



NO REST. NO SECURITY.

Report into the experiences
of asylum seekers in hotels

Acknowledgements

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We would also thank guest writers from Islington and Lambeth Councils; Union Chapel; Dr Rhett Moran, co-founder of Refugee and Asylum Participatory Action Research (RAPAR); and Maddie Harris, director of Human for Rights Network.

About Migrant Voice

Migrant Voice is a migrant-led organisation focused on migrant-centred communications and campaigns/advocacy to achieve migrants' rights and justice for all. We are building a community of migrant voices speaking for ourselves to set the agenda on migration and address structural inequalities that surround migrants and shape society.

We support migrants to speak out in the media, on public and political platforms, in communities, on the streets or in cultural settings to create positive change in UK society: countering xenophobia, forging new ties, running campaigns, strengthening communities, influencing policy and bringing justice.

We operate nationwide, with our regional hubs covering London and South- East, the West Midlands and Scotland, and our national network of members is made up of both migrants and Brits.



Report from Migrant Voice, April 2023 © Migrant Voice

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Telling their own story

All too often discussions about asylum seekers in what is known as Home Office “contingency accommodation” are based only on the views of those looking from the outside in, or on bland statistics. So Migrant Voice has conducted a survey and organised focus groups with asylum seekers to enable them to talk about their experiences in their own words.

Through the voices of those directly affected, a unique picture has emerged of what it is really like to live in Home Office-requisitioned hotels, and potentially in other forms of contingency accommodation such as former military camps.

As we listened to asylum seekers it rapidly became apparent that, important as specifics of conditions in hotels are, the residents’ overriding concerns were about the UK asylum process and how those applying for asylum are treated.

The additional issues raised included:

- Lack of communication with the Home Office
- Prolonged confinement in hotels because of the backlog of asylum applications
- Sudden and regular changes of accommodation and location
- Absence of access to Immigration advice
- Denial of permission to work
- Dangerously erratic healthcare, even for pregnancy and trauma
- Little to no access to information, services and activities
- Unnecessary hardship and isolation
- A desperate feeling of helplessness because of the lack of any control over any element of their life
- Destructive uncertainty about the future

What our report aims to do is give a voice to those most affected by the use of hotels, and the asylum system, the asylum seekers themselves.

It is clear from the responses that unless the asylum system is entirely redesigned - and shifts from punitive to humane - the disturbing criticisms of life in hotels will continue in whatever form of accommodation the Government devises to replace them.

“I want a decent humane life, work and live in peace only.”

Methodology

In this research we undertook three methods to collect information.

Firstly, we took a focus group approach, in which we gathered people from twelve hotels and other types of contingency accommodation in London, to discuss the problems they were facing. We held seven focus groups between November 2022 and January 2023, for a total of fifty participants.

The second approach involved a visit to a number of hotels in London by Migrant Voice staff, conducting informal one-to-one or group discussions. In total we spoke to twenty people over the course of three visits.

Finally, we devised an online survey, with the aim to reach as many people as possible. In total, 109 people responded to it.

Most of the people who took part in our research identified as men, with 18 who identified as women completing the survey and 12 taking part in focus groups. The vast majority of ¹ respondents were between 25 and 44 years old, with 69 in the 25-34 bracket and 27 between 25 and 44. We did not interview minors. Although there is disparity between the genders and one age group seems to be overrepresented, this is roughly in line with 2022 statistics showing 77% of asylum seekers who applied for protection last year were male, and 78% were people between 18 and 49 years of age.

The most represented nationality was Iran, followed by Afghanistan and Iraq. Other nationalities included Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, Syria, Palestine, Yemen, Libya and Nigeria.

While most survey respondents (61) had arrived to the UK in 2022, a significant number, 47, have been here since 2021, meaning they have been kept in limbo for well over a year. One respondent said they had arrived in 2020. Indeed, 45 survey respondents said they had been staying at their current hotel for over a year, while another 37 reported spending at least six months at their current location. The vast majority had been staying at either the same hotel since their arrival (53 respondents) or had been moved once (44).

“I have been stuck for a year, and I do not know what will happen to me.”

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-december-2022/how-many-people-do-we-grant-protection-to>

“No end in sight”: reports from inside the asylum hotels

Speaking to more than 170 asylum seekers currently housed in asylum hotels and other contingency accommodation, through surveys and focus groups, we have identified a number of key issues that have, over time, contributed towards a sense of loss of agency, and a feeling of being dehumanised, leading to significant, sometimes devastating, consequences to their mental and physical health.

Poor quality food, described by many as “almost inedible” and smelling “rancid”, coupled with a lack of facilities and money to enable them to prepare anything for themselves, has left many with exacerbated physical and mental health problems. ¹

Cramped accommodation and a lack of privacy over extended periods of time has increased the difficulties facing many of the asylum seekers to whom we have spoken. Some have had to share rooms with up to ten others from different backgrounds and cultures, all with differing habits, sleep patterns and personal needs.

These issues are further compounded by the lack of adequate toilet and washing facilities: one asylum seeker told us how there was only one shower, which he shared with residents from at least two floors. Another reported 24 people sharing one communal toilet on a different floor. A significant concern raised, which goes against reported Home Office statements regarding the standard and “luxuriousness” of the hotels used, is staff behaviour. Asylum seekers have reported being subjected to verbal abuse, racist comments and threats in some hotels. Issues accessing healthcare, over and above those faced by the general population, mean some asylum seekers in hotels are finding it difficult to find health help and support. Uncooperative, and at times actively obstructive, behaviour by staff in hotels were reported by asylum seekers who needed support in obtaining medical treatment.

These issues, and the lengthy time many asylum seekers spend in hotels - with the vast majority of survey respondents having spent at least six months at their hotel - inevitably leads to many suffering mental health problems due to the repetitiveness, monotony and lack of agency in their daily lives. Respondents to the survey expressed significant distress at their situation, and some shared that they were experiencing depression as a result. There have been significant reports of suicide attempts.

The asylum seekers we spoke to consistently reported feeling stripped of any power or control over their lives by the way they were treated. They saw no end in sight, no light at the end of the tunnel. Having escaped war, persecution or other violence, they are stranded in rooms shared

¹ Hansard (2022) Asylum Seekers Accommodation and Safeguarding, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2022-11-07/debates/B903624C-F400-4519-B10D-DFD6519A89CC/AsylumSeekersAccommodationAndSafeguarding?highlight=hotel%20staff#main-content>

"No end in sight"

with strangers, forbidden from working while waiting for an asylum decision; struggling to afford bare necessities such as toiletries and medicine; often unable to speak English and with no language courses available, and forced to eat poor-quality food every day.

"Having a roommate creates a problem because we don't understand each other's language. Very bad food and not having enough money to buy food and bus tickets... make me depressed."

Worst of all, they are left for months with no communication from the Home Office, trapped in an endless limbo, sustained only by a desperate hope of one day returning to a normal life. Based on information gathered from independent reports and evidence of conditions, these issues are likely to increase with the use of alternative "contingency accommodation", such as disused former military sites, where access to support and external facilities may be even more limited.

A look at the system

The problems facing asylum seekers in hotels are part of wider concerns related to the way in which the asylum system operates.

As of December 2022 there were 110,171 supported asylum seekers in the UK, of whom roughly 50,000 were placed in hotels, or other forms of "contingency accommodation".¹ This is nearly 20 times the number at December 2019, according to Home Office statistics.² December 2019 being notable for being seven months after it was revealed that the Home Office had abandoned its six month "service standard" target of processing 98 per cent of asylum claims.³

The increased use of contingency accommodation has been blamed on the increase in "small boat crossings" in the Channel. However, the number of Channel crossings does not explain how, despite nearly 10,000 more applications being submitted in 2002 than in 2022, 84,132 compared to 74,751, the number of initial decisions dropped from more than 99 per cent of applications to 25 per cent.⁴

Meanwhile, the much publicised "backlog" of asylum claims has grown over recent years, despite the number of applications remaining relatively static within much of the same period and the number of caseworkers processing them increasing from 260 in the year ending March 2016 to 614 in March 2022. Over that same period the backlog grew from 21,475 to 117,400. This included an increase of 35,422, from 81,978, between 2021 and 2022. During this time the number of people waiting more than six months for a decision on their asylum claim rose from 8,278 to 72,597.⁵

These delays in processing claims have contributed to the increased use - and a consequent rise in the cost - of contingency accommodation. Investing in the system and tackling delays would reduce the need for contingency accommodation.

Opponents of asylum often claim that people seeking sanctuary add to pressure on the UK's undeniable housing shortage. This shortage has many contributing reasons, including the government scrapping its own targets for house building,⁶ and the chronic under-investment in

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social housing. But asylum seekers awaiting a decision on their applications are denied access to council housing, so even when accommodated in properties they are not contributing to a reduction in such properties for British nationals most in need of housing.⁸

A number of solutions have been suggested in combating this shortage, including expanding previous Community Sponsorship Groups, which have proven successful in the UK and other countries previously in helping asylum seekers rebuild their lives and develop meaningful relationships with the communities which they live in.⁹

The cost of living crisis is affecting many people around the country, with over seven in ten families going without essentials.¹⁰ For asylum seekers in contingency accommodation this issue is compounded by multiple factors, including, for most, denial of the right to work and the low levels of financial assistance which they are meant to survive on. Those who, having waited for a year, are eligible to work can only do so from a highly limited range of jobs included in the "Shortage Occupation List", including ballet dancers and health services staff.¹¹

Currently most asylum seekers are eligible for £9.10 per week, up from £8 at the time surveys and focus groups were conducted, if they are in accommodation which provide food. In accommodation where food is not provided most receive £45,¹² up from £40.85 at the time this research was undertaken, with an additional pittance in some limited circumstances, such as for families with children. This is significantly below the lowest amount paid to individuals on universal credit,¹³ and slightly less in real terms than the allowance in, for example, France.¹⁴

The increasing months of waiting for a decision on their applications have been shown as a significant issue for many asylum seekers.¹⁵ At the same time, they face additional barriers to accessing care, a lack of access to services - such as translations of key information - and unfamiliarity with UK administrative systems. Cumulatively, these obstacles further damage their mental and physical health.¹⁶

As with other sections of society, transport costs have proven to be a serious barrier for asylum seekers in being able to access medical treatment and to seek legal advice, amongst other things. Overall, this restricts the ability of asylum seekers to rebuild their lives. The average cost of a one-day London travelcard, for example, is £15.50,¹⁷ more than the entire weekly allowance for many asylum seekers in hotels. Travel allowances could produce immediate and significant improvement in lives: a Welsh scheme providing free public transport to asylum seekers has already proved to have a positive impact by making it easier for them to start rebuilding their lives and integrating within communities.¹⁸

Nearly tenfold increase in asylum seekers waiting more than six months for a decision

Lack of appropriate financial support, even leading to malnutrition

Additional barriers to accessing medical treatment, leading to significant mental and physical harm

Support lower than in some other countries, such as France

Living in asylum hotels

The quality of accommodation, services and support varies greatly from hotel to hotel. While some hotels were of an acceptable standard and sparked no specific complaints, participants in our survey, focus groups and interviews generally voiced unhappiness with hotel conditions.

Criticisms covered a range of factors, including poor food, lack of privacy, overcrowding, substandard bathroom and toilet facilities, filthy rooms, with no cleaning supplies, being unable to wash their clothes or acquire additional clothing, and lack of cooperation in accessing adequate healthcare.

As asylum seekers are generally not allowed to work (apart from a few exceptions), most are reliant on basic financial support. All those involved in our report wanted to work and contribute to society. The ban on working caused frustration, had a negative impact on their mental and physical well-being, and left them feeling dehumanised and isolated from society.

Food and cooking facilities

The biggest single issue in conversations about living conditions was the quality of food at the hotels. Most of those we spoke to were housed in accommodation providing meals. This meant they had no access to cooking facilities, and that they received on average £8 per week (since raised to £9.10) for all their other expenses, including personal hygiene items, travel and clothes.

Although the catered meals were the only food many ate, several people told us they were rarely able to finish what they were given. Many described it as "almost inedible"; others told us of "rancid"-smelling meat and that hot meals were served cold: their rooms lacked cooking or heating facilities, so they couldn't warm it up.

One woman who developed diabetes during her pregnancy told us she was served high-carbohydrate food such as bread and rice, which could worsen her condition. She avoided eating the potentially harmful food, but could not afford to buy healthier alternatives, so sometimes went without eating.

Another asylum seeker said he developed diabetes as a result of the food served, and that his doctor visited the hotel to assess the conditions and find out why his patient's health was in such steep decline.

People with children struggled to feed them, as the food was too spicy for children or inappropriate, and lacking nutrition, for toddlers and babies being weaned.

"The food is awful. My daughter cannot eat."

¹ Some asylum seekers are permitted to work after a year waiting for their application to be processed, though the roles they are allowed to apply for are incredibly limited, such as some health care positions, scientists and engineers. The jobs allowed are on the Home Office's Shortage Occupation List: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/immigration-rules/immigration-rules-appendix-shortage-occupation-list>

A limited number of respondents had access to cooking facilities, so could buy and cook their own food. They received a higher amount of financial support (£40.85 per week at the time of our research) and preferred this arrangement.

Finally, some people had been moved from one system to another when they had to change hotels. All preferred being able to cook their own meals to eating the one provided by the hotels.

Many of those surveyed said better cooking facilities, a refrigerator and items such as a kettle and a microwave would improve their situation, while many others expressed their frustration at being unable to make anything for themselves, and the quality - or lack of - of the food they are provided.

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Hotel facilities

Conditions other than cooking facilities can vary greatly from one hotel to another. This also depends on the level of support provided by external bodies such as local authorities, charities and other community or faith-based groups.

We heard worrying reports of rooms being shared for months with up to ten other people. One asylum seeker told us they had to share a single shower room with people living on several floors of the hotel.

While food, a bed and toilet facilities (barely) meet basic needs, little more is provided to people in asylum accommodation. Many told us that they have no place to sit aside from their beds, so they tend to spend their day there. There is also often no storage space, so people sleep with their clothes on their beds. Many reported a lack of safe storage for possessions.

One focus group participant was left without internet or television, effectively cutting him off from the outside world. In a different hotel, he was housed in a windowless two metre by two metre room. His isolation and whole hopeless and generally de-humanised situation had a devastating impact on his mental health, leading to self-harming and two suicide attempts.

The situation is especially difficult for children who have to live in hotel rooms for months, often sharing them with the rest of their families. They don't normally have access to learning tools such as computers, but schools aren't always informed. A mother of two told us that one of the children became fearful of school, as he was punished for not completing his homework which required him to do an online search. He became so depressed and ashamed that his mum had to go to school and explain their situation so he wouldn't be punished again.

We were also made aware of children not being able to attend school because they didn't have any shoes to wear, having lost theirs on their journey to the UK. They were eventually donated new ones by a local organisation and were able to start going to school then, but this shows how insecure their access to education is.

"I hope we will return to normal life."

Treatment by staff

While some asylum seekers praised the friendliness and helpfulness of staff at their hotel, a number experienced abuse or harassment from them. They told of staff making up rules - one person, for example, was told he was not allowed to chew gum. Others were warned they could only leave the hotel for a limited time.

For some respondents, not obeying these arbitrary rules, or complaining about their living conditions or sometimes even asking for help, resulted in receiving made-up threats of being "sent to Rwanda".

A focus group participant said that every time he leaves the hotel he is required to inform reception about the time he will return. One day he was late back and the receptionist told him, "Next time you do this, we'll send you to Rwanda." On another occasion, he put his hands on the counter while speaking to the receptionist. He was told to move his hands away because the receptionist "had an allergy to him".

Hotel staff also often have little or no respect for privacy. We were told of staff barging into people's rooms without knocking, and bringing newcomers in without giving notice to those already staying in the room, sometimes very late at night or very early in the morning, often waking them up.

Living with strangers

A large number of asylum seekers have to share rooms with others, generally strangers. Many who took part in our research, especially those sharing a room with four or more others, complained that sharing their space with strangers for a prolonged period of time was a struggle.

Many have been traumatised by their experience of getting to the UK, and struggle with their mental health, which makes it harder to live in close proximity to others.

A common complaint was that sharing a room with someone speaking a different language, made it very difficult - sometimes impossible- to communicate. Sharers may also have different sleeping patterns, or are unable to sleep. They can connect with families only at specific times late at night or early in the morning. This affects those who want to sleep but have nowhere else to go.

Lack of privacy was frequently cited as a disturbing problem. Here, too, the problem is particularly severe because it is so protracted: the vast majority of survey respondents had spent at least six months in their current hotel.

"It's hard to have a roommate - we disturb each other and the bad hotel food and little money make life difficult for me."

Some have had personal items stolen, or used without permission. With some asylum seekers possessing only the clothes in which they arrived, and are unable to buy more, this loss is even more pronounced. We have been told about people using others' belongings without permission.

Several participants told us that even when they have had serious difficulties with those they share with, they have been unable to change rooms. Generally, they have no say in where they are housed: respondents said they usually received one day's notice of being moved to another hotel, sometimes in a different part of the UK. In at least one instance, two brothers were sent to different hotels after initially staying in the same one, and have not been able to see each other since. They were instead placed in rooms with strangers.

We are also aware of a number of asylum seekers who have lost their possessions at the hands of the Home Office. One focus group participant told us how all his belongings were taken away from him on arrival at the Manston processing centre, as is routine. He was left with nothing and was told that he would get all his belongings once he would be on his way to his next accommodation. But his belongings were lost and were never returned to him. He had on him original documents proving his life and identity before arriving to the UK, his smart mobile phone with the telephone numbers of all the people he knew, his watch, his change of clothing. He was never offered any compensation, and the loss left him traumatised.

Living within the process

While the issues with asylum accommodation reported above are all urgent and seriously impact people's quality of life while they wait for a Home Office decision, the basic, underlying problem is how the asylum system is set up to treat people.

Asylum seekers' lives are effectively put on hold while they wait, sometimes for years, for their claim for asylum to be reviewed and refugee status refused or granted.

While they wait, in hotels or other accommodation, they usually receive no communication from the Home Office. The policy strips them of autonomy in almost every aspect of their lives, from the food they eat to their ability to make plans for the future.

They are barred from working, so they cannot support themselves and must rely on inadequate "financial support" from the Home Office. As a result, most lack basic necessities such as appropriate clothing, toiletries and personal hygiene items.

People are also often unable to afford travel (even when necessary, such as to visit a doctor or a Home Office appointment), or must spend their entire allowance on the fare, which leaves them with nothing for the rest of the week.

While in theory they are allowed to attend college or university, in practice financial, language and other barriers severely limit their access to education. English courses are not always available and when they are, spaces tend to be quickly booked up. People who come to the UK to seek safety are effectively barred from rebuilding their lives for years.

Financial support and work

Barred from working, people in asylum accommodation that provide meals receive £9.10 per week (£8 at the time of the interviews) with which to pay for basic expenses, such as travel, hygiene products, clothes and phones. If they are placed in hotels that do not provide food, they are given £45 per week (£40.85 at the time of the interviews), which is intended to cover their basic requirements as well as food.

This level of financial support was considered too low by everyone who participated in our research. They found themselves unable to afford some bare necessities, like travel. One respondent could not afford to travel to school which is having a detrimental impact on their education.

"The amount they give us is very small, it is very difficult with this inflation."

The Home Office allowance comes in a prepaid "Aspen card", which is meant to be topped up weekly. Some respondents waited for weeks or months before receiving their card, which can be used to track asylum seekers movements. Waiting for a card meant a number of respondents could not afford to eat and had to rely on foodbanks and charities. While some issues were resolved after a change in the company managing the cards, asylum seekers say delays remain common, leaving them unable to purchase the most basic necessities.

An asthmatic focus group participant could not afford a nebuliser to help relieve his condition. (One was donated after an appeal.) Others told us they could not afford to buy clothes despite having almost nothing to wear. The problem is so severe and widespread that some people have even had their socks and underwear stolen. This in turn makes sharing spaces with others more difficult, creating a vicious cycle that feeds disagreements and can drive people into despair and depression.

The meagre level of financial support inevitably affects almost all aspects of respondents' lives. We surveyed people from a number of hotels around London; some in locations with good facilities (supermarkets, parks, libraries, schools and decent transport links). For those in areas that were more isolated it was more expensive to move around: facilities were too far away to walk so they had to take public transport, which left a considerable dent in their weekly allowance. (A one-hour bus fare in London was £1.65 until March 2023, almost a quarter of a person's allowance for the week.) Taking a bus or train to attend a doctor's appointment or get children to school was a hefty expense for many of those surveyed.

"Not having privacy in the room and very bad quality of food and not having enough money even for bus and tube tickets ... I got depressed."

The lack of right to work for many asylum seekers has exacerbated the dire financial situation of the vast majority. The policy has severe consequences on people's finances, of course, but also on their mental health, with many describing their lives as "monotonous", "repetitive" and "boring", or talking about feeling depressed.

"If they allow us to work, we do not need help from anyone until we receive a response from Home Office."

Healthcare

Access to healthcare is another problem, with almost a quarter of survey respondents highlighting difficulties in getting to talk to a doctor or receiving treatment.

Some told us they struggled to register for a GP, with obstacles including lack of help from hotel staff. Others said they were refused by the surgery because they could not prove their address, despite their legal entitlement to register.

Participants in the research also reported struggling to access healthcare because of uncollaborative staff at the hotels. Some were told to go and buy painkillers, even though the staff knew the asylum seekers had no money, and some shared that the staff refused to help book appointments or offer any support despite being asked, with one person being told that their pain was their own problem.

Of those who did manage to register, many said the wait times for an appointment were exceptionally long and that treatment often was inadequate. Language barriers are also an issue even for people who get appointments, as an interpreter is not always available and it can be difficult to understand when the next appointment is and what should be done ahead of it. This has been confirmed by an Islington council representative who said that people risk missing appointments, which makes their wait even longer, because they did not understand when theirs was.

One participant said they did not receive treatment quickly enough, their hand got infected and had to undergo surgery as a consequence.

"My hand has a splint, a part of the splint protruded due to a fall and became infected, and, unfortunately after a long time, I was admitted to the hospital and underwent surgery on my hand ... I was very annoyed and in pain."

Tragically, a survey participant claimed to have lost her child because the doctor did not realise she was pregnant.

"When I had severe pain in my uterus, they didn't tell me to take a pregnancy test at all and they found out after the baby was miscarried."

We have seen that, generally, no psychological support is offered to people, even those who have experienced severe trauma.

Basic necessities

Because of the scarce financial support received, many people who we have been in touch with cannot afford new clothes. A participant who had been in the UK for about 20 days at the time, arrived for the focus group wearing the same clothes he had on when he made when crossing the Channel by dinghy.

Until they are able to get more clothing, people who only have one set of clothes are forced to

"No end in sight"

wait in their underwear while these get washed. This wait can be several days, others said, as laundry is taken away and only done once a week.

Similarly, a respondent said he had been told that there were 300 people at his hotel, but only one washing machine, and that he had to wait up to four days before his clothes would be returned by staff.

In limbo

Overwhelmingly, participants said they had received no Home Office updates on their cases since their initial asylum application. Some had been waiting for over a year. Out of 109 survey respondents, only five said they had received communication about their next steps.

The endless wait has made many feel like they are wasting years of their lives, and led some to self-harm.

"So far there is no response, not even knowing a date or anything else. I wasted a year of my life without making any progress."

As the asylum backlog continues to grow, more than 50,000 people are currently housed in contingency accommodation while they wait for their application to be processed.

What makes the current situation unbearable for most is that they have no control over the most basic aspects of their lives, including choice of food, while there is no end in sight. As they have no right to work and their access to education is severely limited, asylum seekers also have no chance to be independent while they wait for a Home Office decision.

Many have made their way here without their families, who also end up waiting for years before they can be reunited. This is heartbreaking for parents whose children are growing up without them. One participant shared that in his last call with his family, his eldest daughter asked him, "Daddy, do you remember what I look like?"

What others have to say

To get a better picture of the situation and its factors, Migrant Voice spoke with Islington and Lambeth Councils, both of which host contingency accommodation, and a number of organisations supporting asylum seekers in hotels throughout the country: Union Chapel in Islington, Refugee and Asylum Participatory Action Research (RAPAR) in Manchester, and Human for Rights Network, which operates nationally.

Good practice

Both Islington and Lambeth are “Boroughs of Sanctuary”, which means that they offer specific services to refugees and asylum seekers, and have both already taken steps to support asylum seekers in hotels beyond their statutory duties.

Islington Council has set up the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) Migrant and Refugee team to specifically address the needs of those denied access to public funds, including universal income, housing benefit etc. Among those who the team works with are asylum seekers in contingency accommodation such as hotels. An Integration and Inclusion Officer is the point of contact for asylum seekers and can direct people to the right support and services. The Officer also visits the local hotels every week and is in contact with staff and residents to find unaddressed needs and issues. They also coordinate with charities and volunteer teams to better assist hotel residents.

Lambeth Council’s Sanctuary Services team offers drop-in sessions at hotels, provides welcome packs and information on local support, opportunities and events, and coordinates with other charities to offer further support. In addition, it provides services targeted at families with young children, such as weekly support sessions and a grant for school uniforms and other essentials. Aside from charities and volunteer groups, which provide befriending services as well as other support (accessing language courses, registering for discounted travel cards, and more), both boroughs collaborate with local NHS trusts to provide better healthcare access for asylum seekers.

Both boroughs also hold regular meetings with hotel managers and other stakeholders, including the Home Office, its contractors, NHS representatives and other professionals to discuss problems and possible solutions.

Current issues

Councils and charities have reported facing a number of issues in their work to assist asylum seekers in hotels. This is how Maddie Harris, director of Humans for Rights Network, summarises the situation:

What others have to say

“Lack of access to medical care, prolonged time spent with a complete absence of access to community-based support, harm caused by hostile behaviour from and lack of training provided to staff running and working in Home Office accommodations, significant psychological harm caused by exposure to increasingly hostile policy and rhetoric such as the threat of removal to Rwanda, or far right attacks in direct response to government’s rhetoric.”

Councils work with a limited budget. For this reason, they must delegate considerably to charities and volunteer groups, which often also operate with limited budgets. Age assessments, and the cases of children being incorrectly treated as adults, was an issue raised by both Islington Council and Humans For Rights Network.

Many unaccompanied children are not being referred to the local authorities for an age assessment, which means that they do not get access to services to which they are entitled. Access to legal services is very limited, which makes it harder for people to navigate the system. The living conditions of those in hotels was also brought up as a matter for concern by Islington Council and Union Chapel. Despite hotels only ever being planned as a short-term solution, they are seeing asylum seekers who have been left in them for more than a year. Not all hotels are up to standard either, with Union Chapel stating, “With up to ten men sharing a room, and poor quality food, the physical environment is a source of stress. This is an inappropriate space for people traumatised by difficult experiences in their country and in transit to the UK.”

Hotel residents also experience abuse from others and the staff, RAPAR has reported, but there is no safe or reliable reporting mechanism: “In our experience people are not only dissuaded from registering complaints, they are also threatened that notes will be put onto their asylum applications with the Home Office if they register complaints,” Dr Rhett Moran, initiator and co-founder of RAPAR, says.

People’s trauma and mental health needs are one of the main concerns for both Councils and organisations. All agree that hotels, and the living conditions in them, are not the right kind of accommodation for asylum seekers, especially for such extended periods of time. A lack of appropriate clinical services that would adequately address people’s needs worsens the situation. Tragically, there have been many reports, including in the media, of hotel residents self-harming or attempting suicide due to poor mental health, lack of support and lack of progress in their application.

Finally, both Union Chapel and RAPAR note that the current treatment of asylum seekers is deliberate, and that they are used as scapegoats to distract from the real roots of problems affecting the country, such as shortages in housing and healthcare services. They both note how Home Office rhetoric is effectively blaming asylum seekers for many of these issues.

“Lack of affordable social housing, the failure to build houses, the failure to invest in health services and invest in schools... are not the responsibility of the people who have ended up in hotels, but the way the government pronounces policy makes a clear invitation to the wider public to bracket the people living in hotels with the issues to do with lack of public services for the population in general.” – RAPAR

A broken system

Despite disparities between hotels, the same root issues with the treatment of asylum seekers are seen time and time again. They are not limited to hotel accommodation and instead appear to reflect a deliberate attempt by the government to make the current asylum system as inhumane as possible in order to discourage further arrivals. When looked at in the current context of the issues raised in the report and the potential removal of safety protections for multi-occupancy accommodation for asylum seekers, it is becoming increasingly hard to think otherwise.

The use of hotels, and other forms of contingency accommodation, has been ongoing for years, and none of the problems we have seen in this report are new. They have been raised with the Home Office on countless occasions by many different groups, yet each time have been brushed aside. That starts to make this policy seem to be more about an act of cruelty.

While this government has explicitly stated that many of its policies regarding asylum seekers are aimed at “detering” people from coming to the UK via what are termed as “irregular means”. It cannot be forgotten that these are people seeking safety. Many have no idea what the government has planned for them. They believe that they will be protected. No matter how someone arrives to seek asylum that protection must be paramount. At present though asylum seekers are being left in limbo in hotels and other forms of contingency accommodation, unable to rebuild their lives or move forward.

The scrapping of the Home Office’s target for processing asylum claims, despite an increase in the number of people employed to do so, has left thousands abandoned. Due to the lack of communication with the Home Office - raised as an issue by many respondents to the surveys - asylum seekers in hotels have been left in limbo and unable to even start planning on how they can rebuild their lives.

While this has serious consequences for all, for some it can be especially tragic. We spoke with one asylum seeker whose wife died while she was stranded in a foreign country, leaving their three children, who are minors, alone there. As he can’t travel, he’s been unable to attend his wife’s funeral and take care of his children.

Lawyers have already warned that a widely publicised attempt by the government to reduce the current backlog in applications, by creating a lengthy and complicated questionnaire for a limited number of asylum seekers to fill in, could actually worsen the situation. Due to a lack of support with completing the questionnaire, exacerbated by the lack of communication from the Home Office, and the short timeframe available to asylum seekers in which to submit it without risking refusal of their claims, lawyers have flagged that it could lead to more people being left in contingency accommodation.

Each policy on its own appears to cause harm. When taken as a whole, the impact can be devastating for an asylum seeker’s mental and physical well-being.

A broken system

Health concerns have proven a significant issue for those we engaged with. No matter where they are placed, asylum seekers still need medical assistance. Being placed in a hotel, camp or converted barges etc, does not make them suddenly disappear. Yet, throughout the surveys and focus groups, we have seen blocks being placed on their access to support. Some local authorities have tried to address this, but there is no coherence to how these practices are applied across different authorities, leading, as seen in the report, to some asylum seekers facing serious medical problems created directly by their time in hotels.

A contributing factor in health issues has been the poor quality of food in some hotels. Sometimes food has been found to be out of date, mouldy, smelling “rancid” and generally inedible. This is not a case of people being picky about what they eat, but about vulnerable people being put in a position where they have to eat food which none of us would consider acceptable.

Many asylum seekers we met are also denied even the most basic facilities to prepare their own meals, even if they could afford to do so on the minimal financial support they receive. Even the use of kettles, something which most of us would take for granted in a hotel room, is denied to those placed in these hotels. This means that even making a cup of tea on a cold day is beyond their ability.

What we have seen has brought into focus a system that, beyond the use of hotels, dehumanises asylum seekers and denies them agency and independence. Hotels form one part of that system. With the increasing use of sites such as former military camps and barges these issues will grow. There is a prevalent attitude among some that asylum seekers should be “grateful for what they can get”. None of us would accept that judgement if it was applied to us. Asylum seekers are not being placed in hotels on some kind of holiday. With strangers crammed into rooms together they are denied any form of privacy. Reliant on staff who at times are outright hostile, xenophobic and racist, they are denied the ability to develop their own lives. Those who have fled war and persecution are being placed in situations that exacerbate their existing traumas.

“Recognise that we are human beings.”

“We are good people.”

Recommendations

From our own research, the input of asylum seekers and the contributions of local authorities and other charities, several key recommendations became apparent for how we can start to fix the asylum system as a whole, and ensure that people aren't left in limbo by being placed in unsuitable accommodation for months, or even years, on end. We need a workable asylum system which does not take people's dignity away from them.

Improvements to accommodation

Appropriate accommodation

It has been firmly established that the use of different forms of contingency accommodation, not limited to hotels, is not appropriate for asylum seekers, particularly considering the duration many are forced to stay in them. Investment needs to be made into providing suitable accommodation within communities.

Accommodation standards and cleanliness ¹

As part of government contracts for hotels and other types of accommodation, owners must be required to maintain basic standards for furnishings, facilities and maintenance. People must be provided with privacy, and the ability to live their lives in dignity.

Access to cooking/ food heating facilities

People living in hotels for long periods should have access to use of kettles, microwaves and fridges, or access to cooking facilities.

Staff training

Hotel staff, or staff in other types of accommodation, must be instructed to treat residents with respect and dignity and should receive trauma-informed training.

Better access and funding

Increased funding for local authorities

Islington Council recommended that in order for local authorities to provide better services the government needs to improve the funding they receive.

Better access to healthcare

Barriers to accessing suitable healthcare need to be removed. This includes better information for asylum seekers and more translation services to ensure that it is accessible to everyone who needs it.

Free travel for asylum seekers

To ensure that the isolation which asylum seekers face, and remove barriers to such things as adequate medical care, schemes, such as that in Wales, need to be rolled out across the country to provide them with free travel on public transport, even for a limited number of days.

Policy changes

Expand or remove the restrictions on the right to work

Asylum seekers need to be provided with the right to work when their applications are being processed. Ideally restrictions on the jobs which they are eligible for should be removed, to ensure that they are more able to access employment.

Better communication from the Home Office

The Home Office must improve its communications on asylum claims (an issue also highlighted in Migrant Voice's 2022 report on extortionate visa fees and the settlement process). Failure to do so creates stress and anxiety and serious mental health damage.

Better processing of asylum applications

It is essential that asylum applications are processed faster and more efficiently, with protection being prioritised. This involves increasing the number of Home Office staff processing the applications, and removing the obstacles which have led to them being slowed down.

Home Office responsibility

Currently the government is paying good money for poor service. The Home Office should carry out regular checks of accommodation to ensure that they are providing a suitably high level of accommodation. Currently private firms are making vast profits off the housing of asylum seekers. Money which could be better spent on improving the situation for everyone.

"There should not be the ability to profit from the running of Home Office accommodation, asylum seekers should not be accommodated in congregated settings run by private untrained security guards, but provided with self-contained community-based accommodation. Until this is the norm for the accommodation of people seeking safety in the UK, more money will be made as a direct response to the harm caused to people seeking safety. Whilst these accommodations are in use there must be an urgent provision made for NGOs and community groups to be granted access to provide support but also provide independent oversight into the way in which these accommodations are run and how this is affecting people accommodated there." – Humans for Rights Network

Change the narrative

We need a change in both narrative and approach towards asylum and people seeking asylum which is compatible with today's values, international law and responsibly responsive to what is happening around the world. This has to entail changing the rhetoric used about asylum seekers from the hostile one we currently see, to more inclusive language.

"Stop scapegoating residents in hotels and actively invite residents to participate in finding solutions to the problems that are besetting the communities where they are currently living and to the creation of alternative pathways forward whereby the people are not staying in hotels, or if they are staying in them, then they become able to exercise control and responsibility over the ways in which the hotels are run pending adequate alternative sources of accommodation." – RAPAR

Appendix I • Contributing statements

Islington Council

Aside from meeting their statutory duties to asylum seekers placed in their borough, Islington Council have set up an NRPF Migrant and Refugee Team to specifically address the needs of those with no recourse to public funds. This includes people with No Recourse to Public Funds clauses in their visas, Afghan and Ukrainian refugees as well as asylum seekers currently housed in contingency accommodations (hotels).

The Council has set up a single point of contact – an Integration and Inclusion Officer – for asylum seekers, who can direct them to the right resource, service or team. This is because the system can be quite difficult to navigate for someone who is new to the country, and having one single person to reach out to can help people get the support they need. The Officer also regularly visits the hotels and checks the residents' needs (including for example age assessment referrals), speaking directly to the residents and the hotel staff. Furthermore, he coordinates the local voluntary sector to provide services to asylum seekers. This is because the council only receives a small amount of money from the government to provide those services and partly reimburse the costs of providing statutory services and social care. So far only £250 per person in March 2022.

The council also holds regular meetings with different parties involved – such as the Home Office, its contractors, representatives from public health and social care, Migrant Help, etc – to monitor the situation.

While the Council actively seeks out vulnerable residents so they can receive support, one of the main concerns are those individuals who aren't reached because of possible existing barriers, and who therefore aren't receiving the help and support they need. These include adult and children's social care, healthcare, age assessments and more.

As hotels could be closed down at a short notice, councils have little time to prepare the relevant services; furthermore, they struggle planning the right type of support as they do not know for how long it will be needed. A longer-term strategy would be more helpful for councils and would probably provide better conditions for asylum seekers, as hotels lack the facilities to be adequate long-term accommodation.

At the time of writing, there are around 830 people currently housed in hotels within the Borough, which is a high number for the council's capacity, and it is set to rise to around 850-900. People come with a range of complex needs and very diverse situations – some are ready to engage with activities, some need urgent support – that, coupled with the general lack of resources available to the council, make it more challenging for the council to provide adequate support.

Though the council has set up a partnership with local NHS services to facilitate access to healthcare, existing barriers (language, knowledge of the new country, etc) mean that for many it is still complicated to receive healthcare.

The living conditions in the hotels are also an issue. There are two hotels in Islington, with very different standards: while one has mostly single rooms with en-suites, the other is set up as 'dormitory-style accommodation', with up to eight people sharing a room with bunk beds, with some residents having spent at least 17 months there. People have complained about lack of privacy, and have reported trouble sleeping, which can have serious consequences when it is over an extended period of time. There are also many complaints about the food catered; but while the food could be improved in quality and variety, the underlying issue is that people do not have the ability to cook their own food.

Mental health is also a widespread issue, with reports of suicide attempts received by the council. The hotels are not a trauma-informed environment for somebody who is experiencing mental health problems, so asylum seekers experiencing such issues face further challenges. The generally poor state of mental health services in the country also means that there is little availability for clinical support.

The long wait times, the difficult living conditions, the inability to work or study and the weight of such a huge decision hanging over people's head all contribute to worsen people's anxiety and mental health issues.

To enable the council to provide better services, the government should improve their funding. However, a proper approach would entail shortening wait times for asylum applications, so that people do not have to spend so long in poor living conditions; giving people the right to work while they wait for their decision; and allowing people to retrain in their profession or attend conversion courses so they are ready to work when they receive refugee status.

Appendix I

Contributing statements

Lambeth Council

Lambeth is a “Borough of Sanctuary” and its Sanctuary Services work to support asylum seekers, refugees and others affected by forced displacement. Helping to inform their work is the Lambeth Sanctuary Forum, whose members include those with lived experience.

The Sanctuary Services team hold fortnightly meetings with the managers of three hotels housing asylum seekers in the borough to discuss updates, issues and risks. Meetings can have input from National Health Service and other health-related colleagues, along with education professionals and representatives from the firm overseeing the accommodation, Clearsprings, in an effort to resolve matters in a coordinated way.

The services team is charged with ensuring that asylum seekers are provided with translated welcome packs and information on local support and opportunities, as well as hosting drop-in sessions at hotels to keep asylum seekers updated about developments or changes which could affect them. They also try to inform asylum seekers about local activities and events.

Working with the Lambeth Adult Education Team, the services team advise on nearby English classes for asylum seekers to access, which they recommend asylum seekers have more immediate access to.

In addition, drop-in sessions are arranged by the charity Care For Calais to provide support for asylum seekers.

The team sees working with young asylum seekers as a crucial element of the team’s role. So they have commissioned “Young Advisors” from Fight4Change to visit each hotel once a month to support the young people living there and encourage them to sign up to the “Holiday Activities and Food Programme” and other activities, as well as helping them get Youth Oyster Cards to make travelling easier.

For families with young children, they arrange three weekly early-years sessions, so that children under four can play together and the parents get support in a communal environment.

A core issue facing asylum seeking families which Migrant Voice identified in its research was the unaffordability of school uniforms. The team helps address this by providing a grant to pupils to help pay for items essential for their education.

Another issue identified by the Migrant Voice surveys and focus groups was the obstacles to accessing suitable medical treatment for asylum seekers living in hotels. To help overcome this problem, a Health inclusion Team from Guy’s and St. Thomas’ NHS Foundation Trust has been commissioned to hold weekly drop-in sessions at hotels for asylum seekers to address health concerns and, importantly, get the support they need.

Through their own budget and partnerships with other organisations and private businesses, the team help address shortages facing asylum seekers in hotels with the provision of essential items, including warm clothes and even laptops for pupils who need them.

Appendix I • Contributing statements

Dr Rhetta Moran, co-founder of Refugee and Asylum Participatory Action Research (RAPAR)

In our work with asylum seekers in hotels we coordinated community-based protection of two hotels in the north-west which, in the early days of Covid, were targeted by the far right.

More recently I have led the development of an in-depth research project, which has included a combination of correspondence with relevant statutory bodies, commentary derived from 30 completed questionnaires by parents living in hotels about their children's schooling, 18 first-person semi-structured, collaborative conversations, and two case studies from families where we have collected evidence, contemporaneously and over time. One of the case studies is ongoing. This work began in February 2022.

There are a number of profound concerns relating to all manner of abuse, assault, and safeguarding and theft issues in the hotels that we have been concentrating on, and the itemised description of the nature of those concerns can be found on the RAPAR website (Seeking Safety, Looking for Justice (rapar.co.uk)).

There are two main areas of concern. First, the absence of a safe, transparent and accountable reporting mechanism through which people can register and seek the immediate cessation of the abuses that they are experiencing.

In our experience, people are not only dissuaded from registering complaints, they are also threatened that notes will be put onto their asylum applications with the Home Office if they register complaints. This is an extremely serious direct interference with due legal process. Further, there is a long history of peoples' attempts to connect with Migrant Help in order to register their complaints simply not being able to get through.

The second main issue of concern is the extent to which the 45,000+ people who are currently living in contingency accommodation are being foregrounded by the State as being the sources of many problems in the UK that are actually to do with a lack of affordable social housing, and the failure to build houses, invest in health services and schools.

These are long-term and long-standing problems. They are not the responsibility of the people who have ended up in hotels, but the way the Government pronounces policy makes a clear invitation to the wider public to bracket the people living in hotels with the issues to do with lack of public services for the population in general.

The residents are effectively sitting ducks when it comes to racist and xenophobic and fascist attention, as has been evidenced through the activities of both Patriotic Alternative and Britain First who have been targeting hotels and the correlating community and trades union-based anti-racist activity that has been developed to counter it.

I have two preliminary recommendations.

Firstly, stop scapegoating residents in hotels and actively invite residents to participate in finding solutions to the problems besetting the communities where they are currently living and to the creation of alternative pathways forward whereby the people are not staying in hotels, or if they are staying in them, then they become able to exercise control and responsibility over the ways in which the hotels are run pending adequate alternative sources of accommodation.

Secondly, resource the wider communities both materially and ideologically, so that people stop falsely blaming people seeking asylum living in hotels for their problems.

The simplest way to do this in the short term is to grant Status Now for all those who are without status living in the UK. This would enable them to work and actively participate in the body politic as full members of society who have much to offer in terms of solution-making at this time.

Maddie Harris, director of Humans for Rights Network

Humans for Rights Network is a grassroots access to justice organisation. We are contacted daily by people seeking asylum in the UK who are experiencing some form of mistreatment, these are often unaccompanied asylum seeking children who have been given ages making them adults by the Home Office upon arrival accommodated in Home Office Hotels with adults, or families experiencing acute mistreatment in Home Office accommodation. We work with people to gather evidence of this mistreatment and consider opportunities for justice such as litigation, advocacy exposure.

The closed nature of the accommodations in which people are accommodated prevents organisations such as ours from providing meaningful support with much of this assistance carried out over the phone. This isolated nature of many of these accommodations also frequently prevents face to face support from being offered. Thirdly, again due to the closed and isolated nature of many of these accommodations there is often significant delay in people accessing our services, and therefore a prolonged period of harm.

There are a significant number of concerns we hear from people regarding the harm caused by the UK asylum system. Lack of access to medical care, prolonged time spent with a complete absence of access to community-based support, harm caused by hostile behaviour from and lack of training provided to staff running and working in Home Office accommodations, significant psychological harm caused by exposure to increasingly hostile policy and rhetoric such as the threat of removal to Rwanda, or far right attacks in direct response to government Rhetoric. We also hear from parents that their children are malnourished and prevented from accessing education, that the way in which they are accommodated is affecting the development of their children and they are deeply concerned for the long-term welfare of their children. Finally, a core issue we see is the harm caused to unaccompanied children by prolonged stays in adult asylum hotels, often experienced by both the children and adults alike as defect detention, or prison-like accommodation.

There should not be the ability to profit from the running of Home Office accommodation, asylum seekers should not be accommodated in congregated settings run by private untrained security guards, but provided with self-contained community-based accommodation. Until this is the norm for the accommodation of people seeking safety in the UK, more money will be made as a direct response to the harm caused to people seeking safety. Whilst these accommodations are in use there must be an urgent provision made for NGOs and community groups to be granted access to provide support but also provide independent oversight into the way in which these accommodations are run and how this is affecting people accommodated there.

We have seen good practice in a number of local authorities where they have attempted to facilitate access to accommodations for organisations and community groups, understanding the need for independent oversight, as well as good joint working between local authorities and organisations. However this permission for access is not always granted. Secondly, the setting up of drop in centres providing neutral space outside of these accommodations is essential as can be seen in a number of locations.

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Union Chapel

Union Chapel is working to support residents of two hotels in the London Borough of Islington. We are befriending residents, making them feel welcome and wanted in the UK. Our staff run drop in sessions for socialising, access to sports, information on rights and entitlements and one to one support where needed. We provide English language classes at different levels.

We engage with people living in a very stressful environment. They are resident in large all male hotels. Of the two hotels, one is reasonable if basic accommodation and the other below acceptable standards. With up to ten men sharing a room and poor quality food the physical environment is a source of stress. This is an inappropriate space for people traumatised by difficult experiences in their country and in transit to the UK.

The Home Office use of questionnaires to some residents was sprung on support networks like ours. With the shortage of Legal Aid Immigration lawyers, and qualified NGO advisors, there is a great fear that many will fall out of the system with severe consequences for themselves. We are scrambling to put the support that is needed in place but it is not at all straightforward.

Access to mental health services is very limited, resulting in A&E becoming the most likely support. Those charged with providing support appear to procrastinate, ignore, or deny responsibility. The outcome, too often, is that help becomes available only in a crisis.

The Home Office commissioned NGO providing support offer only the minimum, no doubt restricted by their contract. It is not a good advertisement when a charity becomes too closely integrated in the system itself. This is a long standing issue for the sector.

I commend the London Borough of Islington for their positive and caring approach. Other community organisations and ESOL providers are helpful and work cooperatively. We have been able to form a very positive alliance with Praxis, whose expertise we are finding invaluable.

Our principal concern is the relationship between our work and Home Office rhetoric and policies. We are committed to racial and social justice and aim to provide a welcoming and compassionate environment for people travelling to the UK from dangerous situations where they are at risk. However, the Home Office, quite shamelessly and shamefully, plays to the basest instincts. The presence of high numbers of new refugees who have made dangerous crossings should not be surprising given the current high level of conflicts in the world. The absence of accessible safe routes and the inadequacy of processing arrangements is resulting in this 'warehousing' of vulnerable people. The shortage of suitable accommodation then becomes deeply problematic.

There is a strong political will to address the problem, but the motivation is disturbing. It would appear that internal party and electoral considerations take precedence over the need to find bureaucratic and sensible solutions. At the same time the desire for both compassion and justice from charities, community and faith groups is hindered.

The many practical concerns – speed of processing, suitability of accommodation, access to Legal Aid Immigration lawyers and advisors, the need for mental health support, settlement are resolvable if there were a genuine political concern for the survivors of war, torture, environmental degradation, and perilous transitional journeys and their wellbeing.

It is self-evident that our expectations of positive governmental action will not happen this side of the 2024 election and it is far from certain that anything substantially good will happen even after that. The principal recommendation needs to be for concerted action by campaign groups, faith and community organisations to work together, as we are, to create a patchwork of support and opportunities for hotel residents.

Appendix II

Looking at the system

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