



# A place to call home

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A report on housing conditions for asylum seekers in Birmingham and the West Midlands



“”

I am very sad and unhappy. I can't stop crying and I cannot eat because of the mouldy smell. I am 5 months pregnant and I am scared that I have to raise my child with dirt and vermin.

- Responses to Migrant Voice report on asylum seeker housing in Birmingham and the West Midlands

*migrantvoice.org*

## **A report on housing conditions for asylum seekers in Birmingham and the West Midlands**

Research by Migrant Voice  
January 2017

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## 1. Migrant Voice

Migrant Voice is a migrant-led organisation established to develop the skills, capacity and confidence of members of migrant communities, including asylum seekers and refugees. We work with migrants to amplify our voices and secure representation in the media and public life.

Migrant Voice provides a platform for its members from migrant communities, especially those whose voices are not usually heard, and encourages them to express their views on issues affecting them as migrants.

We aim to address negative stereotypes and limited understanding of migrants and migration, and facilitate a more constructive and positive public debate, and believe that empowering people to tell stories is a key part of this process.

Migrant Voice has regional hubs in London, Birmingham and Glasgow. Membership is open to all migrants and non-migrants wanting to engage in creating positive change. To get involved in the UK Migrant Voices for Change network, or to find out more about our work please email [info@migrantvoice.org](mailto:info@migrantvoice.org) or visit our website at [www.migrantvoice.org](http://www.migrantvoice.org).

## **2. Acknowledgments**

Migrant Voice would like to thank all those who participated in our research for sharing their views and experiences. Thank you to the organisations who supported the process.

We would also like to thank the team that worked on putting this report together, with a particular mention to Victoria Perez and Tristan Scholz.

### 3. Key Definitions

A **refugee** is defined by the United Nations as

“a person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”<sup>1</sup>

An **asylum seeker** is

“a person who has left their country of origin and formally applied for asylum in another country but whose application has not yet been concluded.”<sup>2</sup>

**Housing of asylum seekers:** In order to qualify for asylum accommodation and support from the Home Office, “an asylum seeker (and their dependents where applicable) must meet a destitution threshold which was defined by the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. Asylum seekers must appear to be destitute or are likely to become destitute within a 14-day period. Applicants are deemed to appear destitute if:

- They and their dependents do not have adequate accommodation or any means of obtaining it (irrespective of whether other essential living needs are met); or
- They and their dependents have adequate accommodation or the means of obtaining it, but cannot meet essential living needs.”

In March 2012, the Home Office “decided to introduce a new delivery model involving fewer and bigger housing providers than under previous contracts.”<sup>3</sup> This change included six regional contracts, collectively known as COMPASS, delivered by three prime contractors (G4S, Serco, and Clearel). Each company had two contracts and Clearel was the only one with prior experience administering asylum accommodation.

More information about this topic can be found here:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/public-accounts-committee/news/asylum-accommodation-substantive/>

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<sup>1</sup> 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees

[http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/policy\\_research/the\\_truth\\_about\\_asylum/the\\_facts\\_about\\_asylum](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/policy_research/the_truth_about_asylum/the_facts_about_asylum)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/policy\\_research/the\\_truth\\_about\\_asylum/the\\_facts\\_about\\_asylum](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/policy_research/the_truth_about_asylum/the_facts_about_asylum)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/public-accounts-committee/news/asylum-accommodation-substantive/>

## **4. Executive Summary**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The provision of support to asylum seekers is a matter of much contention in public debate with a huge amount of misinformation about the level of assistance rendered. Public polling indicates systematic overestimation of the number of asylum requests granted and the level of expenditure incurred.

The UK Home Office provides accommodation for asylum seekers when they can prove they are destitute or likely to become destitute within a 14-day period. Most accommodation for asylum seekers is now provided through private housing contractors—in the cases we researched, there was only one contractor mentioned by name but there may have been others.

Our organisation aims to collect relevant stories and use them to highlight issues or improve conditions where necessary. After hearing anecdotal evidence from multiple Migrant Voice members in Birmingham about poor conditions in their accommodation, we began to research the issue more extensively.

### **4.2 Our research**

On July 14, 2016, in partnership with Birmingham Asylum and Refugee Association, 26 participants helped engaged in a focus group discussion in which they were asked to consider topics including the quality of their accommodation. A paper questionnaire was also completed by these 26 individuals, and ten others, with many of the questions reflecting topics discussed in the focus group.

### **4.3 Key findings**

There is a proportion of asylum seekers who are satisfied with the accommodation they are granted. Of those who participated in the research, 22% of them considered their accommodation to be “excellent” or “good” – but we believe this deserves further qualification. Many were very grateful to have been given housing and when prompted, provided positive experiences. However, a few who were questioned on why they found their accommodation “excellent” or “good” gave little reason beyond it being preferable to street homelessness.

A clear majority of participants were dissatisfied with the physical condition of their accommodation. A wide range of issues were raised, but cleanliness, disrepair, infestation and poor maintenance were the most recurrent concerns raised by respondents. Over 50% stated that their accommodation was unclean when they arrived, that they were provided with no cleaning equipment, and some respondents were advised to ‘sweep the carpets’ on raising concerns. Damaged or non-functional furniture, walls, ceilings, and house utilities were reportedly common, alongside reports of broken windows, toilets, beds, stoves, cookers, and boilers. 44% of participants reported some level of infestation in their accommodation including mice, rats, and bedbugs. Almost 50% of respondents voluntarily

raised the issue of delays in maintenance staff response to requests, or no response at all. Such requests included repairs to the electricity and water supply, or following leaks.

Interactions with housing providers were largely negative. Just 11% felt they had positive interactions with housing staff. The majority of respondents raised issues including delays, poor behaviour and the impression that their concerns were not being taken seriously. These issues were common to both in-person and helpline interactions. Many reported feeling intimidated and under scrutiny from housing officers. More worrisome issues raised alleged invasive behaviour by some housing staff included unannounced visits, knocking and entering before a response was given, and, while small in number, claims of sexual harassment.

More general feelings on safety and wellbeing were a key concern. Only 16% of questionnaire respondents felt physically safe in their accommodation. 72% of research participants admitted to having sad or negative feelings when considering their safety. Common words used to describe how they felt included “hopeless,” “uncomfortable,” and “powerless.” A few stated they would not trust their housing providers to take necessary measures to ensure their safety. There was a common feeling of disempowerment and anxiety.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

The basis for this research was reports made by Migrant Voice members. On further investigation, our concerns were confirmed. The majority of those who took part in our research found their living conditions unacceptable. They reported limited space, uncleanliness, disrepair, and infestation.

Our full conclusion is detailed at 8). Our research found that while there were a small number of respondents who enjoyed their accommodation, the majority found it unacceptable. The largest issues uncovered concerned the physical space of the accommodations, such as uncleanliness, the state of disrepair, and infestation. In addition, interactions involving the housing provider were a significant concern. This included poor responses to complaints and invasive behaviour. These concerns have led to a number of emotional responses, mainly feelings of distrust, stress, and depression. While we are aware housing is a complex issue, the government has a responsibility to ensure the contracts it signs with private housing companies are effective and that the accommodations are inhabitable. Participants asked to be treated with dignity and respect, and the housing provider and government should work harder to make this happen.

#### **4.5 Recommendations**

Migrant Voice has made a number of recommendations for both housing providers and the Home Office at 8.1 and 8.2, derived from the responses given by participants. These relate to the creation, publicising and enforcement of quality standards, and the speed, comprehensiveness and transparency of responses to complaints, requests for repairs and disciplinary proceedings concerning staff. They also relate to improving communication, and work on part of the Home Office to ensure contractors are providing value and standards commensurate to the public funds invested in them.

## **5. Methodology**

We undertook a focus group discussion together with the Birmingham Asylum and Refugee Association on July 14, 2016 where participants also filled individual questionnaires.

The questionnaire asked participants from Birmingham and the West Midlands area to describe their accommodation, and then prompted them to name any positive and any negative qualities, and any recommendations. There were 61 questions in total. A copy of the questionnaire used is available on request.

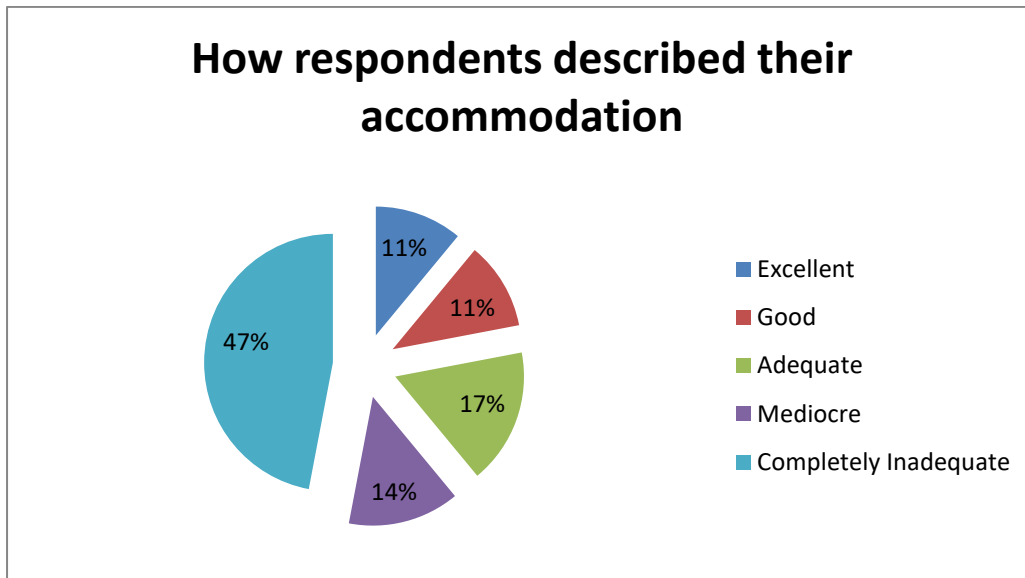
Further individuals have filled questionnaires and sent additional comments. In total 26 individuals took part in the focus group discussion, and 36 have filled questionnaires.

Questionnaire responses have formed the basis of many of our conclusions, though similar sentiments characterised both the questionnaire and focus group. Where data has differed, we have drawn attention to this.



## 6. Responses

22% of respondents marked their accommodation as excellent or good, while 47% found it completely inadequate.



### 6.1 “What is good about your accommodation?”

Three out of 36 questionnaire respondents stated there was nothing unsatisfactory about their accommodation.

12 questionnaire respondents referred to being sheltered as something they are grateful for. All 12 referred to the fact that their accommodation was preferable to street homelessness.

“Otherwise I would be homeless.”

“The only thing I would say that is good is it has a roof.”

“I thank God I have a place to sleep and I'm very grateful. May God bless all the people that gave me a shelter.”

One participant qualified this by stating that the only good thing about the accommodation was that it was free.

Six made positive notes on the physical state of their accommodation.

“Safe for children”, “Heating is very good.”

“The house conditions are not too bad because the property is quite new.”

Three participants stated the accommodation was good or adequate due to the space and independence it provided them.

“I don't have to share the kitchen and toilet with other families like in many other [provider] houses for mums and children.”

“Independence—have your own key.”

Some answered this question by focusing on things that do not relate specifically to the provision of housing. Four respondents alluded to the fact that the people around them were a factor which they considered good.

“The people I live with try to make it homely and accommodating.”

One person qualified this by suggesting that what they appreciated was a sense of communal struggle.

It is notable that out of the 36 questionnaire respondents, eight said nothing was good about their accommodation.

“Nothing, I am struggling and I don’t feel safe.”

“To be honest I have not seen anything good.”

Those in the focus group highlighted their appreciation of personal space.

“What is good is that being a single person I live in my own accommodation, which is good. I don’t share with anyone.”

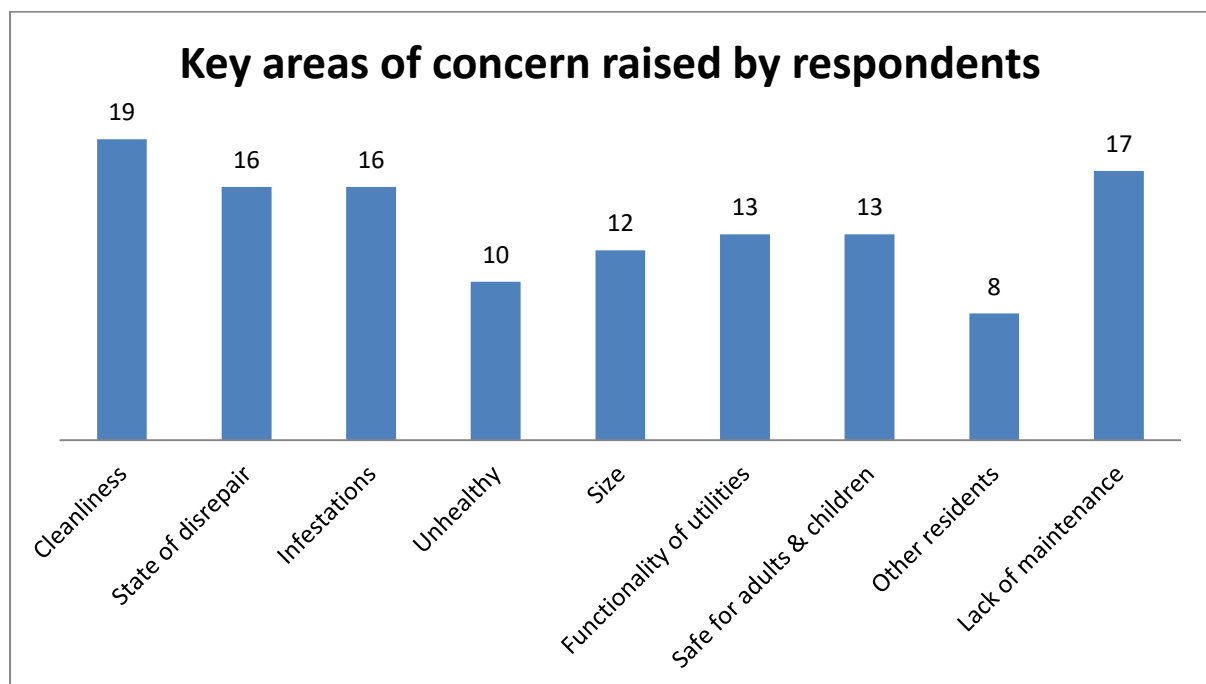
“I am glad that I don’t have to share with anyone. It is just me and my daughter.”

## 6.2 “What are the problems?”

The problems mentioned fall into two key areas: The physical state of the accommodation with several sub-sections of concerns, and the interaction with the housing providers.

### 6.2.1 The physical state of the accommodation

This area had several sub-sections with the problems mentioned in the questionnaire most often the state of disrepair, pest infestations, cleanliness, lack of maintenance, and the functionality of utilities.



### Cleanliness and being prevented from cleaning thoroughly

One of the problems mentioned most commonly was cleanliness, with 19 of 36 questionnaire participants mentioning their accommodation was dirty. Several participants noted that they were not able to keep the place as clean as they would like because they are not allowed a Hoover to clean the accommodation; instead some were told to sweep the carpets.

“Damp walls, dirty kitchen, tiny box room, dirty, cheap bed, dirty carpet.”

“Very dirty, carpets are horrible, no hoovers provided.”

“The carpet is very dirty and there is spider web everywhere. No Hoover to clean the house. We have to sweep.”

### State of disrepair both in terms of the furniture, walls, ceiling, and house utilities

The state of disrepair of the overall accommodation was a large issue, with 16 respondents stating this affected them.

“The house is in ruins.”

“One room is always wet when it rains, so no one sleeps there.”

“There was a broken bed. The stove, cooker and boiler were all broken. Tiles were falling off the walls in the bathroom.”

“There are broken windows and the toilets are not in good working order. The curtains are not in a good state either.”

### Infestations

16 respondents reported a common issue of infestations of mice, rats, bedbugs and other pests.

“Currently I am experience a horde of flies because of dead rats in the kitchen.”

“Bed bugs in my room.”

“Rats in the house although I keep it clean.”

“And we have rats and mice and flies. The flies were having a party. There are files everywhere.”

“Ants and worms coming out of sofa and the walls. It's very unhygienic.”

### Negative impact on health

Ten participants felt that their accommodation was unhealthy for them to live in and has an adverse effect on either their physical or mental health. Several were also worried about the impact on their children's health.

“According to health and safety standards the house is not suitable for living. It is dusty and dirty”.

“There are large damp patches on the ceiling and walls – this causes a very strong musky smell. My baby is suffering from breathing problems. The walls are dirty and very poorly painted.”

“My son has eczema, it is very damp in the house which sets his eczema off. I provided a doctor’s note to [the provider] but they haven’t done anything.”

“The physical space: my room is uncomfortably small and hot. I have cancer and Hepatitis C and my [room] does not cater for [my] need. I have night sweats normally and living in a hot room makes it worse.”

In one section of the questionnaire, participants were asked whether the housing officers took any health problems into consideration when assigning their accommodation. 21 of 36 respondents reported their health problems were not taken into consideration.

“No, don’t care.”

“No. I have back problems and they did not prioritise my need to be issued a mattress in good condition.”

“My baby is having breathing problems—he had a severe chest infection and [the provider] didn’t take this into consideration.”

Only three reported positively on this issue.

“Yes.”

#### Size - overcrowding

The size of the space they inhabited was an issue for 12 of 36 questionnaire participants, though this was overall less of a concern than the state of the accommodation. A few felt the size impacted upon their health.

“Everything is squeezed in one room. Not enough space to move around.”

“The kitchen is too small to fit us all.”

#### Functionality of utilities - fire alarm, water, electricity, gas, boiler

A worrying pattern is the frequency with which electricity, water, and household utilities were mentioned as non-functioning and the time it took to get them repaired. 13 respondents reported having problems with at least one utility.

“I once had an episode where I have to wait two day for the gas and electricity to come back.”

“Boiler is often not working - no hot water.”

“The light will go off because the switch is in someone’s room.”

One member of the focus group mentioned the impact of dysfunctional utilities on health and hygiene.

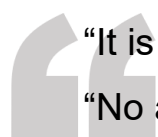
“There is a leak from bathroom upstairs into kitchen. So if you are cooking and someone is showering, you get dirty water in your food.”

### Safety - adults and children

When asked whether they felt safe at home, 23 of 36 respondents stated that they did not feel safe.

Two of the 23 qualified this by noting that they only felt unsafe sometimes, but not always.

13 of these 23 went on to mention specific instances in which they felt unsafe in their responses. Several of these respondents had children and were concerned about keeping their children safe.



“It is ok for living but there is no safety as my room [has] no lock.”

“No alarm works in my house”

“Living room window can easily be pushed open so it's not safe for my daughter to sit alone while I am using the toilet or cooking. She always has to be with me.”

“There are alarms on the windows that are not working and anyone can break in. women don't feel safe.”

### Maintenance

17 out of 36 participants raised ongoing delays to maintenance when issues with accommodation were reported. Some reported that it took months before a problem was fixed. It left many worried about issues happening again and many were frustrated that they saw housing staff come to visit - officially to check for issues to repair etc. - but then the issues do not get fixed.

“On going issues with repairs; water leaking from the ceiling, cooker broken, washing machine broken, baby cot broken. These issues are frequently reported and rarely addressed.”

“In the kitchen the cupboard is falling off and it is too small to accommodate five women. The washing machine is broken and we are still waiting for support. We have called them every week for 5 weeks. In the bathroom the shower head is broken and the toilet does not flush. They haven't come to fix that. The gas was not working but there [were] fumes which lingered for 7 hours. ”

“There was no fridge when I arrived and no hot water. However, these have now been sorted. But I am told that the boiler goes regularly and that women are left for two weeks without hot water and heating. I am scared for my baby when it arrives.”

Focus group participants also noted instances in which circumstances were made even worse when maintenance finally responded to their request.

“Window glass. It was broken in the winter and they only fixed it April or March after 4 months. One was in the bedroom and one in the lounge. They came to fix something else and then broke it.”

“They broke the wood of the door so you have to crawl through the door to get in. To that day it has not been fixed. I told off the housing officer.”

“When they came they put small things that weren’t helping. They use the toilet and leave a mess on the floor. Also one time I came home to find my door was wide open because they hadn’t closed it properly.”

Two focus group participants also discussed how they fixed something on their own due to their frustration with waiting for maintenance.

“Once there was a beeping sound in fire alarm for a whole month, going off day and night. I had to fix it myself, and they told me why did you do it.”

“They’ve taken so long to help me with these issues that I decided to do the repair works myself and I don’t even have the necessary tools or training to do it correctly.”

### People

Four participants mentioned that they had issues with the other residents, which is not an area the housing provider can necessarily control or be directly responsible for. However, when serious issues such as violence have occurred, it was felt there was not enough help from the housing providers.

“One of the residents was violent towards me and when I called the housing manager he said that wasn’t his concern and the resident was free to do what he wanted.”

“I fear other tenants could assault me or my baby again.”

One individual of the focus group raised the concern of lack of support when someone with severe mental health issues is placed in the housing.

“I stayed with someone who was just released from a mental health hospital and no one was coming to visit her. They had taken two children away from her. This lady was walking up and down and singing. We ended up calling them and no one was coming to visit to see that this woman needed help. She got upset sometimes and turned the room upside down and disappeared. And when she disappeared they called me in the middle of the night. She was walking up and down all night making noises and it makes you agitated, you can’t sleep. It makes you scared. When she had disappeared the police call me to find out where she was but, I didn’t know and we had told [the provider] that she was getting worse and needed some attention. When they picked her up they put her in the hospital.”

### Additional concerns

Participants were also asked questions regarding filing formal complaints, disputes with the housing providers, emergency procedures, feelings toward housing officers, and licence agreements. While the results produced are not necessarily statistically significant, they are still important to note.

#### Formal complaints

Eight respondents reported filing a formal complaint against their housing provider. All those who filled complaint stated little came from it and the results were not what they expecting.

“I expected to be helped.”

“Yes but it took me a long time and caused me a great deal of anxiety.”

24 participants did not file formal complaints. The most common response was that this was because they did not know how to, in addition to feeling like the housing providers would not care even if they did.

“No because they don’t care.”

“Unaware of what process to do.”

“I did not file a formal complaint because I do not know what the procedure is and my English is not good enough.”

“Did not know how to do this otherwise we would have.”

#### Emergency procedures

26 respondents reported being aware of what to do regarding emergencies, such as a fire, gas leak, or monoxide alarm going off. A few said they were aware because of the instructions located in the housing. Many participants stated they would not contact their housing providers – mentioning [the provider] by name - in an emergency, as they do not they think this would do anything to help.

“It says on the board. But not sure I understand it.”

“We have enough information because they offer instructions in blackboard in front of our home.”

“Yes. I would call the general emergency numbers before contacting [the provider] because I do not believe they would act promptly.

“I would call the general emergency services because I do not trust [the provider] would be helpful in case of a serious issue.”

“I have called [the provider’s] emergency service but they are not diligent. I do not think I would waste time calling them—I would ring general emergency numbers.”

“I called the police when I was assaulted. I also called [the provider] emergency service but they did not come to the property until the

week after. I do not think I would waste time calling them if something similar happened again.”

Four respondents reported not knowing what to do in the event of an emergency.

#### Housing officer and licence agreement

Participants were also asked about their relationship with their housing officer. They stated whether or not they felt comfortable speaking to them and asking them questions. 19 of 36 respondents answered that they did feel comfortable speaking to their housing officer, while 11 did not feel comfortable. 17 felt comfortable asking their housing officer questions, while 14 did not.

Respondents were also asked if their licence agreement had been explained to them and whether they actually felt like they understood what the agreement stated. 18 of 36 questionnaire participants said the agreement was explained to them, but 15 said it was not. 13 people stated that they understood the agreement, while 15 said they did not understand it.

While a little over 50% of the respondents felt comfortable speaking with their housing provider, asking them questions, and had the licence agreement explained to them, roughly 50% said they did not understand the agreement. When looking at the responses of each participant individually, there does not appear to be a correlation between the relationship and comfort level with a housing provider and participants' understanding of the licence agreement. Therefore, it may likely be the language of the housing agreement itself that causes confusion.

### **6.3 Interaction with the housing provider**

Four out of 36 questionnaire respondents felt the interaction was positive or the attitude of the housing providers was positive and problems were dealt with swiftly.

“Because sometimes [the provider] people behave in a professional way and maintain things.”

“Excellent, because [the provider] is visiting every month and solve the problem as soon as [they get in touch].”

A positive brought up by a participant of the focus group was staff professionalism.

“The housing manager or the people who have come to know the people in the building they are professionals and they have know how to deal with asylum seekers.”

However, the large majority of participants raised various problems. Most concerns were raised about a feeling that problems are not taken seriously, are ignored, or are dealt with after untenable levels of delay.

Most seriously, many also raise concerns about the behaviour of the housing providers in person, and in relation to how they enter rooms. There were multiple concerns about not feeling safe or respected. In some cases there was a sense of intimidation.

Only six respondents felt they could trust their housing provider, while 26 felt that they did not. Four respondents either did not answer the question or stated that they were unsure of



whether they trusted their housing provider. Five people felt that their housing provider cares for their well-being.

Respondents were also asked whether they had gotten into any disputes with their housing provider. 29 out of 36 respondents did not engage in any disputes. Some claimed this was due to the fact that they did not want to cause any trouble and others said it would be difficult to have a dispute in person, as the housing providers are rarely present.

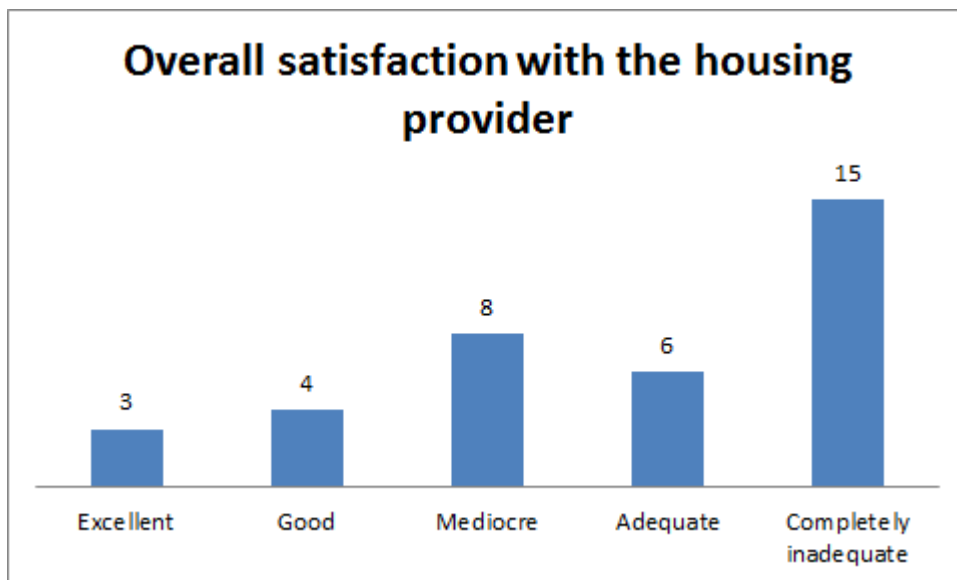
“I try as much as possible to avoid conflicts.”

“We just call constantly, hardly ever see anyone to have a dispute with.”

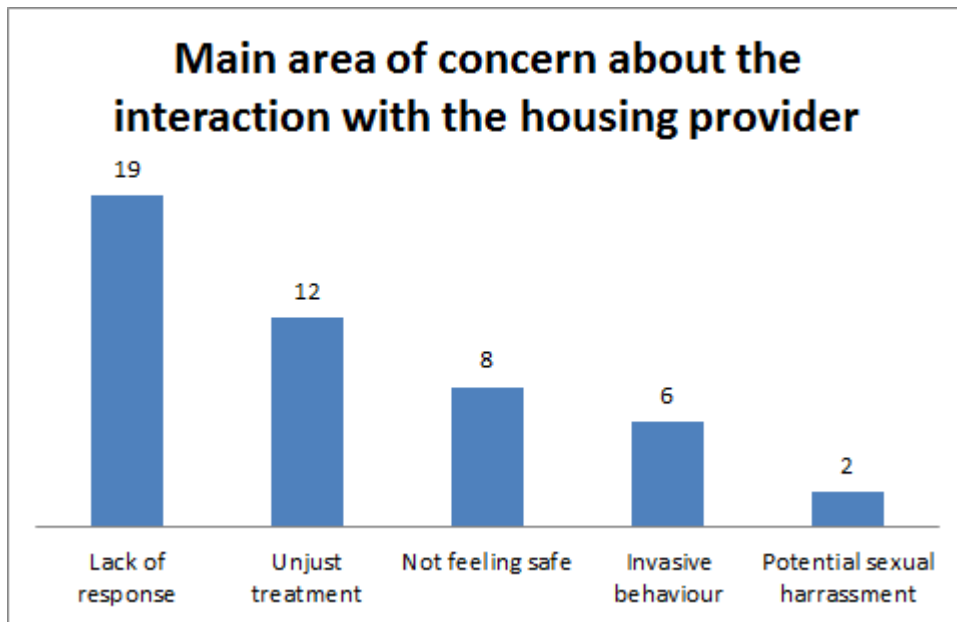
Five participants reported engaging in disputes with the housing providers. None of them felt the issue was dealt with or had a resolution.

*“One of the resident was violent towards me and when I called he said that wasn’t his concern and the resident was free to do what he wanted.”*

**Fig 1. Respondent satisfaction with housing provider**



**Fig 2. Main area of concern with housing provider**



#### Lack of response in person or on the helpline

A large portion of respondents reported being completely ignored by housing staff when they attempted to bring up issues. They mentioned filing issues multiple times through many avenues to no avail. A lack of response has resulted in feelings of frustration and neglect.

“I feel that [the provider]’s staff do not listen and that there is no point of communication between us and them.”

“He (housing officer) was good to speak to but, he reports problems and no one comes to fix them. Only when I call does it seem that someone comes.”

“I feel ignored and neglected.”

“They say that they would sort out things but most of the time they forget about it. I have raised concerns with the housing officer and I have found out that they had not even logged the issue after calling the [the provider]’s contact centre weeks later.”

“I was assaulted by one of the tenants. I even called the police. However the housing officer came 5 days later and only because my support worker spoke to the regional manager after reporting the incident twice.”

“It is very difficult to establish contact with the helpline”

“They sound polite over the phone but no action takes place for a long time.”

“I have called [the provider]’s emergency service but they are not diligent. I do not think I would waste time calling them – I would instead ring general emergency numbers.”

#### Lack of repairs (direct impact on the physical state of the accommodation)

There is a common pattern of requests to fix things going unanswered. Housing providers are often aware of the issues, yet still nothing is done to solve them in a timely matter.

“I expected them to fix both the window and clean the extractor fan within 1 month. I was also surprised because it took two days for the

housing officer to come and view the problem but, months for it to actually be fixed.”

“The boiler is very old and keeps breaking down especially in winter. [The provider] don’t respond quickly when called to fix it. The manager never answers his phone when you call with a problem and when he does he is very rude and disrespectful.”

“The only problem is that there is no key. You can’t lock from the inside. My wife explained but they didn’t change the key. Every month they come to visit but it has not been changed.”

#### A feeling of ‘unjust treatment’ in person or ‘unjust treatment’ on the phone

Many respondents felt that they were not listened to - for instance when reporting issues in the accommodation such as repairs. They felt the issues were not being taken seriously or dealt with. They also complained of being treated with disrespect or rudeness.

"It is bad because they don’t care much and [have] no respect."

“The [the provider] service [people] don’t care about us. They treat us like animals.”

“The housing officer appears to be very patronizing. [By saying things such as " You should count yourself lucky living in the accommodation]"

“They are often rude and are not helpful if you have difficulties with the language.”

“Always an excuse, “oh you are calling again” almost as if we are bothering them.”

Others report the staff being aggressive and intimidating, threatening to evict them.

“He threatened me that if I complained I would be moved to shared accommodation. He also said that there are 400,000 people who need accommodation or you will share with other nine single mothers.”

“I was made to feel very uncomfortable and unsafe. There was an occasion the area manager visited me unexpectedly. He was very rude, intimidating and abusive. I had to report that to the policy. Then on the same day, he switched off the boiler so we had no heating or hot water... I genuinely feared for my safety.”

Three focus group participants mentioned the issue of arbitrary removal. They were not told why they were being moved, where they were being moved to, and were forced to leave many of their items behind, as there was a strict limit on what they could take with them.

“We were told that we are going to be moving from here. They didn’t mention where we were going. We were told to take the “essential things.” I had books which I was forced to leave behind. I had to dismantle my computer and take only the import parts because they just wouldn’t allow me to take any more.”

“I also was almost forcefully removed. In my case I received a long letter telling me that I would have to leave my accommodation and that I have no right to refuse. However, because I am aware that I do actually have a right to refuse I was able to

reject this forced removal. In the end though they offered me a better place to move into but, when moving the really limit what you can take and they give you very little time to prepare your language. They tell you that you can only take two suitcases. You end up losing valuables.”

“You can only take two bags. There are unexplained last minute changes to where you may be going and you can’t refuse it because if you do you may not get housed. It is true there is a limit on everything you can take and they give you very little if any time to prepare for the move.”

‘Invasive behaviour’ - Unannounced visits, knocking and walking in before a response. Observing the inhabitants rather than inspecting the accommodation

There seems to be a wide difference in frequency of visits from housing staff. In some cases it seems to take a few months, in other cases respondents report staff coming to the accommodation several times per week. The reasons for visiting given are reported as ‘to inspect the property,’ ‘to deal with an issue,’ and ‘to make repairs.’ When the reason is given as making repairs, respondents often wonder why the repairs are not done.

Five respondents felt the housing staff had a positive attitude towards them such as ‘good’ or ‘excellent’, whereas 27 expressed they had a negative attitude towards them such as ‘rude’ or ‘unprofessional’ or ‘no respect.’ Some felt they were being watched.

“They come in at any moment and [thus sometimes your] dignity and privacy are compromised”. “As a person who has been trafficked, [this causes] me to panic and relive the traumatizing experiences of the past.”

“The [provider’s] staff show up at the flat without notice and just barge in with no respect for our property.”

“They need to talk to people before coming to visit them in the house.”

Five of the respondents specifically mentioned feeling uncomfortable as women with the way the male housing staff entered the house or their rooms. Often it was mentioned that housing staff would knock, and soon after open the door without waiting long enough for a response. Another concern was that although there is a sign-in sheet for staff to report their visiting time and date in each house, respondents noted this was not always filled in even when they could tell someone had accessed their room.

“They knocked on the door very hard and early, and they also don’t care whether you are decent or not.”

“Men work at [the provider] and we are in a women’s house. They knock and enter and don’t ask for permission. They go through our stuff. They don’t sign in and they come into our rooms to inspect when we are not there.”

“Early this year, in January, three members of [the provider’s] staff barged into my room and other girls’ rooms whilst we were inside, none of them had badges on, so they could be anyone really. They said they needed to inspect. Two of them were men, and the house is women’s only but they don’t respect our privacy we could have been praying, sleeping, getting changed or unwell and trying to get some rest, they just don’t care, as if we don’t deserve respect.”

“I feel unsafe in particular [with] the male staff coming in.”

“One time I was in the shower and on my way coming out I saw a [provider] officer coming out and he had to cover his face for me to come out.”

One person who had a female housing officer said this made her feel safe and another requested to have a female officer.

“Just let the ladies know not just go and open the house.”

“I do not feel uncomfortable with the female housing officer coming to the property but sometimes [the provider’s] male employees enter the house and do not clearly identify themselves or explain why they came.”

### Sexual harassment

Among the respondents’ answers, there are two cases that show strongly inappropriate behaviour that made the respondents very uncomfortable. In the first instance, [the provider] seems to have dealt with the issue adequately and swiftly.

“Before being moved to this property due to the birth of my daughter I lived in a property where the housing officer had a very inappropriate behaviour. He told us residents that if we made trouble (meaning reporting problems or making complaints to [provider] helpline without letting him know) he would inform the Home Office. I had just arrived in the UK and did not know how things work or what my rights were. This used to make me feel very anxious and powerless. He also used to come to my bedroom and close the door which made me feel very uncomfortable. He talked to us about his sexual experiences. I never reported this because I was scared of the consequences but I did tell my support worker about one occasion when he was verbally abusive to me for reporting an incident in the property and my support worker made a complaint.”

The same respondent continues: “My support worker made a complaint on my behalf about my housing officer’s inappropriate behaviour and I think [the provider] conducted an investigation and he ceased working in our house but I am not sure what happened.”

Another person reports:

“[Member of staff] was here with a new girl, he told me that "I was looking fit" whilst staring at me up and down which made me feel very uncomfortable. Then he went on to say that his wife walked away from him, which I didn't care about, so he repeated it then explained what it meant although I knew. I just was not interested. Then he went on to say that he had a date with someone else, as his wife left him after 10 years...He said he wanted “war in our countries,” so he “could keep his job,” then he went to say that he wanted me to get my status so I could go away, that way he “could be at peace.”

### **6.4 Overall feeling of safety and wellbeing**

When asked, “How does living in this accommodation make you feel?” Six out of 36 respondents said their accommodation made them feel “good” or “better” or “OK” or “at home.” Three felt mixed e.g. *“desperate for something where I feel more comfortable, but happy to have a roof over my head”*

26 participants had very sad or negative feelings such as feeling “hopeless” or “unsafe” or “anxious” or “uncomfortable” or “powerless” or “insecure.”

“Disempowered, unsafe and undignified. My opinions do not matter. I feel that anything could happen and [the provider] would not put necessary measures in place to ensure my safety.”

“Depressed, stressed”

“I am very sad and unhappy. I can't stop crying and I cannot eat because of the mouldy smell. I am 5 months pregnant and I am scared that I have to raise my child in this way with dirt and vermin.”

“I am not allowed to do what I want to do, my human rights are taken away from me.”

### **6.5 What are your recommendations?**

We wanted to find out from participants what would help improve the situation.

In sharing their recommendations and messages to the housing providers and government the strongest message from respondents was the wish to be treated as human beings.

15 individuals mentioned wanting to be treated as humans with respect.

“Treat us with respect and dignity. We are human.”

“They should treat us like one of their own. It is not our fault that we are seeking asylum, nobody knows tomorrow.”

“They should treat us like human beings”

Four participants wanted to express their gratitude for having accommodation.

“Thank for giving me a house, treatment and safe.”

“I am very grateful for the Government to make a way for us where there seems to be no way. As a destitute is very difficult.”

Most responses related to calling for the improvement of the physical conditions of the accommodations, the speed with which repairs were done, and the communication and interaction between housing providers and residents. Many gave practical examples of what could be done.

“Solve problems fast or problems will become big and difficult to control and deal with”

“Just let the ladies know not just go and open the house.”

“Treat people as individuals. Provide decent accommodation. Improve point of communication and listening. Respect and maintain our dignity. Respect the sign in sheet. Train staff to carry their badge with them for identification purposes.”

“Please follow protocols like sending letters with appointments and pest control arrival dates. A free emergency contact line would be very helpful. Please improve the time it takes to react to a call. Serious issues should receive attention in 24 hours.”

Six of the respondents recommended that the Home Office should look into inspecting or changing the housing provider:

“Home Office [to] inspect [the provider because] the indifference of [the provider] comes from lack of inspectors.”

“They really need to improve their service or the government should just stop their contract.”

“I think the government should find a different provider to deal with these properties in a humane way.”

## 7. Conclusion

We conducted this research after members in Birmingham brought the questionable living conditions of asylum seekers to our attention. It became clear throughout our research that significant numbers of the asylum seekers we interviewed were identifying serious and systemic problems with the management and maintenance of their accommodation.

The general condition of asylum seekers is a cause for concern. Most asylum seekers live in poverty and experience poor health and hunger. Asylum seekers rely on state support lower than that provided to most social security claimants, and are usually not permitted to seek paid employment. Their housing is not funded through local authorities and is often in hard-to-let properties.

The impact of poor housing upon health, wellbeing and life chances is well-documented, especially for families with children. 2013 research commissioned by Shelter<sup>4</sup> found levels of general wellbeing to be lower among adults living in bad housing, consistent across all categories of tenure.

Traumatic circumstances that asylum seekers are likely to face, the challenges of integration into a new society, and the lack of access to resources or opportunity that asylum seekers face, create a backdrop in which poor housing conditions can have a toxic effect.

Our research found that this effect was both material and psychological.

Our first key finding concerns the physical space of the accommodation itself. There was a clear consensus from many respondents that the overall quality of the space was unacceptable. Respondents felt that their accommodation was dirty and they were not provided with sufficient cleaning equipment. Furniture and utilities were often broken upon move-in or broke after limited usage, and repairs were few and far between. Infestation was a huge issue for many of the participants. When these issues were brought up to the housing provider, it was unlikely that they would be resolved within an adequate timeframe.

Our second key finding concerns interactions with the housing provider. A select few had positive things to say about their interactions, but most comments left much to be desired. Respondents did not feel their requests were taken seriously. They raised concerns over the way in which some housing staff acted, including invasive behaviour such as unannounced visits, knocking and walking in before receiving a response, and a perception of inappropriate levels of observation. Female respondents also mentioned that they often felt uncomfortable with the behaviour of male staff members.

These findings, when combined, provoked negative emotional responses. Many respondents admitted that they felt unsafe with where they were living because basic necessities did not work and they felt uneasy around some staff members. The majority stated that they did not trust the housing provider to do anything for them. They felt that no one held their well-being and quality of life in regard. According to participants, this has caused feelings of stress and depression.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://england.shelter.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0010/726166/People\\_living\\_in\\_bad\\_housing.pdf](https://england.shelter.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/726166/People_living_in_bad_housing.pdf)



We cannot risk a collective mentality where we assume that anything is good enough for asylum seekers. Vulnerable people deserve concern, respect and human dignity. The Home Office must also ensure that it receives value and quality for the public money it disperses to housing providers. Poor-quality housing is a grave concern for people across Britain – not just asylum seekers. The long-term cost to the public purse of poor housing and the social and health problems it creates is not sustainable – as a report last year from the Rowntree Foundation indicates.<sup>5</sup>

Decent shelter, in the view of this report, is a right common to all UK residents. Both state agencies and providers should digest carefully the contents of this report and ensure they meet their obligations to vulnerable residents.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-36937516>

## **8. Recommendations**

### **8.1 Recommendations to housing providers**

Based on the data gathered in our research and the views of respondents, Migrant Voice makes the following recommendations to housing providers.

1. To produce, make public, maintain and enforce a minimum standard of quality in asylum seeker accommodation.
2. To review all existing policies and ensure staff is equipped to follow them correctly.
3. To make complaints procedures clear and accessible, provided in appropriate formats and languages, and to resolve complaints promptly.
4. In cases of staff misconduct, to ensure disciplinary action is taken quickly and notify complainant of complaint status.
5. To respond to urgent repairs swiftly, ensure a regular flow of communication, and provide information about the expected timeframe in which repairs will take place.
6. To increase transparency in the implementation of operations, including visits, and how complaints and repairs are dealt with, in a way that allows for effective scrutiny by third parties.

### **8.2 Recommendations to Home Office**

Based on the data gathered in our research and the views of respondents, Migrant Voice has the following recommendations for the Home Office.

1. Review all contracts with housing providers to ensure compliance with standards - including undertaking inspections of the properties - and value for money.
2. Undertake a review into the option of providing asylum seekers the option of finding their own housing in the wider community, where minimum standards are met and the cost is equivalent to or lower than that of housing providers.

All agencies must treat asylum seekers with fairness and dignity. They should not be vilified, but treated with respect and compassion.

**Ends**



For more information about this  
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