



Refugee Week Conference 2020

Workshop Notes: Refugee Week in Challenging Environments 1

Facilitated by Sandra Watt and Ashkan Dabbagh, Friends of the Drop In for Asylum Seekers and Refugees, Sunderland (FODI)

Note: These notes were taken by our fantastic volunteers, with the aim of sharing some of the key points discussed in the workshop, rather than being an exhaustive record of the conversation. If you'd like more information about the workshop or its facilitator(s), drop a line to Emily on emily@counterpointsarts.org.uk.

Challenging environments: The example of Sunderland

- Right wing extremism is on the rise in the North-East. Far-right poses as protectors of women and children to target Muslims and ethnic minorities.
- This is the story the media wants. It is part of the story, but it is **not** the whole story
- FODI is regularly approached for negative stories about Sunderland. Refugees who give positive stories aren't aired - doesn't fit the narrative
- Most of the population haven't met a refugee
- Problems in community generally stem from people either not knowing anything about refugee issues, or having the wrong information

Refugee Week in Sunderland

- FODI core programmes include a drop-in for about 130 people, women's service (as drop in 80-90% men) - aim for the women to be able to build relations with each other and Sunderland. Creche and travel expenses available
- Sandra (FODI) co-ordinates Refugee Week in Sunderland

Refugee Week Activities in Sunderland include:

- Walk of Sanctuary (organised by City of Sanctuary): Sunderland to North Shields. Walk represents refugees' journeys, ferry across river. This year looked at different religious buildings
- Littletown Cricket Match

- Art Session - with display of historic accounts of earlier immigration to the area
- Football mini tournament
- 'Refugees Got Talent'
- Tea with a Refugee - held in library and job centre
- Park Clean-Up - with activities for children
- Sunderland Unites - panel discussion
- International food garden party
- Schools awareness sessions - go into schools with refugee speakers

When asking people to share their experiences of seeking sanctuary, safeguarding considerations are key. Speakers/ interviewees must give informed consent, helped to prepare for intrusive questions, and given support. Better to ask refugees rather than asylum seekers to do interviews/ presentations.

Achieving impact through partnership working, long-term work

Refugee Week is just one week, so engagement needs to continue all year round for real impact.

There's a limit to what one organisation can do alone. Working in partnership enables FODI to bring different communities together, for example:

- Princes Trust partnership project brings together young asylum seekers and local young people who are NEET
- Radio Project with Spark at Sunderland University, funded by Cultural Spring - music, stories, conversation with an international flavour - nominated for community radio awards
- Sunderland Culture Project: 'Who Would You Like To Meet': FODI meets FOYF (Falling On Your Feet, dance group for elders) - none of the elders had ever met a refugee before. Come together to sharing stories of daily life, family values, shared love of music and dancing

This work gradually touches people and shifts perceptions. There is a pyramid effect - elders share with family, school children have info and experience to counter what they might be hearing at home.