

Belfast City of Sanctuary



Building a Welcoming, Safe, and Inclusive City for All

A Sanctuary Culture Advancing the Belfast
Agenda and Good Relations Strategy

 Belfast Shared City Partnership

 January 25, 2026



A Growing Movement

Schools and Nurseries Leading the Way

59

**Schools &
Nurseries in Belfast.**

Since June 2017

From Blythefield Primary School in 2017 to 59 schools in Belfast, with a total of 99 Schools across northern Ireland today, the Sanctuary Network has fundamentally shifted how Belfast's educational sector approaches inclusion.

Rigorous Appraisal

Schools are assessed against three core principles: Welcome, Safe Environment, and Inclusion & Integration, ensuring genuine commitment.

Participatory Process

Appraisals involve refugees, asylum seekers, and community members, giving voice to those with lived experience.

Urban Villages Focus

Strong adoption in Urban Villages areas, actively transforming communities through inclusive education.

Future Ready

Equipping young people with the values and understanding needed for a diverse, interconnected world.

Queen's University Belfast

Northern Ireland's First University of Sanctuary

Est. May 2025



Access & Pathways

- **Widening Participation:**
Pathway Opportunity Programme now includes Newcomers, Refugees, and Asylum Seekers (16-19).
- **Scholarships:**
Dedicated support for displaced students to access higher education.
- **Scholars at Risk (SAR):**
Institutional support for threatened academics.

Removing barriers to entry for the most vulnerable.



Academic Support

- **McClay Library:**
Free one-year Associate Personal Memberships for displaced academics and students.
- **Language Support:**
Non-formal English classes and sanctuary language programmes.
- **Resource Access:**
Full access to digital and physical learning materials.

Ensuring success through comprehensive resources.



Community & Culture

- **Sanctuary Coffee Mornings:**
Monthly welcoming gatherings for social connection.
- **QUB STAR:**
Student Action for Refugees society providing peer support.
- **Sanctuary Roadshow:**
2025-2026 outreach activities across communities.

Building a culture of welcome beyond the classroom.

Belfast Trust

The Only Trust of Sanctuary in the UK and Ireland

In September 2024, Belfast Trust became the **first and only Health Trust** in Northern Ireland, the UK, and Ireland to receive the Trust of Sanctuary Award.



Maternity Services of Sanctuary

Introduction of a Cultural Liaison Midwife to ensure culturally sensitive care for pregnant women and families from diverse backgrounds.



Inequalities & Inclusion Team

A dedicated team specifically supporting refugees and asylum seekers in navigating complex health services.



Vulnerable Youth Support

Specialised support programs for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, ensuring safety and care.



International Workforce

Active international recruitment and support strategies, creating a workforce that reflects the diverse communities served.



Cultural Representation

Exhibitions like Oliver Jeffers' "Seen" remind staff and patients of the importance of compassion and solidarity.



The only Trust in NI with a comprehensive Good Relations Strategy

Institutional Models of Welcome

Ormeau Library and Belfast Met leading by example



Ormeau Library

Library of Sanctuary (2023)

Serving a diverse and vibrant community, the library has transformed into an essential hub for learning and connection for those new to Belfast.

- **Welcome**
- **Safe Environment**
- **Inclusion & Integration**



Belfast Met

College of Sanctuary (First in NI)

861

ESOL Learners

56

Countries

Dedicated ESOL Unit (Oct 2025)

New institutional investment in language support alongside full scholarship places for asylum seekers.

A Network of Change

Organisations and Institutions Working Together

The Sanctuary Network builds a collaborative citywide ecosystem so welcome is shared across schools, services and communities.

Education

Schools, universities and colleges creating inclusive learning.

Public Institutions

Councils and libraries providing civic welcome and information.

Healthcare

Trusts delivering culturally sensitive care.

Community

Faith groups, businesses and volunteers offering housing and connection.



Collaboration across sectors drives systemic inclusion.

The Integrated Journey

A coordinated approach supports a family at every step: learning, health, civic resources and pathways to a new future.

Sanctuary Culture & Strategic Alignment

Operationalising T:BUC and Good Relations Strategies

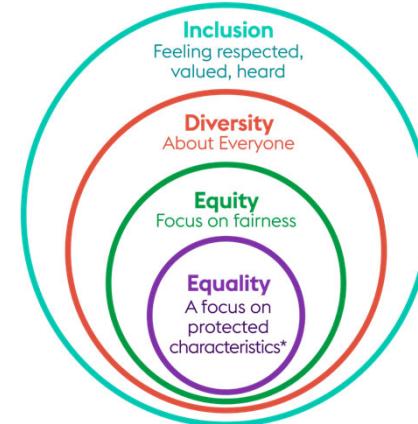
T:BUC Priorities (2013)

- Our Children & Young People: Shaping a shared future.
- Our Shared Community: Creating spaces of welcome.
- Our Safe Community: Ensuring safety for all residents.
- Our Cultural Expression: Respecting diverse identities.

Good Relations Outcomes

- Strong, transformative civic leadership.
- Shared and connected spaces for diverse populations.
- Structured collaboration through the Sanctuary Network.
- An intercultural city with respectful expression.

Sanctuary culture moves Good Relations beyond the traditional "two communities" framework to a comprehensive model of inclusion.



Expanding the Definition of "Community"

 Newcomer Communities

 People with Disabilities

 LGBTQIA+ Community

 Young People

Belfast's Diversity & Commitment

The Evidence for Inclusion

1,750

Asylum Seekers

Approx. 69% of Northern Ireland's total supported population reside in Belfast.

4.1%

LGBTQIA+ Community

Highest proportion in NI (2021 Census), indicating a vibrant, visible community.

24.8%

Disability

Adults reporting limited activities due to health, requiring accessible services.

1,798

Young Voices

Surveyed in Big Youth Survey (89% increase), showing growing engagement.

Institutional Response

 59 Schools of Sanctuary

 861 ESOL Learners

 University Pathways

 Trust of Sanctuary



From Aspiration to Reality

Addressing Exclusion & Marginalisation

Barrier

Systemic Exclusion (Jobs, Housing)

→ Sanctuary Response: University & College pathways provide skills, scholarships, and professional development to break cycles of poverty.

Barrier

Discrimination & Racism

→ Sanctuary Response: Schools of Sanctuary explicitly teach diversity, countering xenophobia from an early age.

Barrier

Health Inequalities

→ Sanctuary Response: The Trust of Sanctuary ensures culturally responsive care, removing barriers to access.

Barrier

Social Isolation

→ Sanctuary Response: Libraries and Community hubs provide safe spaces for connection and belonging.

"Institutional change alone is insufficient. Sanctuary culture requires sustained, coordinated action to ensure welcome translates into genuine belonging."

Inclusion for All



Official Designation

BELFAST CITY FOR ALL

Formalising our commitment to Welcome and Inclusion.



Formalise

Recognise the Sanctuary Network and institutional achievements.



Signal

Send a clear message of belonging to LGBTQIA+, Disabled, and Newcomer communities.



Lead

Position Belfast as a leader in inclusive city development.

Let us make welcome our official policy.

