HOSTILE ACCOMMODATION

HOW THE ASYLUM HOUSING SYSTEM IS CRUEL BY DESIGN
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nearly 50,000 people seeking asylum currently live in temporary or ‘contingency’ accommodation in hotels where they are held indefinitely in conditions that actively harm their physical and mental health. Their freedom of movement and basic liberties are restricted, they are held in rooms where they are unable to receive guests or arrange childcare and they are told that if they leave for short periods, such as one or two days, they will not be able to return. They live in an environment of fear of attacks by racist groups stoked by the racist language of politicians and sections of the media.

This is a system of ‘de-facto detention’ which shares some of the features of other forms of detention in which people are detained indefinitely, segregated from communities, do not have access to legal or welfare services and have limited contact with the outside world due to restrictions and the cost of transport and communications.

The expansion of detention proposed by the current government will not only be a human rights catastrophe but will also be incredibly costly. There is almost no accountability for the private providers, who make huge profits and have been the subject of numerous complaints yet continue to be awarded contracts worth billions.

This report compiles data from Refugee Action’s Asylum Crisis services in three locations – Greater Manchester, London, and the West Midlands from mid-year 2021 to January 2023. During this period, Refugee Action caseworkers and volunteers recorded their advocacy on hundreds of cases which provide a snapshot of life in the UK asylum accommodation system. The report also draws on 100 in-depth surveys conducted with people living in hotels in London, Greater Manchester, the West Midlands, and Bradford.

OUR FINDINGS

1. The set of policies surrounding asylum accommodation, decision-making and support have converged to produce a nationwide system of racialised segregation and de-facto detention of people seeking asylum.

2. The cost of de-facto detention has increased exponentially since 2019 leading to enormous profits being generated for the Government’s private contractors.

3. Plans to replace ‘contingency accommodation’ or detention of people in one room in hotel settings with camps will further entrench this system.
OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Housing people seeking asylum in high quality and appropriate accommodation in communities is workable and just.

2. Standards for asylum seeker housing should be brought into line with those of the rest of the population and adjusted for their specific needs. You can read Refugee Action’s accommodation principles here.

3. The Government should work with and fund local authorities and NGOs to run integrated housing, support, and legal advice in communities and address the crisis in social housing.
INTRODUCTION

The reality behind what we call ‘asylum accommodation’ in the UK is a system in which tens of thousands of people are living for many months and years in conditions that actively harm their physical and mental health and violate their basic human rights. At the time of writing there are 105,522 people in asylum accommodation. They are detained indefinitely, segregated from communities, do not have access to legal or welfare services and have limited contact with the outside world due to restrictions and the cost of transport and communications. They live in an environment of fear of attacks by racist groups stoked by dangerous, inflammatory, racist language of politicians and sections of the media. In this system, people who came to the UK seeking safety are forced to live in conditions so bad that they present a clear threat to their lives. A joint investigation by the Observer and Liberty Investigates found at least 107 deaths of people seeking asylum who were provided with Home Office housing between April 2016 and May 2022.

This report compiles data from Refugee Action Asylum Crisis services in three locations – Greater Manchester, London, and the West Midlands from mid-year 2021 to January 2023. During this period, Refugee Action caseworkers and volunteers recorded their advocacy on hundreds of cases which provide a snapshot of life in the UK asylum accommodation system. The report also draws on 100 in-depth surveys conducted with people living in hotels in London, Greater Manchester, the West Midlands, and Bradford. Information gained by Refugee Action through Freedom of Information (FOI) requests in January and February 2023, has also been included.
THE CASES REVEAL:

- Family groups living in one room for over a year.
- Adults, teenagers, and small children living in **one small space**, with **no privacy** or place to play.
- People who wait for months and years with no information about their asylum application and **no access to legal representation**.
- **Children** spending over a year in overcrowded hotels where they are **too afraid to sleep**.
- Rooms with **doors that don’t lock** where staff come in without knocking.
- **Pest and rodent infestations, mould, and flooding**.
- **Overcrowding** and lack of proper hygiene in hotels causing infectious disease outbreaks on premises.
- People living in **chronic pain** who are unable to access a GP, cannot access free prescriptions due to Home Office delays in issuing documentation, and can’t afford to buy medicine.
- **Children who are unable to attend school** because it is an hour’s walk away and there is no money to buy school uniforms.
- **Food which is inedible** and of such low quality that it creates and exacerbates illness, and causes hospitalisation, weight loss and malnutrition.
- **A mental health epidemic** including depression, anxiety, panic, and suicidal ideation.
- **An arbitrary and traumatic dispersal system** where people have no choice over when they are told to leave and where they are sent next.

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54% of adults and 58% of families with children we surveyed had spent over 6 months in hotels. with 27% of families with children having been in a hotel for over a year.

75% are facing hunger and malnutrition

57% experiencing health issues

52% have no money to buy essential items

71% experiencing mental health issues
1. WHAT IS ASYLUM ACCOMMODATION?

In the UK there are **105,522** people living in what is called ‘asylum accommodation’. Of these **56,029** are in what’s referred to as dispersal accommodation and **49,493** are in temporary or ‘contingency’ accommodation in hotels.³

The legislation that governs this are sections 98, 95 and 4 of the 1999 Immigration Act which state that people who claim asylum in the UK should be provided with accommodation to prevent them from becoming homeless. Instead of providing housing through local authorities or housing associations, the Home Office has outsourced accommodation provision to private providers who operate on a profit-based model. Since 2019 these contracts have been held by three companies – **Mears, Serco** and **Clearsprings Ready Homes**. Although they carry out immigration functions and therefore have statutory responsibilities, private providers aim to generate profit. The largest of these providers is **Serco** – a company which also specialises in prisons and detention, operating six adult prisons in the UK.⁴

According to Home Office guidelines, people seeking asylum who need housing are housed in temporary accommodation or ‘initial accommodation’ for **a maximum of 3–4 weeks**.⁵ Following this, people should be moved to ‘dispersal’ accommodation, which is longer-term housing, while their asylum claim is processed. Dispersal accommodation is allocated on a ‘no choice’ basis and following the introduction of the mandatory dispersal policy in April 2022, people seeking asylum can be moved around the UK without regard to local connections. The UK has
an obligation to respect a person’s right to a family and community life under Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights which is referred to in policy documents. However, in practice, this is not well applied, and advocacy is required to prevent inappropriate dispersal. Such advocacy is not available for the majority of people, given that the Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility (AIRE) contracts, which regulate the provision of advice and support prohibits advocacy. The 10-year AIRE contract, to ‘provide impartial and independent information, advice, guidance and assistance’ was awarded to an organisation called Migrant Help in 2019.

The distinction between initial accommodation and dispersal accommodation has largely collapsed as the use of ‘contingency’ accommodation in hotels has grown massively since the new contracts were awarded to the providers, Serco, Mears and Clearsprings, in 2019. Currently the nearly 50,000 people being held in hotels are there for months and sometimes years, while their asylum claim is being processed. At the end of 2022, 109,641 people which represents 68% of the total number of asylum applicants and dependents had been waiting for 6 months or more for an initial decision on their asylum claim.

People seeking asylum are forced to live on very low levels of asylum support which is set at £9.50 a week for those living in hotels and £45 per week for those in dispersal accommodation. There can be long delays in accessing financial support. Many people report waiting for months with no money to buy essential items, unable to support themselves as they are banned from working. Our research shows that people in hotels including family groups with children waited on average 2.3 months to receive financial support necessary to buy items such as winter clothing, bus fares, school uniforms, toiletries, baby milk or food. More than half (52%) of the people we surveyed reported that they were facing destitution and were unable to buy essential items.

The conditions that people seeking asylum are living in are determined by a complex set of policies surrounding dispersal, housing, decision making and support. This set of policies means that the issues surrounding asylum accommodation are often presented as if they were a result of an accidental convergence of policy making. However, this should not blind us to the fact that the system is designed to detain people seeking asylum in conditions that violate their basic human rights.
DE-FACTO DETENTION

The International Detention Coalition defines immigration detention as any law, policy or practice by which persons are detained for reasons relating to their migration status and observes that immigration detention has been growing as a practice over the last 20 years.\textsuperscript{10}

The UK now has one of the largest detention estates in Europe and is the only state to use detention without time limit.\textsuperscript{16}

It currently allows for the indefinite detention of asylum seekers, refugees, migrants and people without status in immigration detention and prisons in violation of the right to liberty which is a fundamental principle of human rights legislation.\textsuperscript{12}

De-facto detention in hotels and accommodation centres shares some of the features of other forms of detention. In hotels people are held indefinitely, their freedom of movement and basic liberties are restricted. They are held in rooms where they are unable to receive guests or arrange childcare and they are told that if they leave for short periods, such as one or two days they will not be able to return. There are curfews and sign in and sign out protocols, they are in locations that are isolated and far from community, and the low level of asylum support means that transport is very restricted.

The proliferation of forms of de-facto detention and the expansion of the detention estate has occurred as countries, particularly in the West and Europe have pursued deterrence policies in order to close their borders to migrant and refugee populations from the Global South. In this sense, detention has become a “symbolic act used to convey a message to a range of people who are not being detained themselves.”\textsuperscript{13}

A further feature of detention in hotels is its extra-legality. Extra-legal detention occurs when there is no crime, no trial, and no access to representation. It is indefinite and takes place in locations that are not officially acknowledged as prisons. It’s extra-legal because it fundamentally violates the rights of asylum seekers under UK and international law and is a product of hostile formal and informal policy making. These policies place asylum seekers in institutional settings which are not covered by normal governance and accountability mechanisms and instead subject them to arbitrary punishment, control, and violence.
SEGREGATION

The Home Office does not publish data on the equalities characteristics of people seeking asylum in hotel accommodation. However, we know that the vast majority of those in this detention system are from countries in the Middle East and Africa.

Refugee Action’s caseworkers and volunteers working with service users accommodated in hotels recorded 187 cases requiring urgent intervention between July 2021 and January 2023. These included multiple intersecting instances of trauma relating to 82 people, both individuals and members of family groups.

Of the 82 individuals, over two thirds – 68% (56) came from the Middle East and North Africa, 17% (14) came from Sub-Saharan Africa, 8.5% (7) came from Central and South America, 1.2% (1) came from the Caribbean and 4.8% (4) came from two countries in Europe – Russia and Albania. Of the nationalities represented, the top three came from countries where there has been military intervention by the UK and its allies in the last two decades. Over a quarter (27%) came from Iraq, a country with a grant rate of 55% followed by Kuwait (12%) with a grant rate of 51%, and Afghanistan (8.5%) with a grant rate of 98%. 95% of the cases recorded in hotels over this period therefore related to people who were likely to be identifiably people of colour, the majority of whom come from countries with a combined average grant rate of 68%.

What emerges is a picture in which brown and black people are being held for months and years in segregated spaces, cut off from communities, in buildings that are called ‘hotels’ but are in reality de-facto detention. They have committed no crime, have had no trial, nor, in a majority of cases access to legal representation. They are being held for indefinite periods of time. Even people who have been granted refugee status are being denied the ability to access their rights or to leave hotel accommodation. In January 2023 the Home Office confirmed that it is not serving decisions for people in contingency accommodation. This means that people who have had their asylum claim granted are not being informed of that fact and are prevented from exercising their rights, including rights to welfare services and family reunion.

95% of the cases recorded in hotels over this period therefore related to people who were likely to be identifiably people of colour.
2. HOW DO PEOPLE EXPERIENCE ASYLUM ACCOMMODATION?

TIME PERIODS AND OVERCROWDING

“...It feels like a prison…”

The Home Office does not publish data on length of stay, but our data shows that of the 39 single adults, couples and families with adult dependents surveyed, over half (54%) were held over 6 months, 33% had been held for over a year, and 8% had been held for over 15 months. Families with children are supposed to be prioritised for dispersal to longer-term housing, but of the 62 families with children surveyed, 95% were held for over 6 weeks – (until recently the statutory limit in mainstream homelessness law for children to be kept in temporary accommodation⁷), 58% were held for over 6 months, over a quarter (27%) had been held for over a year and 8% of families with children were living in confined spaces for over 15 months.

In one illustrative case a family of five with three children aged 8, 7 and 2 years old had been held in temporary accommodation since they arrived in the UK in October 2021 and were only dispersed following advocacy in August 2022. In another a family including a pregnant woman with two children have been held since December 2021 in one small hotel room with a double bed and a sofa bed where the children sleep. As of the date of this report they are still waiting to be moved.

Organisations working with single adults reported that some were held for two and a half years, or since the beginning of the pandemic. According to the ICIBI, unaccompanied children were held in de-facto detention for an average of 23.2 days in January 2022.⁸

51% reported problems with overcrowding and lack of privacy.
I want to move freely but they don’t let me”

A quarter (25%) of people surveyed reported restrictions on freedom of movement and 1 in 5 (20%) reported other restrictions. In some cases, staff did not allow people to come and go from the hotel for unexplained reasons, and they were threatened with homelessness if they broke these rules. It has been widely reported that some hotels placed unlawful curfews, sometimes for 23 hours of the day, on people who are forced to live there, with no reason given as to why they are not allowed to leave.

Wider issues such as having no money and being in isolated areas also contribute to restrictions on movement. Refugee Action has seen many cases of people seeking asylum being unable to leave hotels as they cannot afford public transport, one person reporting having to walk one and a half hours to reach the nearest shopping centre.

We are treated like animals, not humans”

51% of people surveyed reported problems with overcrowding and lack of privacy, which are major contributing factors to mental health issues. In one case a family of seven were sharing two rooms, and in another, a family of six had been living in one room for over a year. Lack of privacy is compounded by rooms without locks and the behaviour of staff who enter rooms unannounced.

36% reported lack of basic facilities. People seeking asylum report rooms with windows that don’t open, which are freezing cold or very stuffy. Respondents reported that rooms were cold, or heating was broken. Family groups are detained in rooms without enough beds. In one case, two adults and their daughter live in a small hotel room with only two single beds, with the adults taking it in turns to sleep on the floor.
One person spoke of how the prison-like conditions of the hotel conditions were impacting his family:

Now we still in a poor living condition at all levels without freedom of movement and my child is sadly suffering and becomes upset as we are staying in a kind of prison...

The room is confined and it restricts his movement, our GP complained many times and sent his medical condition to Migrant Help and warned them, but now we are witnessing all those predictions come true and he is not improving mentally and physically...

We do not like the food and often eat only bread and milk, we have all lost weight. My son will not eat the food and he has no space to play.

The hotel staff have said that if we complain about the hotel then the Home Office will move us to Rwanda. The staff have a master key and will just come into the room, they do not knock or inform us that they will be coming in the room.

We were locked in our room for a week and only had bread and milk, we tried to call the reception but they did not answer the phone.”

Staff enact penalties which are arbitrary and not governed by any formal process. For example, residents who have been seen as ‘complaining’ about food were effectively confined to their room as punishment. People have been subject to unannounced random room searches. One person experienced the housing provider coming in, without permission, and going through her room. Her belongings were then confiscated, including her insulin which could have had life threatening consequences. She was not allowed to go back into her room and was homeless for the following week. Her belongings have since been returned but she has received no explanation to why this happened.

People with complex mental and physical health issues, who have no access to medical help or support are forced to share rooms for long periods, which contributes to their feelings of fear, panic, and lack of privacy. This is despite the fact that in May 2020 accommodation providers committed before the Home Affairs Select Committee not to move newly arrived unrelated adults entering initial or contingency accommodation into shared bedrooms.20
HOSTILE AND UNSANITARY CONDITIONS

Unsanitary conditions are commonly reported in hotels, including mice infestation, mould and leaks, damaged and dirty carpets.

A quarter (25%) of people we surveyed reported the presence of mould in rooms and almost a fifth (19%) reported rubbish and unsanitary conditions where they were living.

These conditions are making people sick and causing outbreaks of infectious diseases on premises:

A chickenpox outbreak occurred, and everyone got infected, including me, which scared my kids and me. In general, because of lack of proper hygiene and because it is a closed space, soon after we recover from an illness, we get infected with something else.

Once a week, housekeeping people knock on our door and give us new sheets to change our bedding and then provide us with a small antibacterial spray to clean up the room, which we have to return as soon as we are done. Therefore, other residents and I need to buy cleaning sprays for £8 weekly we receive to keep our room and toilet clean, and because of humidity, we need to clean everything twice. Otherwise, we get all sorts of health issues.”

19% reported rubbish and unsanitary conditions where they were living

Rubbish in sleeping area

Mould beneath carpet
Information gained through FOI requests in January and February 2023 reveal the extent of unsanitary conditions in hotels. Environmental health teams were contacted nine times between January 2019 and June 2021 for just one hotel to respond to complaints regarding pest infestation, cleanliness, covid concerns and health and safety concerns. In another hotel also operated by Clearsprings there were three separate food hygiene visits in six months between August 2021 and February 2022.

An October 2022 environmental health report from regarding a property operated by Serco detailed “very high scoring category two hazards” including a mice infestation, holes in walls, a broken heating system, broken windows, electrical hazards, a level of lack of hygiene in kitchens that would lead to increasing “risk of gastrointestinal infection”, leaks, standing water and doors that didn’t latch.

People seeking asylum are required to resolve problems with accommodation by going through Migrant Help, the organisation that holds the Government AIRE contracts to provide advice, guidance and assistance.

Wait times for calls to Migrant Help, can be up to three hours and complaints are often either ignored or the issues are dismissed. Between February 2021 and January 2023 Refugee Action recorded 84 cases of complaints submitted to Migrant Help regarding accommodation which required follow-up advocacy to be actioned.

Almost half (46%) of respondents to our survey reported problems with Migrant Help and 37% reported problems with the accommodation provider. Out of 72 people who responded to our survey section on complaints, 70% had made a complaint and out of this total, 55% of people managed to get through to complain to Migrant Help, and 41% complained to hotel staff. 57 recorded information on whether they got a response and out of these 68% reported that they had received no response to their issue. Even when a response was received 78% of people reported that the issue was unresolved. 29% of people did not make a complaint and gave reasons such not knowing who to complain to, fear of eviction and homelessness, and fear that it would impact negatively on their case or that there would be retribution and things would get worse for them.
HUNGER AND MALNUTRITION

The low quality and inappropriate nature of food was reported in 75% of the people we surveyed.

There are generally no cooking facilities in contingency accommodation, and many people described the food as inedible, reporting that they or their children have lost weight and show signs of being malnourished. In some locations, only cold food is delivered in styrofoam boxes and people are expected to eat in their rooms. In others, food is served in a common area.

Restrictions on food are enforced by staff and food is commonly used as part of the regime of punishment. People seeking asylum are prevented from cooking where there are kitchen areas, and report that they are told that they cannot bring in outside food to eat in their rooms. In all cases, there is very limited choice and in some cases no choice at all about what they eat, some hotels disregard dietary requirements such as halal or vegetarian diets, and food is inappropriate and lacks nutrients.

Pictures of unappetising and unsanitary food sent by people to Refugee Action. Including mouldy bread and a snail found in a salad.
Weaning babies are not provided with appropriate baby food but are expected to eat adult food of low quality which they can’t tolerate and as a result lose weight. In one case, a person seeking asylum reported finding a live worm in the food served and another person held in temporary accommodation reported that he had lost around 10kg, his children had lost weight and were struggling physically and mentally.

Our research found numerous cases of breastfeeding mothers who cannot continue to breastfeed because they are malnourished.

In one case, a woman who was a victim of human trafficking was held in temporary accommodation with her baby, who stopped progressing in her development due to the nature of the food.

Aisha reports that her daughter was more or less living on chips but now she is refusing them and eating very little. She says she can see that her daughter has lost weight.\(^{24}\)

Many cases express the anguish and desperation of parents who can see that their children are losing weight and becoming malnourished due to the low quality of the food.
I gathered many toys for him in the room which left no space for us to eat or move because I am trying to play with him and make him happy…”

The impact of living in detention for long periods of time on children is particularly acute. Numerous reports have underlined the inappropriateness of temporary accommodation for children including the ICIBI report on an investigation carried out from May 2021 to November 2021 which states: “long-term hotel accommodation is not suitable for families with children. A hotel car park does not constitute a safe or appropriate play area, nor does it provide the variety of activities required by children.”

A Children’s Commissioner’s report from 2019 concluded that bed and breakfast accommodation is never an appropriate place for children to call home – not even for 6 weeks.

Out of 62 families and lone parents with children surveyed, 90% reported that hotel was unsuitable for children and 61% reported safeguarding issues regarding their children.

Having no place to play or do homework, and being confined in one room has a clear detrimental impact on children’s development. Although nappies and sanitary products are meant to be made available by the accommodation providers, the amounts are often inadequate. Toys, games, and books are not generally provided, and people do not have money to purchase these items. One person describes how his young son’s development is affected. After a year in a hotel room, the child couldn’t talk or stand, and his father reported that although he was trying to crawl, due to lack of space in the room it was difficult for him to do this.
They feel scared to stay there, they cry when they stay there..."

The cases also reveal the extent of the trauma being experienced by children. A family of 5 who had been given two rooms reported that after a year of living in these conditions the children were afraid to sleep on their own and cried whenever they were separated from their parents.

Another family of 5 described living in two hotel rooms. Their 4-year-old child has complex PTSD and neurological needs after witnessing a bomb explosion in the country they fled. The child finds the hotel environment extremely challenging due to loud noises in the hotel. The parents are struggling with their own mental and physical health issues, including an ongoing health condition, made worse by the non-nutritious food and environment of the hotel.

My son was very motivated and very active and now he is not as active as he was, he has a lack of energy different as he used to be... it is heart-breaking, if we went out of the hotel you could see a different child.”

The isolation and trauma experienced by children is compounded by their lack of access to schools or social activities where they could make friends and pursue education. One third (30%) of the families we surveyed reported that their children could not access education. In some cases children were not registered with schools for the entire period that they had been in the UK. Children were in some cases registered with schools that were far away from the hotel, and were forced to walk hours to access education, underlining the extent to which these spaces are segregated from communities. In several cases, children had stopped attending schools due to distance, lack of transport and inability to buy school uniforms and supplies on the very low levels of asylum support. One child who was due to be sitting his GCSE exams this summer was commuting every day from the hotel to his school which meant leaving the hotel around 7am and not returning until 5.30pm and was exhausted and demoralised by the long journey.

I'm very scared that my baby will be born and I'm only in one room in this hotel.”

Pregnant women often expressed their fear that after their babies are born, they would have to return to living in a single room in the hotel with a new-born and with no support.

The fact that 222 unaccompanied children have gone missing from hotels27 underlines the catastrophic level of safeguarding failure for unaccompanied children who are detained. Our research demonstrates that these cases are not isolated instances but are the result of a complete failure of the Home Office to safeguard children. In one case, two children left a hotel where they had been held alone for months without seeing a solicitor or social worker, to be nearer to family members being held in another hotel. There were no safeguarding measures put in place to ensure their safety by staff. The only contact they had with the Home Office regarded an age dispute launched by the department as despite having documentation that stated that they were both under 18, Home Office staff had estimated their ages to be in their early thirties. It was only through the advocacy of Refugee Action caseworkers that social services were alerted to the children's presence.
DISABILITY AND HEALTH (MENTAL AND PHYSICAL)

People living in this form of de-facto detention often arrive in the UK with complex sets of physical and mental health issues due to their experiences in their countries of origin and the hardships of their journey.

Being held in long-term detention in these conditions can significantly exacerbate these health problems and demonstrates a failure to assess the adequacy of accommodation to their needs.

57% of the people we surveyed reported health issues.

Health problems including diabetes, anaemia, blood pressure and cholesterol are made worse by the low quality of the food available and the fact that food is inappropriate for people with specific dietary requirements means that these conditions worsen rapidly. In one case, a person with high blood sugar was hospitalised as a result of food at the hotel.

Many people reported not being registered with a GP despite spending months in the UK. Some were forced to live in chronic pain due to injuries sustained in their countries of origin or on the journey, for years with no treatment, unable to buy medicine due to the low level of asylum support. Refugee Action have seen cases where Serco instructed a GP surgery not to provide medical support letters where hotel accommodation is deemed inadequate and injurious to their health needs as it was creating too much pressure on their dispersal demand.

Despite an urgent dispersal request, providers failed to relocate a family who had been held in a hotel for 6 months including a child with lymphoma undergoing chemotherapy, another child who suffered from anaemia, and a daughter with a heart condition. People with mobility issues are detained on the top floors of hotels meaning that they are in essence prevented from leaving their rooms.

The Home Office does not collect data on how many people with disabilities are held in de-facto detention, which is a failure of its public sector equalities duty and demonstrates a failure to assess the adequacy of the accommodation to their needs. Our research shows that disabled people are being held for long periods in unsuitable accommodation where they are trapped in their rooms in addition to having no access to medical services and treatment.
The conditions that people are living in compound the traumatic experiences of fleeing war and persecution leading to acute levels of mental health crisis.

71% of our survey respondents reported a deterioration in their mental health. People reported not being able to sleep, experiencing chronic fear, anxiety, low mood, depression and suicidal ideation. There were 48 safeguarding cases in hotels recorded by Refugee Action between March 2021 and December 2022, half of which were related to acute mental health crises. Over 1 in 5 (22%) of respondents to our survey reported that they were afraid for their safety and where there are testimonies from people seeking asylum recorded, the phrase that appears most often is “I am scared”.

Many of these issues are not resolved when people were eventually moved to dispersal or long-term accommodation. Dispersal accommodation, which is run by the same private contractors as contingency accommodation, is often inappropriate and in very poor condition. Many were dispersed away from schools, relatives or where they had been receiving medical treatment – even when specialist treatment was not available elsewhere. Disabled people are often forced to live in non-accessible housing such as one wheelchair user who was trapped on the 11th floor of a block of flats, with no accessible lift. Another wheelchair user was accommodated on the second floor with no way to access the outside.
PROTEST AND RESISTANCE

People in de-facto detention have actively tried to make their lives better and fight for their rights.

They have alerted the outside world to the appalling conditions in both contingency and dispersal accommodation by taking photos, videos and recording their treatment. They have organised to demand better conditions, which is in itself a testament to their strength and resilience. There have been episodes of resistance at hotels including petitions, hunger strikes and protests.

The response of staff to people who have tried to organise for their rights has been inadequate and punitive. 22% of respondents to our survey reported inappropriate or disproportionate behaviour by staff. Staff working in hotels are not trained in trauma or anti-racism and are often in low-paid and temporary employment, yet they are being asked to perform duties beyond their required role such as immigration officials, guards, and caseworkers.

This is a feature of hostile environment policies which bring the border into public spaces and everyday life, requiring healthcare professionals, landlords, employers and banking staff to act as immigration officials. Forcing people seeking asylum to live in hotels for months and years, has created a new access of the hostile environment into private spaces. Housing providers’ staff have formal training, but hotel staff whose job roles don’t include housing people seeking asylum can enact these roles arbitrarily without any proper guidelines and policies. The safety and wellbeing of residents becomes a matter of chance interactions with individual staff, rather than governed by proper guidelines and policies. This means people seeking asylum are forced to live in a pervasive atmosphere of control, threats and intimidation.

22% of respondents to our survey reported inappropriate or disproportionate behaviour by staff.
Protests and reporting of problems with food and unsanitary conditions are often met with threats that the staff will call the police, a disproportionate threat which instrumentalises the fear that reporting will harm the person’s asylum claim. In one case, people seeking asylum holding a peaceful protest were confronted by police who warned them against protesting and told them to leave if they were not happy. Staff who called the police accused the protesters of encouraging other residents to act against the hotel and the ‘authorities’.

When people seeking asylum try to express that the food is not adequate for their needs, they are viewed as ‘complaining’ and accused of ‘making trouble’. Staff have put up signs forbidding anyone from taking pictures of the food in hotels, and in one case when a petition was organised about poor food, the hotel manager reprimanded those who had signed their names, accusing them of upsetting staff. In another case staff told a family that the food is good, they eat it too and so should the family.

Staff enact penalties which are arbitrary and not governed by any formal process. In one case a family with children was punished for ‘complaining’ about food by being banned from the common area, in another people were banned from eating in the restaurant – in effect confined to their rooms as punishment. Communication with staff is hampered as there is little effort to engage with people about what they are experiencing through interpreters.
RACISM AND HATE CRIMES

The conditions that people are living in are a result of hostile and racist policy making which pervades all levels of the asylum system. People who live in this system also describe directly experiencing racism. Shockingly, more than one in 10 (12%) people said that they’d experienced racism, making it the highest reported social issue by survey respondents. What is concerning is even this is likely to be underreported because it is rare for people in the asylum system – especially people new to a country – to identify racism, especially that which is less obvious or structural.

In addition, people seeking asylum are being confronted by a massive rise in attacks by racist groups. The organisation Hope Not Hate recorded 253 incidents outside hotels, hostels and other accommodation centres housing refugees and people seeking asylum in 2022, an increase of 102% on the previous year. This has left people seeking safety living in fear, often with even stricter curfews placed on them for their safety. One person we spoke to reported having to be in their room by 8pm since an attack by a racist group. These activities which have included vocal and at times violent protests by racist actors and groups, are directly linked to the narrative which is being promulgated by the Government and sections of the media.

One respondent to our survey reported the horrifying extent to which these attacks happen:

- The hotel was attacked 3 times from anti-refugee movements. They broke into the hotel through the emergency fire exit. They broke and destroyed things, it was next to our room. The police arrived and checked CCTV and said they would follow it up but then it happened 2 more times.

- Inaccurate and misleading stories of people seeking asylum living in 5-hotels were used in leafleting campaigns by racist groups in Liverpool in the days leading up to a violent attack on a hotel.

- Racist language used about asylum seekers such as ‘illegal migrant’ embolden and encourage racist groups in their campaigns of terror against people living in de-facto detention.

- Politicians must take responsibility for the fact that their rhetoric directly impacts the safety of people seeking sanctuary and cease all racist attacks.

Attacks on army barracks and hotels by racist groups have left people living in fear.
3. WHO PROFITS?

The Government claims that the detention of people seeking asylum in contingency accommodation occurs as a result of the system being overwhelmed by arrivals and the lack of availability of housing by which they mean low-cost housing that is procured by the private providers. However, our analysis of the changes in asylum accommodation over time demonstrates that the Government is subsidising private contractors to run indefinite de-facto detention in hotels at a profit.

Asylum accommodation and support contracts are worth a total £4 billion over ten years and the Home Office paid an estimated 28% more to providers in their first year of operation. Although the Home Office contracts the providers to cater for people seeking asylum who need to be housed by law, the providers’ contracts only require them to provide a total of 1,750 places in long-term accommodation. The Home Office enables the private providers to use hotels and other contingency accommodation to meet the additional demand.

At the end of 2019, out of a total of 47,244 people in accommodation support 94% (44,506) were in dispersal accommodation and 6% (2,738) in contingency accommodation. In 2020 the National Audit Office reported that the average time that accommodated people seeking asylum spent in initial accommodation before being rehoused in longer-term accommodation was 26 days. Since then the use of contingency accommodation has risen dramatically, and people are spending much longer periods of time in detention. By the end of 2022 the number of people in contingency accommodation had risen to 49,493, an increase of 1707%. By October 2022 the Government was paying contractors £5.6 million per day to detain people seeking asylum in hotels.
There is little to no accountability for the private providers, who have been the subject of numerous complaints yet continue to be awarded contracts worth billions. In 2016, accounts published by Companies House showed that Clearsprings paid one of its executives £960,000 in the same year that there were 59 complaints about the company, including reports that people seeking asylum were forced to wear red armbands in order to get food at an accommodation centre in Wales.33

Serco is a company with a professed commitment to upholding human rights, including in the area of asylum accommodation.34 It appears to be fully aware of the gravity of human rights abuses, stating on its website: “People whose rights are denied and abused may suffer mental and physical anguish and harm”.35 The company has been the subject of numerous scandals and complaints and has been fined millions for its shortcomings on the accommodation it provides for people seeking asylum.36

Clearsprings annual financial reports for the year ending January 2022 show that the company’s year profit before tax increased by 580% in one year from £5,086,588 to £34,589,745. The report lists the Home Office as the largest contract held by the company and states that the rise in profits is due to “demand for accommodation for people seeking asylum …due to high levels of political and economic turmoil in many countries”.37 Mears Group financial statements list adjusted profits before tax at 22.4 million38 for the year ending December 2021, and Serco listed an operating profit in year end 2022 of £217.6 million, an increase of 1 million from the previous year.39

While there are currently enormous demands on social housing, the system that is in place funnels taxpayers money into companies that profit from de-facto detention rather than supporting local authorities to provide appropriate housing in the community. Dispersal to appropriate accommodation is hampered by this profit driven system. In December 2020, the High court found the economic incentives within the contracts the Home Office has with its private accommodation contractors’ risks a negative impact on disabled people as their accommodation needs are less profitable (or even unprofitable).40

In addition, the fact that local authorities do not receive any additional funds for people held in temporary accommodation, contributes to the conditions that mean that they can’t access services and also means that schools, housing, and medical services continue to be underfunded at a local level.
4. DETENTION CENTRES

The government plans to end hotel accommodation by massively expanding the detention estate in the form of camps or detention centres – referred to as ‘accommodation centres’. Numerous studies and reports have demonstrated the illegality and cruelty of holding people who came to the UK seeking safety in what are essentially detention camps, and crises such as those at Napier and Manston demonstrate that the problems associated with institutional accommodation are only worsened exponentially when it is carried out on a mass scale.41 The All Party Parliamentary Group on Immigration Detention’s report on conditions at Napier and Penally in December 2021 found: “Large-scale and institutional in nature, the sites replicate many of the features found in detained settings – including visible security measures, surveillance, shared living quarters, reduced levels of privacy and access to healthcare, legal advice and means of communication, and isolation from the wider community. In the APPG Inquiry Panel’s view, they are most accurately described as ‘quasi-detention’.”42

Government policy and legislation are set to compound these problems in the future. The Nationality and Borders Act 2022, which deems people seeking asylums’ claims as ‘inadmissible’ means that they will spend more time in detention – 6 months or more – before they can be ‘admitted’ into the UK’s asylum system, whereupon they may have to wait months or years for their claim to be processed. The Government’s 2023 bill which aims to subject people seeking asylum who are forced to cross the channel to detention and deportation will also necessitate a massive increase in indefinite detention. The Home Office has also removed limits on how long people can be detained in camps, and recent changes to accommodation policy have also included a significant weakening of protections for adults at risk, who will no longer be assessed in places like Manston.43
The Government seeks to contract the same providers who were responsible for the crises at Manston and Napier and are currently profiting from the extra-legal detention of people seeking asylum in hotels, to run these camps. Clearspings financial statements, for example, state that Clearspings will be “well placed” to bid for new accommodation contracts tendered by the Home Office as a result of the expansion of accommodation centres in the April 2021 New Plan for Immigration and the Nationality and Borders Act 2022.44

The numbers of people the Government is proposing to detain in camps will necessitate a massive expansion of these institutions and in effect comprise a new prison-system in the UK. 400 people seeking asylum were detained at Napier Barracks in Folkestone at its peak in January 2021 while the proposed detention camp at Linton-on-Ouse was to provide full-board accommodation for 1,500 single men for up to six months. To detain the current numbers in contingency accommodation, the Home Office would need to procure 26 Lintons (or 100 Napiers). This would equate to 3-4 accommodation centres on the scale of Linton per region if they were divided equally across the UK.45

It is likely that the numbers of people seeking asylum in detention and time periods will increase dramatically as will the costs. The government has released procurement information that states that they aim to spend £70 million on accommodation centres this year, however the proposed centre at Linton was contracted to Serco at a cost of £32.8m for two years.46 This means that the expansion of detention proposed by the current government will not only be a human rights catastrophe, but also incredibly costly. It will continue to be a system that generates profits for private contractors at an estimated cost of £1.4bn for six months.47
There is an alternative to mass detention of people seeking asylum in institutional accommodation.

Housing people seeking asylum in the community is not only humane and legal, but also workable. Regions and cities across the UK are already working with people seeking asylums and NGOs to develop programmes of support and sanctuary that can be a model for service delivery. Standards for asylum seeker housing should be brought into line with those of the rest of the population and adjusted for their specific needs – you can read Refugee Action’s accommodation principles here.

In order not to place further stress on social housing, the Government should work with and fund local authorities and NGOs to run integrated housing, support, and legal advice in communities. Models of community accommodation should be developed and piloted, and lessons learned from community sponsorship and resettlement programmes that include community housing.

Local initiatives such as those being trialled in London, an area with huge demand for social housing, can be part of the solution to this. These include schemes where not for profit and third sector organisations have teamed up with councils to provide innovative solutions such as building appropriate independent modular housing and forming partnerships to buy homes to provide stable accommodation for groups facing homelessness and social exclusion. Other organisations locate homes across London with owners willing to rent them to households facing homelessness.
While institutional accommodation continues to exist, accountability and reporting mechanisms should be put in place immediately with financial penalties for providers who fail to comply.

The profit-driven model used to accommodate asylum seekers in temporary accommodation in hotels is linked to and shares features with the crisis in social housing in the UK. Homelessness charities have reported that the sharp increase in homelessness rates has been caused by the government’s failure to invest in quality, affordable housing. As a result of this spending on temporary accommodation contracted to private companies has become a lucrative business and risen by 78% in five years.\(^51\) Research conducted by Shelter shows that 86% of this money is flowing directly to private providers, most of whom are unregulated.\(^52\) Housing charities have called for a six-week limit on temporary accommodation for families with children due to the disastrous impact it has on their lives, but although this is in force, it is not being applied in a large number of cases. In addition, changes to homelessness law in 2022 removed the 6-week time limit to people who have been in the UK for less than two years,\(^53\) a policy change which will disproportionately impact on refugees, migrants and people seeking asylum.

People seeking asylum are therefore a part of the broader UK population who need safe, appropriate, and high-quality housing but are being failed by the policies of the current government. Solutions to a housing crisis which disproportionately affects migrants, people subject to the hostile environment, refugees and people seeking asylum must be funded by government who should work with councils to invest in a new generation of decent, affordable social homes.\(^54\)
CONCLUSION

Asylum accommodation is not a broken system but one that is hostile by design.

In order for it to be transformed we need to radically re-think the fundamentals of a system in which private contractors are subsidised by the Government to run a system of violence, punishment, and control – one that disproportionately impacts on people of colour and clearly bears all the hallmarks of racism and segregation. Detention centres will institutionalise the worse aspects of asylum accommodation, keeping people detained for long periods in remote locations, in centres run by staff with inadequate training, and with no access to community which further entrenches their isolation and lack of safety.

Detention centres will only serve to decrease community cohesion and make people more vulnerable to racist attacks. These policies are connected to the Government’s construction of a hostile environment that discriminates against migrants and people of colour and the shifting of government funding from local authorities and public services to private companies. However, this is being resisted.

The resilience of people inside the carceral asylum system, and the actions of solidarity groups across the country show what is possible and necessary. Building a refugee protection system where people fleeing persecution and conflict are treated with dignity, and housed in safety, so that they can rebuild their lives in communities where they belong.
RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Housing people seeking asylum in high quality and appropriate accommodation in communities is workable and just.

2. Standards for asylum seeker housing should be brought into line with those of the rest of the population and adjusted for their specific needs. You can read Refugee Action’s accommodation principles here.

3. The Government should work with and fund local authorities and NGOs to run integrated housing, support, and legal advice in communities and address the crisis in social housing.
Endnotes

1. *Housing-Association-Standards*
2. *Dozens of At-Risk Asylum Seekers Died During Pandemic Amid Alleged Safeguarding Failings – Liberty Investigates, June 2022.*
4. *Serco, Justice Services.*
7. *AIRE Contract Schedule 2*
13. *There Are Alternatives, p. 3.*
15. *Legal Aid for Asylum Seekers is Broken – Free Movement, January 2023 January 2023.*
16. *‘Thousands of Asylum Seekers Living in Hotels Cannot be Told Refugee Status’ – The Independent, January 2023.*
21. *AIRE Contract Schedule 2*
23. *‘Campaigners Slam ‘Inedible and Terrible’ Food Being Given to People Seeking Asylum at Hotels – Daily Mail Online, February 2023.*
24. *Names have been changed to protect confidentiality.*
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The Short-term Holding Facility (Amendment) Rules 2022 (legislation.gov.uk)


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The Homelessness (Suitability of Accommodation) (Amendment) (England) Order 2022 (legislation.gov.uk)

Cashing In – Shelter.

Housing-Association-Standards
HUMANITY CAN WIN

REFUGEE ACTION