

## Places of Sanctuary Ireland Chairperson's Report for Year 2022

The year 2022 was pivotal for Places of Sanctuary Ireland, both internally as an organisation, as well as how it was called upon to respond to external circumstances. Emerging from a post-Covid society, there was a perceived need to strengthen ties and regain in-person links, at the same time recognising the value of on-line communication technologies as a means for reaching out to individuals and groups. The new freedom of movement also saw Ireland receiving increased numbers of people seeking international protection, which, combined with an escalating housing crisis, created additional pressure on systems at national and local level.

The most significant impact, as documented in the PoSI National Coordinator's annual report, both nationally and for PoSI, was the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022 and the displacement of its people as a result of heavy bombardment of towns, cities and key infrastructure. PoSI network support for displaced refugees in Ireland occurred on several fronts.

At the Schools of Sanctuary level, a welcome pack was prepared to aid school communities to support the social and emotional needs of refugees, and a number of related webinars was held with networked schools, which were attended in high numbers. Attempts to secure funding proved successful, thanks to the efforts of the National Coordinator and Assistant NC and with the support of the Board. This entailed the development of an ambitious three-year proposal, mapping out expansion of the *Schools of Sanctuary* stream.

The *Universities of Sanctuary* stream similarly organised a number of informative webinars; in this case, outlining governmental support for Ukrainians under the Temporary Protection Order, which included the Higher Education Temporary Tuition Fee Support Scheme for Displaced Ukrainian Students 2022/2023. Churches also opened their doors and provided temporary accommodation for displaced Ukrainian families.

One worrying feature that emerged in the light of this catastrophe was the development of a so-called two-tiered system of reception and resettlement in European countries, including Ireland, resulting in a differing set of rights and entitlements between Ukrainian refugees and International Protection Applicants. PoSI has spoken out on a number of fronts about this injustice and, in its activities as a national community based organisation, has sought to bridge this divide, where possible.

2022 saw a growth in the number of institutions and organisations that received sanctuary accreditation. A highlight saw the Technological University of the Shannon (TUS), became the first of the new technological universities in Ireland to be awarded the status of *University of Sanctuary*, offering a record 15 scholarships for the following academic year, in addition to supporting other sanctuary related endeavours. In so doing, TUS set a high bar for other HEIs to follow. Separately, the UoSI network hosted a webinar on community sponsorship, encouraging HEIs to consider establishing groups to support displaced individuals and families.

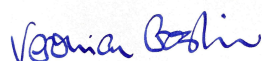
Thanks to a significant funding boost from the Lakeside Trust to support *Schools of Sanctuary*, a recruitment drive was initiated in the summer and two new members of the Schools of Sanctuary team were employed to support the upscaling of the programme. The team was duly expanded to include two SoS Coordinators and one Programme Manager, with the national coordinator maintaining the lead on an interim basis. Outreach to schools was increased manifold including in-person visits and webinars, assisted with the additional support of valued Sanctuary ambassadors.

Towards the latter end of the year, four places of worship received the *Sanctuary in Faith* award during the Advent season for their efforts to welcome refugees and to engage the local community in acts of hospitality. Other efforts to create a culture of welcome throughout the network during 2022 took place in City of Sanctuary groups, including Cork and Dublin, in the case of the latter, expanding on solidarity efforts through Nature and Heritage walks and mentoring support for business and enterprise initiatives.

There were some changes to the Board of Directors throughout the year. The interim Chairperson, Andy Pollak, stepped down and was duly thanked for his sterling efforts. Having been nominated and formally endorsed as the new Chair, I subsequently took up the role in March. The initial Chairperson, Philip Berman, who was pivotal in establishing PoSI as an organisation with charitable status in 2017, stepped down after serving a 12 months post-chair handover. The Board thanked Philip for his pioneering work and his attention to detail in setting up a system of good governance. Other Board members, Rosemary Kunene, Corona Joyce and Jacqueline Phiri stepped down over the course of the year due to individual work commitments. They were also thanked for their valuable contributions.

One of the duties as incoming Chair was for me to invite the Board to formally endorse the new PoSI Strategic plan and to start to engage with some of the key proposals outlined, including Board expansion and a Communications audit, both of which are on-going. It was felt for the time being that PoSI should continue the website hosting arrangement offered by City of Sanctuary UK. The Board acknowledges, and is grateful for, the generous support offered by our 'sister' organisation.

Finally, it remains for me to thank the PoSI 'in-house' team which worked tirelessly throughout the year, adapting quickly to new global and local challenges and demands, and securing new funding to strengthen and expand our reach. The voluntary body of sanctuary coordinators and ambassadors, without whom much of PoSI's work could not happen, is also greatly appreciated. I am also indebted to my fellow Board members for assisting me through my first year as Chair of a vibrant and vital organisation that is playing its part in transforming lives and societies in Ireland.



Veronica Crosbie, 20 September 2023