

Reading

Cllr Jason Brock
Leader, Reading Borough Council

Snapshot of Reading's Demographics

- Population c. 175,000 [Census, 2021]
- Fourth most densely populated area of the South East
- Diverse communities – language, ethnicity, religion
- Post-industrial town
- Strong economy, high-skill and high-wage
- Third most unequal 'place' in the country – five areas in most deprived 10% nationally
- 10-year difference in life expectancy between most and least affluent parts of Reading

City of Sanctuary UK

- Network of cities across the country
- Also a network of community groups, schools, libraries, universities, theatres, etc. to provide support to refugees
- Effort to counter the negative narrative surrounding refugees (and migrants) in the UK
- Reading became an official City of Sanctuary in 2014
- Reading Refugee Support Group as key partner for us, alongside the broader voluntary and community sector

Homes for Ukraine Scheme

- National scheme asking individuals with spare rooms to come forward as sponsors for those seeking refuge from the War in Ukraine
- Scheme has an (effectively) unprecedented structure for UK
 - In essence, a temporary visa scheme rather than an asylum scheme
 - Sponsors are incentivised via (relatively small) payments
 - Sits alongside Families for Ukraine scheme
- In Reading, there are currently 239 Ukrainian guests under the scheme
 - 162 adults, 77 children
 - 216 currently staying with sponsors, 23 are currently in private accommodation
- 41 adults and 7 children are still due to arrive

Support for Ukrainians in Reading

- Duty on the Council to ensure placements are safe
- Reading Ukrainian Advice Centre – partnership between the Council, Citizens Advice Reading, and the Reading Ukrainian Community Centre (has become a support hub for the broader area too)
- Mayoral Fundraising Appeal for Reading Ukrainian Community Centre
- Support with ‘rematching’ when a homing relationship breaks down
- All Ukrainian guests are eligible for healthcare
- All children are provided a place at a local school (plus some special arrangements for those wishing to continue with the Ukrainian syllabus)

Challenges...

- What happens when the 6-month sponsor placements end? Extensions, re-matching, supported to find private sector accommodation
- Affordability of private accommodation in the South East is very challenging – Housing Benefit payment not sufficient to cover costs, insufficient social housing provision (successive Government failures)
- Breakdowns in placements, risk of homelessness, emergency accommodation placements (but limited by positive and proactive action in Reading)
- Retention of sponsors is challenge, but scheme in general retains public goodwill

Other Resettlement Schemes in Reading

- Bespoke UK schemes for Afghan and Syrian refugees – both have brought individuals and families to Reading
- Hong Kong (British Nationals Overseas) resettlement scheme has been especially popular in Reading – highest number resettled in the South East of England
- Dispersed placement of those seeking asylum in temporary accommodation throughout UK, but principally in urban areas
- Reading Council has a clear policy of endorsing and promoting all resettlement schemes and all placements – proactive, but challenging, dialogue with Government Departments leading schemes

Challenges...

- Housing, housing, housing...
- Integration (but perhaps easier in Reading than elsewhere)
- National public discourse on migration – rarely positive (and often underpinned by inaccuracies)
- Very slow system of asylum claim processing, leaving claimants in temporary accommodation for far too long
- No cohesive or systematic approach from different councils, approach differs by geography, economy, urban/rural, demography, etc.

Future? A wish list...

- Better dialogue between Government and councils, and better funding over an extended period
- More consistency in expectations of councils, especially across different schemes
- Huge reduction in processing times needed
- A clear commitment to learning from others (for the Government, for my Council, and for me personally)