed by Southwark, were the first councils to officially commit to the sanctuary movement. These two projects therefore offer a particularly interesting case study, as sanctuary is beginning to impact local government practices, as well as civil society organising. The sanctuary ambitions of the two councils demonstrate how sanctuary is being used in this context to promote a particular political appearance and forward party politics. What is interesting, however, is how this inadvertently expands the current discourses of sanctuary to address a wider range of issues beyond the asylum framework.

Lewisham Council (2018) officially committed to the movement in its Corporate Strategy 2018-2022. This pledge was made before a civil society movement had formed, which is unusual for a sanctuary initiative. In some ways, this points to accomplishments of the national movement, which has made ‘sanctuary’ an attractive political identity for councils to endorse. However, as Darling (2010) notes, the ‘culture building’ approach of CoS enables political actors and institutions to subscribe to the sanctuary principles without enacting any policy change. Lewisham’s pledge can be seen to fall within the practice of councils supporting the movement only to boost their reputation as a contemporary and cosmopolitan urban space. In this case, sanctuary aligned with their desired public image as an inclusive and collaborative institution that does things “the Lewisham Way” (Lewisham Borough Council, 2018: 17). Meanwhile, the actual policy commitments of the pledge were notably vague:

“Lewisham will be a Sanctuary Borough, welcoming those fleeing violence and persecution in their own countries. [...] Working with our partners to develop [...] practical steps to welcome and include refugees in our activities” (2018: 17)

Here, we see the more conventional idea of sanctuary seekers being articulated, in terms of vulnerability and recent arrival. The only practical commitment was to host “100 families from Syria and other areas of conflict” under the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (2018: 17). This programme, which affords protection to highly vulnerable refugees living in camps in selected destinations outside of Europe, enacts the selective logic of the hostile environment. It also enables the Council to appear progressive by supporting a relatively small number of refugees in Syria, while not addressing the impact of their own hostile practices on a much larger number of local residents, such as their NRPF practices. In this way, the

discursive construction of sanctuary by Lewisham Council did little to expand its meaning and potential.

The Southwark Council pledge was made two years after Lewisham, in 2020, at a council assembly meeting (Southwark Borough Council, 2020). This was a much less public declaration. As part of the motion, the Council highlighted the number of NRPF households (280) it supports, and the fact that it “receive[s] no funding from government” to do so. However, there is no commitment, here, by the Labour Party Council to change their own discriminatory NRPF procedures (see Murtagh, 2018). All the blame is directed at the government’s Conservative Party. This illustrates how sanctuary can be used in party political games. Instead of identifying any areas of policy change of their own, the cabinet resolved to “continue to celebrate the contribution of refugee and migrant communities to Southwark” — similar to the culture-building rhetoric of Lewisham Council’s pledge.

Yet, the inclusion of NRPF is nevertheless significant because it broadens the asylum-restricted parameters of what it means to build sanctuary, even if the Council takes no responsibility themselves. It is these small openings, which offer opportunities for political actors to enact change in ways that address the broader violence of the hostile environment at national and municipal level.

### **Builders of Sanctuary**

In 2015, there was a proliferation of initiatives in support of refugees across Europe and the UK. As the CoS (2022: 5) notes, “the Syrian conflict led to a huge grassroots response across the UK, a ‘revolution of generosity’, that saw our networks grow considerably”. Urban movements, such as CoS, were seen to “offer different ways of relating to the ‘refugee crisis’” (Agustín and Jørgensen, 2018: 42). For members of the Bos group in Southwark, the emergence of the group was situated in response to the perceived crisis at Europe’s borders:

“We started it five years ago, just after the big summer 2015 refugee crisis in the Mediterranean” (SP.1)

“I first got involved at a time when there was a lot in the news about the refugee crisis, and that little boy [Alan Kurdi] had just died, and people were kind of horrified and tried to think about what we could do to be more supportive” (SP.2)

These foundations mean that there is a tendency for sanctuary builders in Southwark to perceive people with precarious immigration status through dominant and stereotypical images of victimhood, and as newcomers. The ‘revolution of generosity’ at this period was often enacted in response to horrifying images and news stories, such that of Alan Kurdi, the young child who tragically drowned off the coast of Turkey in 2015 (Adler-Nissen, Andersen and Hansen, 2020). As such, sanctuary politics has become bound to the figure of the refugee, defined in terms of a specific national identity, gender and age. In the case of Southwark, this reactionary response to crisis has also meant that none of the core members have any prior knowledge of border injustice or experience in migrant activism (SP.1-SP.6). This is affecting the effectiveness of the movement, as SP.10 and SP.8 observe,

“When I went to the SBOS meeting, it seemed that they are not very aware of all of the other people who are suffering under the hostile environment, and I think that’s a big problem because you’re excluding a lot of people. It definitely felt like it was focused on refugees.” (SP.10)

“Most people are completely new to this. [...] there is no real direction. There was nothing where they could say, “this is what we’ve done, and these are the differences we can make”. People were just talking about so many different things.”

(SP.8)

In spite of their inexperience, the group is attempting to establish a forum with the Council to represent migrants in the borough and discuss issues. The risk here is that local authorities can point to the existence of a ‘sanctuary forum’ and a commitment to collaborative change, which are unlikely to meaningfully critique or improve their malpractices. Indeed, the group’s lack of experience has potentially stunted opportunities to expand the meanings, practices and policies of sanctuary in ways appropriate to the local context, especially considering the space opened-up by the Council to discuss other issues, such as NRPF. Rather, the group appears to endorse a more conservative interest in creating a culture of welcome for refugees.

“I think we’ve been fairly focused on refugees and asylum-seekers. I don’t think we have really explored a wider scope. [...] the CoS approach seemed like a really good rhetoric around how and why you could create a culture of welcome in a particular place. [...] The language [of the Council’s pledge] sounds more cautious and keeping to the law.” (SP.3)

In Lewisham, by contrast, the BoS group is predominantly formed by professionals and representatives from pre-existing third-sector organisations and activist groups in the borough (see Paul and Squire, 2020). The main actor is the Lewisham Refugee and Migration Network (LRMN), which has been offering immigration and welfare advice to local migrants for over

twenty years. As such, the movement was not enacted in response to constructed moment of ‘international crisis’, but rather a way to frame longstanding issues affecting local people. As LP.2 recalls,

We [LRMN] were looking for a flagship campaign that would be able to [address] all of the issues our clients were facing [...] I found out that [...] Lewisham Council had already committed to becoming a BOS. So, the wording was already there, but in practice nothing had happened. (LP.2)

LRMN established the Lewisham Migration Forum with the Council, where local organisations, institutions, and residents could come together to discuss relevant issues. They made a concerted effort to go beyond the asylum remit of CoS and the Council’s initial pledge, highlighting other aspects of the hostile environment affecting people in the borough. As LP.2, who designed the Sanctuary Campaign said:

“I was very conscious from beginning to use the word migrant rather than refugees because often people felt CoS is about welcoming refugees, which (a) doesn’t really apply to London; and (b) ends up creating this two-tier category between the ‘good refugee’, who needs to be protected because they are escaping war, and then the ‘not so good’ Nigerian or Ghanaian migrant, who comes here for different reasons. That’s a really dangerous and wrong differentiation.”

This captures exactly the issues of asylum-restricted solidarity raised above. LRMN have attempted to expand this by using the term ‘refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants’ (or RASM) in all their communications. The extent to which this discursive shift has influenced



the way the Council articulates sanctuary was initially limited. At the inaugural Forum meeting, Councillor Kevin Bonavia, Cabinet Member for Democracy, Refugees and Accountability, stated that:

“We [the Council] are committed to making Lewisham a BoS where we offer welcome to those fleeing violence and persecution in their own countries and protect the rights of all migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees.” (CoS, 2020b).

This shows that attempts to create a more expansive concept of sanctuary, by including other categories of migration, does not easily displace vulnerability as the main optic through which migrant experiences are made legible and legitimate. Moreover, the distinctions that exist within the term ‘RASM’ maintain the politics of labelling and hierarchizing different forms of mobility and presence (Zetter, 2007). Nevertheless, it marks a crucial step to disrupting the asylum-focused framework of sanctuary.

The fact that sanctuary initiatives are established and organised by any group that shows an interest in the movement, means that the level of prior experience in migrant justice is highly variable. The responses of members presented in this section demonstrate the extent to which this reproduces or challenges the politics of the border. Indeed, sanctuary groups without prior experience risk reproducing the state’s selective restrictions on mobility. In the case of Southwark, sanctuary remains, in almost all circumstances, uncritically tied to the figure of the refugee. This has created a blind spot in considering which issues could be included and excluded in the movement. Consequently, opportunities to use the council’s endorsement of sanctuary as leverage against other hostile policies have been missed. On the other hand, Lewisham BoS members have attempted to displace the figure of the refugee as the object of sanctuary politics. Individuals with professional experience supporting local people affected

by the hostile environment have used this knowledge to pioneer a more expansive notion of ‘Sanctuary’ that advocates for the rights of all migrants. This broad remit is a significant contribution to the national sanctuary movement, as it more accurately captures the social complexity of urban spaces in the UK, where local migrants hold a range of precarious immigration statuses.

### **The Listening Exercises**

In spite of their different approaches to sanctuary politics, both Southwark and Lewisham have struggled to meaningfully include people with precarious immigration status in the decision-making spaces of the initiative. The Lewisham Migration Forum, and the Southwark BoS steering group meetings are the main spaces where decision about the direction of each project are made. These are rarely attended by people with precarious immigration status, however, and those that do are side-lined in discussions (LP.4, LP.3). For some members of the BoS groups, this feature was an expected, even intended, outcome:

“The Forum was mainly set up for professionals [...] The idea is we have a forum, and then we consult [people with precarious immigration status]. So that’s the involvement that we want. But it’s mainly set up for professionals, but it’s not closed for refugees and migrants themselves [...] the idea is for us to consult them, and to pass on the information” (LP.1)

“The [Southwark] sanctuary group doesn’t really have any day-to-day work with individual refugees and migrants. We never intended to, particularly. [...] the types of things we’ve done haven’t really involved them” (SP.1)

It is difficult to understand how any sanctuary initiative could run activities, which are not the types of things that involve migrants, given that groups must, according to the CoS Charter, “engage [migrants] at all levels of decision-making” (CoS, 2020a: 2). The irony is that despite advocating for the inclusion of migrants in wider society, there is no expectation that this could or should take place within the initiatives themselves. As a result, very few people with precarious immigration status participate in either project. Most participants explained the lack of participation in terms of an assumed incapacity of migrants to participate in social justice activism because of competing life demands:

“There’s a priority of needs. If people don’t have their basic needs met, and are struggling to survive, I think they’re just not in the right headspace to be working in that.” (LP.2)

“People are already fighting their challenge. They find it hard, then, to get involved and help other people, while they think they are in a situation that they need to be out of.” (SP.7)

These concerns highlight genuine issues affecting migrants’ abilities to participate in activist initiatives, especially in the wake of austerity politics (see Emejulu and Bassel, 2018). At the same time, assumptions about an individual’s financial and time constraints may shroud the exclusionary structures that prevent people from participating. Indeed, such assumptions become problematic if no steps are taken to enable people to participate amid these challenges. One of the steps taken by both groups to address this was the Listening Exercise.

The Listening Exercise was first designed and implemented by Lewisham BoS, and later adopted by Southwark. It draws on techniques of community organising promoted by *Citizens*

UK, which LRMN is a member of. The aim of the Listening Exercises was to facilitate conversations with local migrants about what sanctuary looks like from their perspective, and, subsequently, inform the councils about the specific issues affecting them. BoS members saw this as a valuable exercise because of the power of migrant stories to stimulate political and public support:

“It’s much more effective, if you can get the people with first-hand experience to put their voice to it, because that makes it a more compelling story.” (SP.9)

“It’s different when someone that you know tells you this story [...] that has a big impact on the people [...] If we want to help refugees and migrants, we need to know their story and understand their problems.” (SP.7)

The idea that migrant participation is valuable insofar as their stories are ‘compelling’ and ‘impactful’ for the listener, points to assumptions about who can enact political change. In this formulation, the listener is recognised as the sanctuary builder who has the capacity to make change and save people from their passive suffering. Meanwhile, sanctuary seekers must “identify themselves vis-à-vis their own trauma and locate themselves as thusly distinctive from their audiences” (Houston and Morse, 2017: 32). These responses exemplify a paradox within many migrant justice initiatives, which often reproduce the absence and/or irrelevance of (racialised) people with precarious immigration status in political spaces (Emejulu and Bassel, 2017). Emejulu and Bassel (2017: 199) show how migrant communities tend to be approached only after the political and conceptual work has been completed, in order to extract quotes that fit predetermined agendas. This was also the case with SP.1, who recognised the value of

speaking with local migrants in terms of validating the position of the group as their representatives with the council:

“We felt like it’d be very useful to talk to local refugees about their experiences [...] in the framework where we were beginning to talk to the Council about what they should be doing.” (SP.1)

Such practices result in a disconnect between migrants’ own experiences and analyses of marginalisation on the one hand, and the type of projects and programmes offered by predominantly White, citizen-led initiatives on the other. Attempts to represent migrants in this way inevitably positions them as silent others within the movement (see Spivak, 1988). Indeed, the Listening Exercises foreclosed opportunities for people with precarious immigration status to participate in the production of the report or in the wider BoS activities:

“They talked about ‘listening’, but their listening was focus groups and surveys, which very few people engaged in. Then they kind of extracted that information of what people cared about, and then all the ‘experts’ made some plans about it.” (P16)

“Southwark BoS is only a small little group of people wanting to make decisions on behalf of over 40,000 people [living in Southwark with precarious immigration status]. I know there have been attempts to bring those voices in, through the Listening Exercise. But it just feels like they are still marginalised: ‘Oh, we only need them when we have an exercise to do!’” (SP.8).

In many ways, the BoS Listening Exercises was an exercise to bolster the authenticity of each groups' expertise, rather than seeking to include people with precarious immigration status in meaningful ways. However, the absence of people with precarious immigration status in the forum or steering group meetings belies the complexity of their participation in the movement. As I explore below, migrants are reconfiguring sanctuary to bring about change to wider array of issues, such as NRPF, in ways that the political actors of the BoS groups have not managed to achieve.

### **Challenging NRPF, Expanding Sanctuary**

Although the movement reproduces a statist politics of exclusion in its framing of sanctuary, numerous critics have found value in the “minoritarian” politics that CoS facilitates (Squire and Darling, 2013). A range of studies have engaged with the social and relational practices of sanctuary that emerge at a local level, such as community cafes, befriending schemes and conversations clubs. These are seen to challenge discreet hierarchies and categorisations present not only in the state's politics of exclusion, but also in the “majoritarian” articulation of sanctuary at a national level (Squire and Darling, 2013; Darling, 2014; Squire and Bagelman, 2012).

Squire and Bagelman (2012) point to a community café in Sheffield CoS, where asylum seekers volunteer and socialise alongside citizens. This project challenges the restrictions imposed on asylum seekers by national legislation, enabling them to ‘take back’ their political agency. According to Darling (2010), these types of initiatives, by bringing together different actors in shared urban spaces, stimulate a relational imaginary of the city as a space of political connections and responsibilities. Similarly, Wilcock (2019) insists that these “non-hierarchical friendships” have the capacity to dissolve dominant political subjectivities between citizens and non(-national)-citizens. In such ‘minor’ acts of sanctuary, CoS is seen to enact alternative

modes of being, beyond statist conceptions of hospitality. That said, there is a residual assumption that these social interactions are politically valuable because they help to build support for the movement and raise awareness of wider issues of *asylum* (Wilcock, 2019). This reduces the role of migrants in these conversations to a compelling and impactful voice, thus reinscribing their identities as distinctive from their audiences, in ways resonant of the Lewisham and Southwark BoS members' responses explore above.

So far, these minoritarian enactments have not been seen to bring about practical change to exclusionary policy and legislation. According to Wilcock (2019: 144), to demand that CoS adopts more radical politics may “miss an opportunity to shape this influential movement within its own terms”. The case of Lewisham is interesting because people with precarious immigration status are reconfiguring the meaning of sanctuary politics in London from within, in ways that are bringing about radical political change.

Since 2020, there have been major changes to how Lewisham Council responds to requests for S.17 support. One of the main drivers behind this change was the Immigration Action Group (IAG), a collective of migrant parents at a primary school in Lewisham. The IAG emerged from an initiative run by *Lewisham Citizens* and *Coram Children's Legal Centre*, which provided training in community organising and free legal advice, respectively. After several weeks of running the programme, parents identified NRPF as the main issue affecting them, with many in the group intimately aware of the Council's aggressive policies.

The IAG invited Councillor Bonavia to their children's' school to speak about their experiences, and the impact it was having on their lives. The campaign led to the removal of a fraud officer from the social care services, and the first independent review of a NRPF team anywhere in the UK. Lewisham Council also received training designed by the parents themselves. This allowed those affected by NRPF to put forward their own solutions to the issues they are experiencing, and in doing so 'take back' their political agency.

These changes have been framed as part of the Council's commitment to becoming a BoS. According to LRMN (2021), it was "through the Forum [that] Lewisham Council [...] agreed to undergo training sessions with parents affected by NRPF, and specialist organisations [...] to improve their council services". However, this project initially took place outside the formal structures of BoS (LP.5). The 'sanctuary' label only became relevant when speaking to the Council, as it provided a framework and incentive for the authority to respond to the parents' demands. On the one hand, the way the IAG's campaign has been pulled under the banner of sanctuary can be seen as problematic, especially given continued absence of migrants in decision-making structures of the BoS forum. On the other hand, it demonstrates the potential of migrant groups to co-opt and reconfigure the sanctuary framework in order to bring about policy changes in ways that address the wider violence of the hostile environment.

The IAG campaign also brought into existence a political life beyond the vulnerability and empathy frameworks commonly adopted by the sanctuary movement. Rather than using narratives of suffering to build support, these political actors expanded the space available for describing their life experiences and the need for security and political change. The political implications of the IAG's campaign are already stretching beyond the policy and procedural changes of Lewisham Council. They have expanded the meaning and activities of sanctuary itself, politicising the movement in ways that transform its narrow conceptions of rightful presence, as well as who sanctuary builders are. The *South London Refugee Association* (SLRA), for example, have positioned themselves within this more expansive framework of sanctuary: "we can learn from Lewisham for our BoS journey in Lambeth. [We support an] understanding of sanctuary that does not discriminate based on people's immigration status or nationality [but] responds adequately to the unique hyper-diverse context of London."

## **Conclusion**



Previous research has highlighted the divergent, at times contradictory, political discourses, actors and activities involved in and/or excluded from the sanctuary movement in the UK. Building on these works, I have highlighted how, in its current formation, CoS is overlooking a vast number of people who may not qualify as asylum seekers or refugees, but who nevertheless suffer from other policies of the hostile environment. The result is that sanctuary as a political framework for bringing social change in the field of immigration politics is highly restricted in its current and dominant form. It limits activist support to a specific ethical-legal category of rightful presence, flattening the legibility of migrant experiences, and positioning migrants as perpetually exterior to the identities and performances of the citizen-qua-host. These issues are being reinscribed, but also challenged, at a local level by the discourses, actors and activities of sanctuary building in south London.

I have shown how the use of ‘sanctuary’ as a political rhetoric by Southwark and Lewisham Councils largely conforms to the more conservative aspects of the sanctuary movement, such as a focus on refugees and an apolitical celebration of ‘diversity’. I also highlighted how the two councils are playing with the politics of sanctuary in relation to NRPF, in ways that inadvertently expand the meaning and scope of sanctuary itself. The extent to which this has been capitalised on by local BoS groups depends on the political actors involved in the respective initiatives. In the case of Southwark BoS the core members are almost exclusively British pensioners or working people with very little expertise or experience in migrant justice organising. This has hugely limited the scope and relevance of the sanctuary movement in this urban setting, and opportunities have not been taken to use the Council’s expansive sanctuary pledge to bring about change to longstanding issues. By contrast, Lewisham BoS, which is composed of professionals in migrant justice organisations and Council members, have more successfully expanded the meaning of sanctuary in ways that capture the complexity of issues affecting people with precarious immigration status.

However, the participation of migrants in the decision-making structures of both groups remains almost absent. Attempts by members of the BoS groups to include migrants has only positioned them as silent others within the movement, through initiatives such as the listening exercise. The assumed irrelevance or incapacity of people with precarious immigration status to participate in the movement was re-emphasised by members of the BoS group. This exemplifies a paradox within many migrant justice initiatives, which advocate for the inclusion of migrants in wider society, while simultaneously reproducing their absence and/or irrelevance in political spaces.

That said, the lack of participation of people with precarious immigration status belies the complexity of the sanctuary movement in London, where migrants have claimed the sanctuary framework to address issues relevant to their lives, such as NRPF. These actions are beginning to reshape the meaning and potential of the sanctuary movement, pushing it to become a more progressive political force. In the case of Lewisham, the IAG have coopted the sanctuary framework to bring about policy changes on their own terms. While their activism has taken place outside the formal structures of the BoS group, these seemingly peripheral political actors have rewritten the meaning, formation, and practices of sanctuary today. This has brought about meaningful changes NRPF procedures of Lewisham Council and other local authorities. But it is also having an impact of the meaning and practice of sanctuary in the UK, with other groups in London already starting to adopt this more expansive political goals. This highlights the capacity and potential of the sanctuary movement to become a more progressive and relevant political force, which addresses the exclusions within the movement and the wider violences of the hostile environment.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The dispersal policy was introduced by the Immigration Asylum Act 1999 to house destitute and/or homeless asylum seekers in areas outside the Southeast of England, especially London. The Home Office has since established voluntary agreements with local authorities throughout the country, especially in North England, Scotland and Wales, to accommodate dispersed asylum seekers.

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