



Far from a home:

why asylum accommodation
needs reform

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“Even now, when I sleep in my own bed, my mind jumps all the way back to being in that accommodation. I can’t sleep as I think about people who are there now.”

“The main things we need as humans: we need to feel like we belong, we have a route, we have people around us who care and want to be around us.”

Refugee and British Red Cross staff member

Acknowledgements

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1. Foreword

When I was first sent to asylum accommodation it was a dark night in a foreign place and I was not well. My eyesight was poor, and I was dropped in an unknown place with only £20 in hand. I didn't know where to go, who to ask for help or even the nearest place to get food - I was terrified.

The Home Office and its accommodation providers were aware of my serious health conditions. But I was allocated accommodation that was dangerous and unsuitable for me. My lawyer, MP and social worker all helped to fight for safe accommodation for me. I often wonder what would have happened to me if I didn't have these advocates.

I was lucky to have a GP and health team who understood how closely linked where we live, and sleep, is with our health. I often worry about what happens to people who cannot express themselves, those who are afraid, who can't read or write, who can't speak English or who don't have people to support them.

We are treated like we don't matter and that hurts. Nobody plans to leave their home countries to seek asylum. Our situations are not in our control, but we get blamed and scorned for seeking safety.

My fellow men, women and children seeking asylum who are stuck in hostels, Initial Accommodation centres and military bases are struggling. We have felt the impact of poor living conditions and cramped spaces during the pandemic. The treatment given to people who are running away from rape, torture, persecution and war is making us relive our traumas.

Security and privacy is of great concern. Before, the housing provider used to text, call or send letters ahead of an inspection but now they just turn up unannounced and if we take any time to answer the door, they enter without our consent.

It's even more daunting if you're a mother with a baby. If you're stuck in an isolated accommodation centre, in a small room with your baby, without independence and the money to buy the things they need, with no space to play or support to keep yourself well as a mother. We are so isolated and lonely, and this treatment is devastating.

We thrive in our communities if given the chance. Making sure this happens should be a priority in the UK Government's plans to reform the asylum system, rather than putting us into centres separated off from the rest of the world.

If all people seeking asylum could live in communities, it would help us integrate and play active roles in our local communities and society. Many of us make lifelong friends and help with charity work at foodbanks, with faith groups, and dedicate our time with community groups. And once we are allowed to work, we work hard and pay taxes just like anyone else.

Most of all, showing humanity to people fleeing persecution is the right thing to do. We are all human beings and deserve to live in dignity and safety.

I write this as a member of the VOICES Network, a network of people with experience of seeking asylum who speak out and share our experiences to shape services, stories and policy for the better. Those of us who have lived through the asylum process are best placed to offer insights to improve it. As VOICES Ambassadors, we speak up with the hope that others do not have to go through the same struggles we have.

Saffie

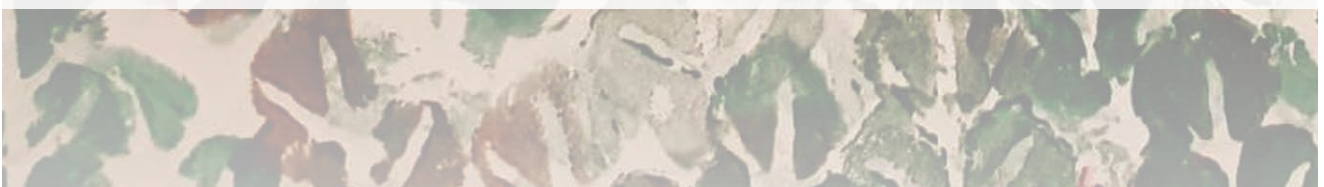
Ambassador for the VOICES Network, Glasgow



About the VOICES Network

The VOICES Network brings together people with experience of the issues that affect refugees and people seeking asylum. Launched in 2018, it brings together ambassadors in Birmingham, Derby, Glasgow, Leeds, Leicester, London, Sheffield, the South-East of England and across Wales. The VOICES Network is supported by the British Red Cross.

With training and support, VOICES ambassadors work together to speak out about issues that affect refugees and people seeking asylum. Sharing their own experiences, they advocate to change policy, use the media to change points of view and support the British Red Cross and others to improve services through expert feedback.



2. Executive summary

Providing the right support that people need while waiting for a decision on their application should be a core part of a compassionate and fair asylum system. This should include ensuring that people are given access to clean and well-maintained accommodation where they feel safe and secure. Where it works best, communities are empowered to welcome people, creating an environment that enables them to fully engage with the asylum process.

Yet for an increasing number of people who are seeking asylum in the UK, their experiences involve living for months and even years in accommodation that falls far short of these standards.

This has been caused by a combination of increasing delays before decisions are made on asylum applications, the Home Office not securing enough community dispersal accommodation and, more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic increasing demand for housing.

This rapid review tells the story of what is happening in accommodation provided by the Home Office, the impact it is having on the people living there, and why addressing this issue should be a priority in the upcoming reform of the asylum system.

It is drawn from the experiences of over 100 people living in asylum accommodation, including in military barracks, as well as insights from British Red Cross staff and volunteers who are supporting thousands of people each year.

We found that isolation, poor facilities and barriers to accessing support, particularly healthcare, are having a serious, negative impact on the mental health and wellbeing of men, women and children living in asylum accommodation. And that political, operational and policy decisions about accommodation provision often do not take into account, or in some cases ignore, people's needs and the trauma they have experienced.

We heard from people living in the same clothes for weeks as they were not given financial

support or basic items such as clothing; survivors of trafficking placed in large, mixed-gender hostels where they were afraid to leave their rooms; parents desperately worried about their children; and people who were feeling suicidal and had attempted suicide. We also heard about requests for help, including medical attention, being ignored or not acted on until after a serious incident had taken place, including in situations where people's lives were at risk.

Alongside providing more safe and legal routes for people to reach the UK, and reducing delays in asylum decision-making, addressing the barriers to providing safe, suitable accommodation for people seeking asylum in the UK should be a priority within any reform of the asylum system.

However, the UK Government's recent proposals for asylum reform, as set out in the *New Plan for Immigration*¹, fall short of achieving this. Instead, the proposals include the introduction of reception centres as a form of accommodation for people applying for asylum in the UK after arriving irregularly. It is unclear how many people would be housed in these centres but given the current lack of safe and legal routes to seek asylum in the UK, the changes are likely to affect most people seeking asylum here, including families with young children.

The UK Government's *New Plan for Immigration* says reception centres would "provide basic accommodation and process claims", suggesting that rather than being a short-term option, people would be kept there throughout the asylum process. Given the significant delays in making asylum decisions, men, women and children could potentially find themselves living in such centres for several months, if not years.

We believe this would be a mistake.

As we have witnessed in the use of military barracks, institutional-style accommodation can have significant negative impacts on people's mental and physical health, as well

¹ UK Government (2021), *New Plan for Immigration: policy statement* <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/new-plan-for-immigration/new-plan-for-immigration-policy-statement-accessible>

as isolating people seeking asylum from wider communities, ultimately reducing social integration and cohesion.

These are families and individuals who need our protection and should have a safe place to live. A more compassionate and effective asylum

system would give people accommodation within communities that allows for better social integration, access to education and healthcare, and creates an environment for people to engage fully with the asylum process and their own application.



Young people from the British Red Cross surviving to thriving project in Leeds take part in an art workshop

Key findings

The conclusion from this rapid review is that too many people living in asylum accommodation are living in inappropriate housing where they do not feel safe. **This is having a serious, negative impact on the mental health and wellbeing of men, women and children.**

The issues people are facing, ranging from unsuitable accommodation to unmet personal needs and to poor resolution of complaints, are a consequence of political, operational and policy decisions taken by the UK Government and its contracted providers in the asylum accommodation system.

There has also been an increase in the demand for asylum accommodation, which has increased the number of people living in inappropriate places. While this has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, it has its roots in underlying systemic issues with asylum claim processing and dispersal of individuals, including:

- The **increasing delays since 2018 in making decisions on asylum applications** prior to the Covid-19 pandemic are resulting in people staying in asylum accommodation for longer periods.
 - **While fewer people have been entering the UK asylum system during the Covid-19 pandemic, fewer people have also been leaving asylum accommodation** due to reductions in the number of asylum decisions being made and fewer people being moved on when a determination on an asylum claim has been made.
 - **Fundamentally, there is not enough asylum dispersal accommodation available, or enough flexibility within the system** to cope with the increase in demand for asylum accommodation. Without community accommodation to move on to, blockages are created earlier and throughout the system. This slows the flow of people through the asylum estate and leads to more and more people being housed in inappropriate places for longer periods of time.
- The result is that accommodation is regularly not meeting the basic standards that should be expected. In particular, we found that:
- When people first enter asylum accommodation, they are **not given financial support or basic items such as clothing**, and so have to make do with the few things they possess. This leaves people without clean or warm clothing.
 - **Decisions about where to accommodate people often do not reflect individual needs**, even when these needs are well known. For others, ineffective health screening and barriers to accessing healthcare mean that health needs and vulnerabilities may not be identified.
 - **Isolation, poor accommodation and barriers to accessing healthcare have contributed to a serious deterioration in mental health** and people's experiences in their accommodation and the asylum system can reinforce past trauma. Between January 2020 and early February 2021, British Red Cross teams have supported over 400 individuals living in asylum accommodation who have references to suicidal ideation or attempts recorded in their case notes.
 - **People living in the repurposed barracks feel unsafe, unwell and imprisoned.** For some, this is directly linked to military barracks being inappropriate places to accommodate people seeking asylum.
 - Families and single people housed in hostels, hotels and other forms of emergency accommodation **have been isolated in a room, in some cases without any natural light, for many months.**
 - **When people raise concerns about disrepair, safety or other issues in their accommodation, they do not feel that action is taken.**

Recommendations: reforming asylum accommodation

Addressing the shortage of adequate asylum accommodation:

- The Home Office should, as a matter of urgency, **address the supply of suitable asylum accommodation, and work with local authorities, devolved governments, voluntary sector organisations and others to expand community dispersal accommodation** to increase the supply and improve the quality of housing for people seeking asylum.
- **In the short term, the Home Office should put in place procedures to accelerate asylum applications by people from countries with high overall grant rates, such as Eritrea and Syria.** Given the impact that Covid-19 has had on the asylum system and the backlog of cases, these procedures shouldn't necessitate full consideration of claims. Once necessary security and identity checks have been carried out, the Home Office should quickly move to make positive decisions.
- **In the medium term, the Home Office should put improving asylum decision-making at the heart of its plans for reform of the asylum system.** Decisions should be made as quickly as possible and should be right first time.

Improving the quality of asylum accommodation:

- **The Home Office should immediately end the use of military barracks as asylum accommodation** and move people into safe and suitable housing in the community.
- **The UK Government should introduce a formal, independent inspection regime for asylum support accommodation² with publicly available reports,** in order to monitor the quality and effectiveness of support provided and improve transparency and accountability.

- **The Home Office and its providers should publish a plan for moving people out of hotels into community dispersal accommodation that is clean, safe and appropriate to their needs.**

Meeting people's needs in accommodation:

- **The Home Office and accommodation providers should ensure people's needs are met at all stages of the asylum process** - and this includes properly addressing complaints and prioritising effective safeguarding.

In addition to meeting the existing standards in asylum accommodation, they should:

- **Carry out health and vulnerability screenings when a person first enters the asylum support system,** using a screening tool such as the one developed by UNHCR-IDC³, to ensure that accommodation meets people's needs.
- Ensure that everyone accommodated in the asylum support system is **registered with a GP and has access to appropriate mental health support and secondary healthcare.**
- Provide everyone in asylum support accommodation with **financial support and the facilities to cater for themselves.**
- Provide **internet access throughout asylum accommodation** and provide access to mobile phones to residents.
- Ensure people's **privacy is respected and that no-one is forced to share a bedroom** with an unrelated adult.
- Ensure that people are **well informed and supported, and that issues and concerns are handled effectively and transparently.**

² In line with the Home Office's recent work with the Care Quality Commission to regulate the support provided to survivors of trafficking under the Victim Care Contracts [cqc.org.uk/news/stories/how-we-inspect-services-victims-human-trafficking-modern-slavery](https://www.cqc.org.uk/news/stories/how-we-inspect-services-victims-human-trafficking-modern-slavery)

³ UNHCR-IDC (2016), Vulnerability Screening Tool - Identifying and addressing vulnerability: a tool for asylum and migration systems [unhcr.org/uk/protection/detention/57fe30b14/unhcr-idc-vulnerability-screening-tool-identifying-addressing-vulnerability.html](https://www.unhcr.org/uk/protection/detention/57fe30b14/unhcr-idc-vulnerability-screening-tool-identifying-addressing-vulnerability.html)

3. Glossary

Contingency Accommodation: is a catch-all term to describe any form of accommodation that is used to make up for a shortage of housing that should be provided.

Dispersal Accommodation: is longer-term temporary accommodation managed by accommodation providers on behalf of the Home Office. Asylum seekers will normally be able to stay in dispersal accommodation until their asylum claim has been fully considered.

Initial Accommodation: is short-term housing, usually in a hostel or hotel-type environment. It is for people who need accommodation urgently, before their support applications have been fully assessed and longer-term accommodation can be arranged. The amount of time people stay in Initial Accommodation can vary, but Home Office materials state that three to four weeks would be the usual period that asylum seekers should live in such accommodation, before they are moved on to dispersal accommodation.⁴

Person seeking asylum: is a person who has left their country of origin to seek protection in another country, often described as an 'asylum seeker'. A person seeking asylum has not yet been legally recognised as a refugee and is waiting to receive a decision on their asylum claim. People seeking asylum have a legal right to stay in the UK while waiting for a decision.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: is caused by very stressful, frightening or distressing events⁵. Someone with PTSD often relives the traumatic event through nightmares and flashbacks, and may experience feelings of isolation, irritability and guilt. They may also have problems sleeping, such as insomnia.

Refugee: is someone who has proven that they would be at risk if returned to their home country, has had their claim for asylum accepted by the UK Government and can now stay in the UK either long term or indefinitely.

Section 95 support: people seeking asylum who are facing destitution, can apply for accommodation and support while their asylum application is considered. This is often referred to as Section 95 support (defined in Section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999). The application can be for subsistence and accommodation or for subsistence only.

Section 98 support: is a form of emergency support. While an application for Section 95 support is being considered, the Home Office can offer what is known as Section 98 support (defined in Section 98 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999). This will be offered if a person may be destitute, or is likely to become destitute, while the Section 95 application is being considered. People receiving Section 98 support are housed in Initial Accommodation.

Survivor of trafficking: is used in this report to describe people who have experienced human trafficking, modern slavery or other exploitative situations, including forced and compulsory labour, sexual exploitation and forced criminality.

4 A Home Office Guide to Living in Asylum Accommodation assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/821324/Pack_A_-_English_-_Web.pdf

5 NHS (2018), Overview - Post-traumatic stress disorder nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/overview/

4. Background

Families and individuals seeking asylum have been forced to flee their homes because they have experienced horrors many of us could not even imagine. Sometimes overnight, they must make the decision to leave behind jobs, communities and loved ones, in the hope of finding safety.

Right now, 1% of the world's population – or one in 97 people – are forcibly displaced, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees⁶. This number has nearly doubled compared to ten years ago, and 40% of this group are children.

Around 90% of displaced people are hosted in developing countries - often neighbouring or close to the country they have fled. The UK receives a very small proportion of the applications for asylum worldwide, less than 1% in total.

When someone applies for asylum within the UK, they need to attend a screening interview to collect basic information about their identity and journey, and to take biometric details like fingerprints. After this, usually some months later, people have a longer, more detailed interview. According to the latest statistics from the Home Office, most people wait more than six months for a decision on their application, in some cases people wait years.

While they wait for a decision, **people seeking asylum are not allowed to work and are not allowed to rent accommodation without permission. They are also not allowed to access welfare benefits, nor to get help from a Local Authority if they are homeless.**

What is asylum support?

If someone seeking asylum is facing destitution and homelessness, they can apply to the Home Office for 'Asylum Support'. Under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, the Home Office has a duty to provide accommodation and/or financial support to anyone applying for asylum who would otherwise be destitute. **Accommodation is**

provided on a no-choice basis, which means people cannot choose where in the UK they will be accommodated, although discretion can be used to ensure people can access specialist support, such as medical treatment.

There is usually no face-to-face assessment when someone applies for asylum support. People usually have to complete a 33-page application form in English and provide additional supporting evidence to prove that they are 'destitute'. This might include bank statements, or letters from night shelters or acquaintances who have provided a place to sleep. The Home Office then considers this application and decides whether to grant accommodation and support.

If someone is facing immediate homelessness, the Home Office should provide emergency support. This is often called 'Initial Accommodation' and is usually provided in a full-board hostel while the person's application for asylum support is considered.

After staying in Initial Accommodation, people are moved to 'dispersal accommodation' around the UK, which is usually provided in shared housing with other people seeking asylum. This process relies on Local Authorities across England, Scotland and Wales⁷ agreeing for people to be moved into accommodation in their areas.

Since 2012, the Home Office has outsourced the procurement and management of asylum accommodation to private companies. The contracts cover certain regions, with the contract holders responsible for sourcing and managing accommodation within the different areas.

The statement of requirements connected to the contracts set out basic requirements for asylum support accommodation standards and the services provided including that the accommodation is "safe, habitable, fit for purpose and correctly equipped"⁸.

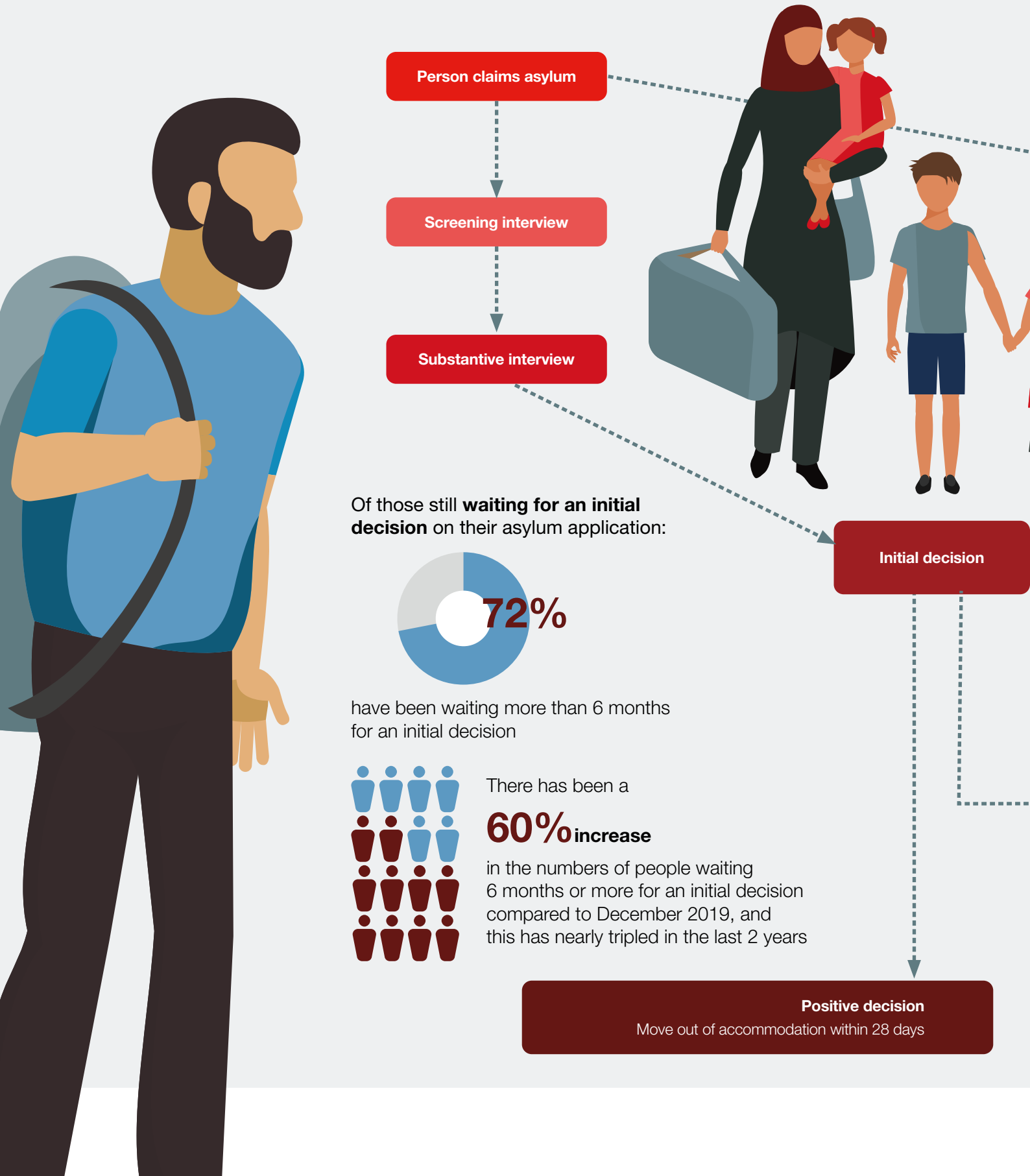
6 UNHCR (2020) Annual Global Trends Report <https://www.unhcr.org/ua/en/23255-1-of-humanity-displaced-unhcr-global-trends-report.html>

7 People who apply for asylum support in Northern Ireland are accommodated in Belfast where the Home Office and providers work with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive

8 The Home Office, COMPASS Project, Schedule 2: Accommodation & Transport - Statement of Requirements data.gov.uk/data/contracts-finder-archive/download/503103/ce88be88-62c0-4491-b903-5c6b02cc368c

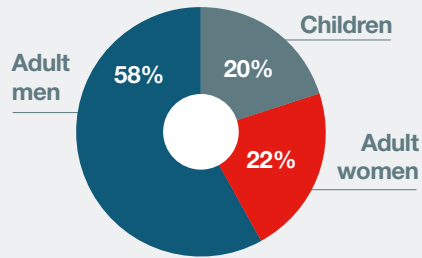
Figure 1: The asylum system

Home Office statistics for the year ending 31st December 2020 show that:

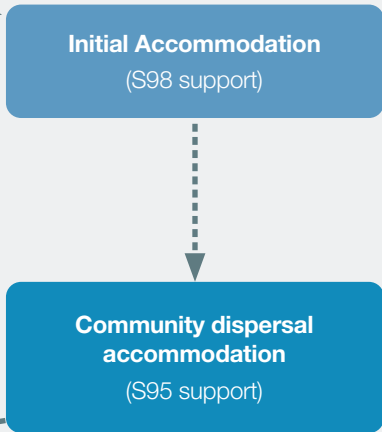
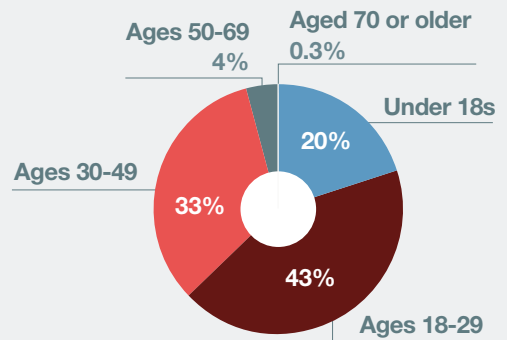


Of the total number of asylum applications

Sex:



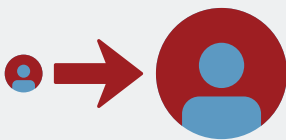
Age:



Of those in receipt of support



19% are receiving support **under Section 98** in Initial Accommodation



There has been a **347%** increase in the number of people on **Section 98 support** compared to the same time in 2019



71% are receiving **support under Section 95**

Refusal decision
Move out of accommodation within 21 days unless submitting an appeal

Long-standing concerns about asylum accommodation

There have been many detailed reports over several years raising concerns about poor quality, unsanitary and, in some cases, unsafe accommodation provided to people seeking asylum⁹. Among other serious issues, these reports have described vermin-infested accommodation, ceilings falling in, pregnant women struggling to access healthcare and survivors of torture and human trafficking being forced to share a bedroom with strangers.

In 2019, the Home Office awarded new contracts to three companies – Serco, Mears Group and Clearsprings Ready Homes – to source, provide and maintain accommodation for people seeking asylum. At the same time, a charity called Migrant Help was contracted to provide advice and information, as well as handling applications for asylum support and complaints or issues reported about accommodation. The transition to the new contracts was associated with several issues, including the quality and availability of asylum support accommodation and people's access to advice and support¹⁰.

From the start of the new contracts there was a sharp rise in the use of emergency forms of asylum support accommodation across the UK, including hostels, B&Bs and hotels. By February 2020, there were nearly 1,600 people seeking asylum being housed in temporary hotels and hostels, including families with young children¹¹. In one area, there was no agreement in place for a transition between the former accommodation provider Jomast and the new provider Mears Group at the time the contracts came into force. When negotiations between the providers broke down, people found themselves in properties with

the water and heating turned off and some were relocated at short notice and in some cases to places with no furniture, electricity or heating¹².

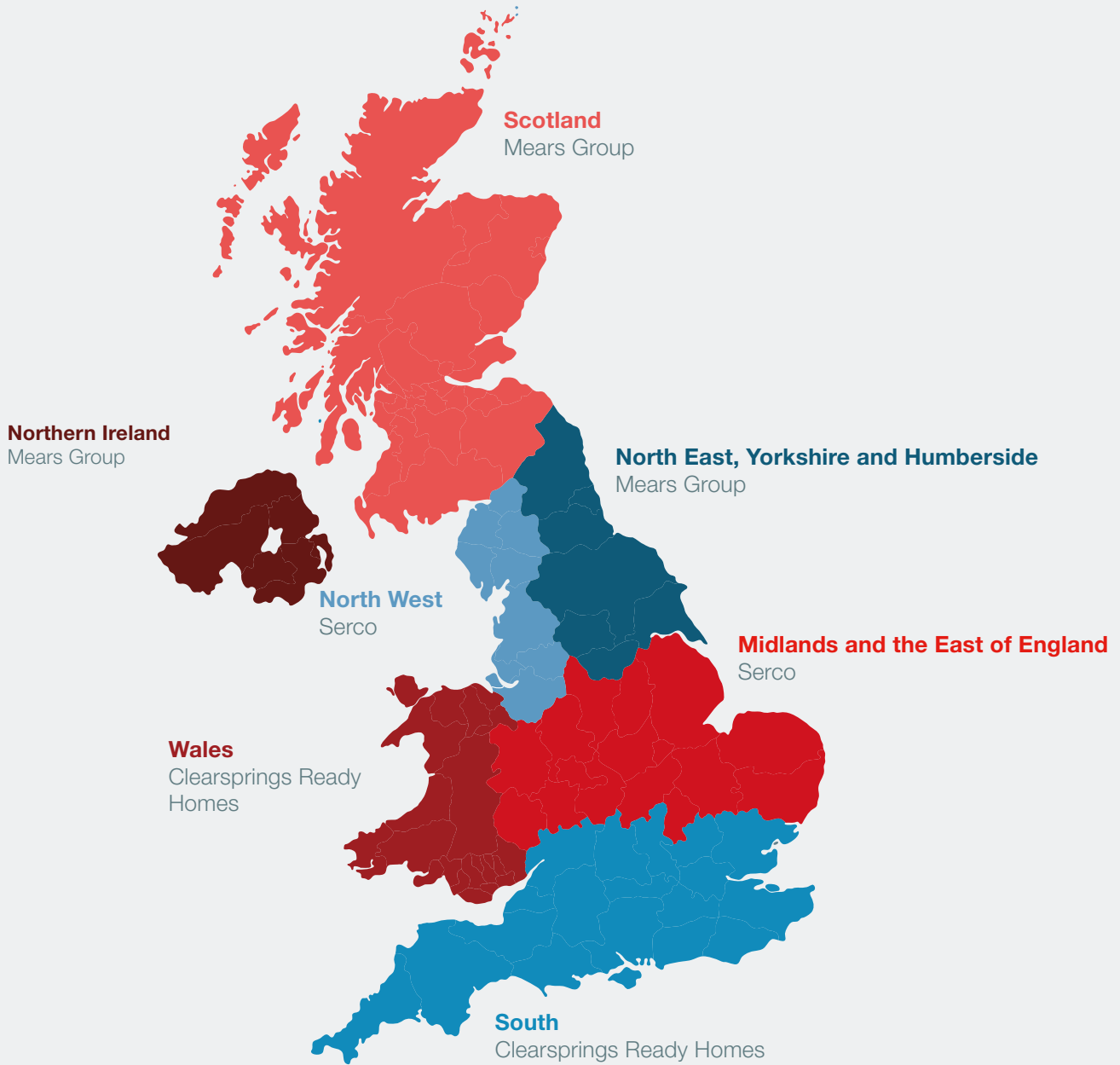
In the midst of these significant challenges, the asylum support system was required to step up provision in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Shortly after the first UK lockdowns were announced in March 2020, the UK Government took the welcome decision not to evict people from asylum accommodation following an asylum decision, for at least three months. While evictions restarted in summer 2020, they have been at a much lower rate than normal due to fewer decisions on asylum applications being made, and restrictions on international travel meaning more people have continued to be eligible for support after a negative asylum decision.

This has resulted in the Home Office needing to provide accommodation for an increasing number of people. So, despite fewer people entering the asylum system in the first place¹³, at the end of 2020 there was a 24% increase in the number of people accommodated compared to the start of the pandemic, with an additional 11,675 men, women and children in asylum accommodation. With the available dispersal accommodation already at capacity, this led the Home Office and its providers to depend on 'contingency' accommodation such as hotels, hostels and, more recently, disused military barracks.

In addition, people receiving asylum support are usually accommodated in houses of multiple occupancy and are often required to share a bedroom with a stranger. This made it impossible for people to socially distance to prevent themselves, and each other, from catching the virus.

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- 9 House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee (2020) Home Office Preparedness for Covid-19 (Coronavirus) institutional accommodation <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmhaff/562/56202.htm>; Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (2018), An inspection of the Home Office's management of asylum accommodation provision gov.uk/government/publications/an-inspection-of-the-home-offices-management-of-asylum-accommodation-provision; House of Commons Home Affairs Committee (2017), Asylum Accommodation: Twelfth Report of Session 2016–17 publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmhaff/637/637.pdf
- 10 Asylum Matters (2020), Wake Up Call: How government contracts fail people seeking asylum asylummatters.org/2020/07/03/wake-up-call/
- 11 For more information see Asylum Matters (2020), Wake Up Call: How government contracts fail people seeking asylum asylummatters.org/2020/07/03/wake-up-call/
- 12 For more information see Wake Up Call: How government contracts fail people seeking asylum (2020) asylummatters.org/2020/07/03/wake-up-call/
- 13 Home Office (2020), Immigration statistics, year ending December 2020 gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-statistics-year-ending-december-2020

Figure 2: Map of areas of asylum support provision in the UK



The UK Government's proposals

In March 2021, the UK Government published a Policy Statement called *New Plan for Immigration*. The Policy Statement contains a number of proposals for changes to the UK's asylum and immigration systems. The proposals cover most of the asylum process and, if implemented, would have significant implications for many people who seek protection in the UK.

The impact would be to create two different asylum processes and determine which system would be applied to people arriving in the UK. This includes the introduction of reception centres. This would be a significant change to the current dispersal policy that focuses on providing accommodation within communities across the UK.

The Policy Statement does not set out in detail what these reception centres would look like or where they would be located, nor does it say whether people would be accommodated in them for the entirety of their asylum process. However, it is proposed that the centres would “provide basic accommodation” and “allow for decisions and any appeals following substantive rejection of an asylum claim to be processed fairly and quickly onsite.”¹⁴ Given the delays in the asylum system, it is possible that men, women and children could be living in such centres for several months, potentially in remote locations.

As is set out in the following report, the introduction of reception centres risks reducing contact between communities, increasing social isolation, and harming the health and wellbeing of people seeking asylum in the UK.

14 UK Government (2021), *New Plan for Immigration: policy statement*, 24 March 2021, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/972517/CCS207_CCS0820091708-001_Sovereign_Borders_Web_Accessible.pdf

5. Living in ‘Initial Accommodation’

Families and single people housed in hostels, hotels and other forms of emergency accommodation have been isolated in a room, in some cases without any natural light, for many months. The Home Office guide to living in asylum accommodation describes a stay of three to four weeks in Initial Accommodation as ‘normal’¹⁵ but during the pandemic people have spent up to 12 months in Initial Accommodation, without any financial support.

Since the outset of the pandemic, the number of people housed in temporary forms of asylum support accommodation has drastically increased. **By December 2020, around one in every five people being accommodated by the Home Office was living in a hostel, B&B or hotel; a 347% increase compared to the same time in 2019**¹⁶. Accommodation providers have also made use of other forms of accommodation including student halls and hostels.

Where people live and sleep is a vital part of their lives and is closely connected to their health and wellbeing¹⁷.

Access to food, clothing and other essential items

People receiving asylum support have had to prove to the Home Office that they are destitute, meaning that they do not have any financial support: no savings, no income, no high value items or other forms of income. Often, the British Red Cross is supporting people living in asylum support accommodation who have few possessions, apart from the clothes they are currently wearing.

The support provided in ‘full-board’ Initial Accommodation includes three meals per day, toiletries and access to laundry services. Voluntary sector organisations have stepped in to provide clothing and other essential provisions to people in full board accommodation, which is especially important given the need for warm clothing over winter. **Some people we spoke to for this research had gone without clean clothes, due to an inadequate supply of warm clothing, while others had struggled to access laundry facilities.**

Until recently, people being housed in full board accommodation received no financial support at all. This leaves people with no freedom to meet their needs with dignity, and unable to travel to essential appointments or buy essential items that are not provided by the Home Office, such as mobile phone data, clothes, face coverings and non-prescription medication. Since October 2020, people staying in full board accommodation who are eligible for Home Office financial support are now given £8 per week to cover the costs of clothing, non-prescription medicines and travel¹⁸. While making this amount stretch to cover such costs is extremely difficult, there is still a significant proportion of people in this type of accommodation who are not provided with any financial support.

Providing people with financial support allows people to meet their basic needs with dignity and acknowledges that the needs of any one individual or family are not the same¹⁹. Financial support allows people to prepare, prioritise and take care of their families, based on their own needs. **Everyone in asylum accommodation should have access to financial support and the facilities to cater for themselves.**

15 A Home Office Guide to Living in Asylum Accommodation assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/821324/Pack_A_-_English_-_Web.pdf

16 Home Office (2020), Immigration statistics, year ending December 2020 gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-statistics-year-ending-december-2020

17 BRE Trust (2016), The full cost of poor housing brebookshop.com/samples/327671.pdf

18 Letter from Chris Philp, Minister for Immigration Compliance and the Courts, to Civil Society Chief Executives dated 27 October 2020 freemovement.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Asylum-support-letter.pdf

19 For more details on the benefits of cash provision see resources at cash-hub.org/guidance-and-tools/our-approach



Access to healthcare

While people seeking asylum are entitled to free healthcare, they often face barriers in accessing appropriate care, particularly as many have complex health needs related to experiences of violence²⁰. The standards²¹ that the Home Office have set out require that if a person has an “obvious and urgent” need for healthcare or “a pre-existing health condition”, the accommodation provider is required to support that person to access healthcare. In our experience this requirement is often not met and there appears to be very little oversight or assurance on this standard by the Home Office.

British Red Cross teams are supporting people who have not had a healthcare screening before or after moving into asylum accommodation and face issues with accessing GP registration and prescription exemption certificates. We heard about instances of people being required to speak to hotel reception staff to request to see a GP and being asked to disclose the reason for needing medical attention. Based on running healthcare clinics in an Initial Accommodation site in London during 2020, Doctors of the World found that over 80% of residents had no access to primary healthcare and 84% of residents did not have an HC2 certificate to enable them to access free prescriptions²².

GP registration is increasingly important as the Covid-19 vaccine programme is rolled out. Registration with a GP is currently required before people can receive the vaccine, and vulnerable groups are identified through registration. For many people living in temporary accommodation, however, registering with a GP is difficult because they cannot provide proof of

address or identity documents²³. While proof of address is not necessary to register with a GP, in reality many practices request proof of address before agreeing to register new patients. The Home Office and its providers should ensure that everyone accommodated in the asylum support system is **registered with a GP and has access to appropriate mental health support and secondary healthcare.**

Mental health deterioration

People seeking asylum and refugees are more likely to have mental health needs, including higher rates of depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder than the wider UK population²⁴. Research has found that increased vulnerability to mental health issues is connected both to people’s experiences before seeking asylum, such as trauma connected to experiences of war and violence, and experiences after seeking asylum such as separation from family, and poor housing and support²⁵.

The high prevalence of complex mental health needs and experiences of trauma among people seeking asylum make the prolonged use of hostels, hotels and other forms of temporary accommodation deeply concerning. It is difficult to overstate the impact of being isolated in a small room, sometimes with no natural light, for many months and with no certainty of when this will end. **Our services have seen marked deterioration in the mental health of the people we are supporting in the asylum support system and a rise in complex safeguarding concerns, often connected to suicidal thoughts and attempts.**

Between January 2020 and early February 2021, British Red Cross teams have supported over

20 Kang, Tomkow and Farrington (2019), Access to primary health care for asylum seekers and refugees: a qualitative study of service user experiences in the UK, *British Journal of General Practice* bjgp.org/content/69/685/e537#ref-6

21 Asylum Accommodation and Support: Statement of Requirements data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/Files/DEP2018-1112/AASC_-_Schedule_2_-_Statement_of_Requirements.pdf

22 Submission by Doctors of the World to Home Affairs Select Committee Inquiry into Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 (2020) committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/1018/html/

23 Doctors of the World (2019), Registration Refused Briefing doctorsoftheworld.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Reg-refused-research-briefing.pdf

24 Mental Health Foundation (2016), Mental Health Statistics: Refugees and Asylum Seekers mentalhealth.org.uk/statistics/mental-health-statistics-refugees-and-asylum-seekers

25 Porter and Haslam (2005), Pre-displacement and post-displacement factors associated with mental health of refugees and internally displaced persons: A meta-analysis. *JAMA*, 294, 602–612 jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/201335

Experiences shared by Firooz

“During the pandemic I have been given accommodation in different hotels. It was like being in a jail, I had to sign when I went in or out. You have to share everything and touch everything everyone touches. It was a lot.

The people staying opposite from me would leave their rubbish outside their room and it would only be taken away weekly. The staff did not clean the room properly, they just changed the sheets and towels. There were bugs everywhere in the room. If you didn't go on time to get the food, it would be hard to get any. I have nightmares and can't have a routine and I would wake up late. They would not give me anything, I couldn't even have milk and sugar to make a cup of tea as I had missed breakfast.

I did not feel safe or free in the hotel. They had my keys and came and searched my room and I don't know why. Being alone would have been better.

My mental health got really bad. I jumped from the second floor of the hotel because I wasn't in a safe place. When I was in the hotel I would hurt myself as my mental health was not good. There was lots of noise in the hotel which made my mental health worse. Every day there were new security, new staff. The staff would not listen to me and this made me frustrated and angry, it was hard.

I often wished that I was not in the hotel and had my own space where I could feel safe and free.”

400 individuals living in asylum accommodation who have references to suicidal ideation or attempts recorded in their case notes. This is an average of almost one person per day. These cases are split 70% male and 30% female, which is largely in line with the gender split across people seeking asylum in the UK. This includes pregnant women, people with disabilities and people of all ages, including children under 18 years old and people over 75 years old.

People we spoke to described not only the impact on their own mental health but also the impact of living alongside people whose mental health was deteriorating and who were not receiving any support. We heard about their experiences of living with people who were hallucinating, screaming at night, becoming aggressive and showing signs of self-neglect, in one case to the point where the property smelt of faeces.

British Red Cross Refugee Support staff shared the experience of a 19-year-old man they are supporting. The young man is himself a recognised victim of human trafficking and had summoned

the confidence to raise concerns with his housing manager about the welfare of someone he lived with. He felt that his concerns were ignored and sadly the person he was living with died in the accommodation. The young man we worked with did not feel he received adequate support at that time.

Privacy and independence

For many people the lack of privacy and independence in hostel and hotel accommodation was extremely distressing. **Some people we interviewed described staff entering bedrooms using a master key without notice or permission.** In one case a young man described returning to his room to find a staff member going through his possessions. This left people feeling afraid, particularly women who were faced with male staff entering their accommodation and, in some cases, bedrooms²⁶.

Since the most recent lockdown in England started on 4 January 2021, British Red Cross

26 An investigation by the Observer and ITV News covered similar concerns and found evidence of sexual harassment in hotels. See for example: [theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/feb/21/asylum-seekers-subjected-to-sexual-harassment-in-government-hotels?CMP=share_btn_tw](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/feb/21/asylum-seekers-subjected-to-sexual-harassment-in-government-hotels?CMP=share_btn_tw)



Refugee Support teams have increasingly reported hearing of people living in hotels having their movements restricted. This includes people being prevented from spending more than one hour outside of a hotel and being required to answer questions on, and in some cases even prove, where they are going. While it is important that everyone, including people living in asylum accommodation, is aware of the legislation and guidance that will help to tackle Covid-19, these restrictions go beyond that.

The Home Office and providers should ensure people's **privacy and independence is respected, and that no-one is forced to share a bedroom** with an unrelated adult.

Experiences shared by Golnar

Golnar spent several months living in a hotel in Slough, during the height of the pandemic, and says that how much time she was allowed to spend outside was very restricted. The staff told the people seeking asylum living at the hotel that they were only allowed to leave the hotel for an hour a day due to Covid-19 lockdown rules. Golnar accepted that this was true, until she called Migrant Help, who told her that there was no specific limit on how long she could be outside for, and that she had the right to go out for exercise.

When Golnar raised this with the hotel staff, they wouldn't accept it. The staff at the hotel continued to make a note of when Golnar went out and said they would call the police if she wasn't back within the hour. Golnar said this caused her a lot of stress when she went outside, as she was scared about not getting back in time, and the police being called.

Impact on children and young people

“The kids keep asking when will we be taken to our home, which is a difficult question. There’s no answer yet, we are in limbo.”

VOICES Ambassador, London

Across the UK, British Red Cross teams are supporting families seeking asylum who have been living in one or two rooms in hotels and hostels for many months. Parents we interviewed described staying in their rooms for long periods of time, in cramped conditions where their children had no space to play nor the space and digital devices necessary to continue with their education.

The British Red Cross also supports young people who have arrived in the UK alone and without adult guardians, whose age is disputed by social services and who have

been accommodated with adults as a result. One young person, who was moved into hotel accommodation in Glasgow, was profoundly affected by this and described feeling like they were in jail, unable to eat or sleep and experiencing deteriorating mental health. They reported high levels of hopelessness and despair, often describing a lack of point to life and suicidal thoughts. After sustained advocacy by the British Red Cross and others, the young person was eventually taken into care through Social Services.

The Home Office has clear duties to safeguard and promote the welfare of children²⁷. While examining the impact on children was beyond the scope of this rapid research, it was clear that parents we spoke to were extremely concerned about the impact of asylum accommodation on the wellbeing of their children, and that staff supporting families and young people shared these concerns.

Experiences shared by Rewan

Rewan has been living in a hotel room for nearly 10 months with his two sons, aged 11 and 18. Rewan says the number of people in the hotel constantly changes, but that there are sometimes 60 to 70 people, all from different nations, living there.

The two main issues Rewan and his family have with living in the hotel are a lack of space and the food. Rewan and his sons have to spend most of their time in their room. This is especially difficult for Rewan’s sons, who have to try and do their schoolwork in this small space. The older son has to wait until the 11-year-old goes to sleep to start his work, as the room is too small for them to study at the same time.

Sometimes Rewan’s 11-year-old son cries with frustration at having to stay in their room. Because of Covid-19, the family have been advised to stay inside as much as possible, and if they do go outside the weather is too cold for them to stay out for long. This means the three of them spend most of their time inside their hotel room, where they have little to do.

Rewan wishes that he and his sons were able to move to a place where they could cook food for themselves and where his children could have the space to do their schoolwork. Rewan says that being able to cook for himself and for his sons would make life much better.

Rewan says he feels desperate. He is desperate to get a job and to move to somewhere where his family could eat whatever they like. He asked at a local shop if they could give him work but was turned away due to his status. He feels he has no control over his life, and that he just has to accept his current situation until he’s told he can leave the hotel.

²⁷ Home Office (2009), Every Child Matters: Change for Children https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/257876/change-for-children.pdf

Experiences shared by Umar

Umar has been living in a hostel with his wife and four children, aged 7, 9, 13 and 14, since October 2020. Their accommodation has two rooms: one room with four beds and the other with two beds, a small kitchen and wash room. Umar was told that his family would only have to live in the hostel for a few weeks, but four months later he has still not been given an update on when they will be moved to more suitable accommodation.

One of Umar's children has been diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), which makes living in such a confined space particularly challenging, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. The family have a letter from their doctor, strongly recommending that a child with ADHD should not live in such a compact space. The children are trying to study while schools are closed, but struggle to concentrate in the cramped conditions. Due to fear of Covid-19 and the cold weather, the family have to spend most of their time inside their rooms.

“ It's not suitable to keep a family here, it could be suitable for one person. This is totally inhumane actually. Totally unsuitable for a large family.

Umar is increasingly experiencing anxiety, both due to the stress of living in close quarters and due to the uncertainty about what will happen to them next. Umar is also worried about the numbers of people living in the hostel, which has six floors of rooms, as he doesn't know whether everyone is following Covid-19 guidance. Umar says the staff at the hostel lack training, are unprofessional and are disrespectful. He feels that the staff do not appreciate that the people living in the hostel are people seeking asylum who have not chosen to be there.

“ Sometimes you feel like they are not dealing with you. You don't feel like you have rights. It doesn't seem like [the staff] feel they have responsibility. Just that you're being dumped in this place and have to deal with it, and you can't question it. It seems like they don't care, it's more like a business, they just dump you in a room.

Umar can't think of any way that his current accommodation could be made more suitable for his family, as there is simply not enough space for six people to live. He thinks that families should not be expected to live in temporary hostel accommodation for more than one week at most. Umar wishes that his family could live in a place with more privacy and space, where his children could have a more “ordinary” life.



Safety and safeguarding

The underlying concern about asylum accommodation raised by the people we interviewed for this research was about people's safety and the connected processes in place for responding to issues, complaints and safeguarding risks.

Many of the concerns raised about safety demonstrated a lack of consideration for people's needs when allocating asylum support accommodation in the first place. Often people's needs were known to the Home Office and providers – we spoke to one man who is paralysed in one leg and requires special adaptations in his room to live independently. After raising concerns about the first hostel he was placed in, he was moved to another accommodation which did not have the adaptations he needs, leaving him unable to use the bathroom and afraid of falling. We also heard examples of female survivors of sexual abuse and human trafficking being placed in mixed gender hostels, sometimes with male-only staff, which left them afraid to leave their rooms.

Everyone we spoke to described receiving limited responses to any concerns they raised. British Red Cross staff supporting people living in asylum accommodation described responding to serious safeguarding issues every day, in several cases where people's lives were at risk. Where concerns have been raised, staff also described receiving limited, poor or no response from the accommodation providers or Home Office teams responsible for the safety and wellbeing of residents in the accommodation.

“When there are incidents, it's not just about getting an appropriate response it's getting any response. We had someone attacked in his accommodation a few weeks ago and we still haven't got a response.”

Service Manager, East of England

These concerns were not individual or one-off incidents; people we interviewed described limited or poor responses as systemic. Concerns about safety were often connected to negative interactions with staff, including housing officers, reception staff,



security guards and others involved in asylum accommodation. One person we interviewed described accommodation staff as friendly but in other interviews people described dismissive or discriminatory behaviour.

One person with experience of living in asylum accommodation described how he had *“called the managers thousands of times, about serious things like a roof leaking into the bathroom. I sent messages, I called them – all possible pathways...that roof then collapsed in. It came down, and they only then came to look at it”*. Other people described similar experiences of making multiple complaints or calls and only seeing action after a serious incident had already taken place. After incidents it is unclear what, if any, formal review process takes place to ensure lessons are learnt and to prevent further harm.

To be effective, health and safety measures and safeguarding must be preventative and not reactive. Waiting for ‘evidence’ of vulnerability, harm or risk to arise puts people in significant danger²⁸. The Home Office and its contracted

providers are supporting people who have experienced the worst abuses imaginable, people who have been exploited, tortured, held in captivity. There appears to be very little recognition of this built into the asylum support system.

The Home Office and accommodation providers should ensure people’s needs are met at all stages of the asylum process – and this includes properly

addressing complaints and prioritising effective safeguarding. In addition to meeting the existing standards in asylum accommodation, it should:

- **Carry out health and vulnerability screenings when a person first enters the asylum support system**, using a screening tool such as the one developed by UNHCR-IDC²⁹, to ensure that accommodation meets people’s needs.
- Ensure that people are **well informed and supported and that issues and concerns are handled effectively and transparently**.

28 Social Care Institute for Excellence (2020), Safeguarding Adults: What are the six principles of safeguarding? [scie.org.uk/safeguarding/adults/introduction/six-principles](https://www.scie.org.uk/safeguarding/adults/introduction/six-principles)

29 UNHCR-IDC (2016), Vulnerability Screening Tool - Identifying and addressing vulnerability: a tool for asylum and migration systems [unhcr.org/uk/protection/detention/57fe30b14/unhcr-idc-vulnerability-screening-tool-identifying-addressing-vulnerability.html](https://www.unhcr.org/uk/protection/detention/57fe30b14/unhcr-idc-vulnerability-screening-tool-identifying-addressing-vulnerability.html)



6. Living in military barracks

“The kind of accommodation being provided is not acceptable for anyone to live in. Military sites are something you will never believe unless you see it yourselves.”

Staff member, Refugee Support Wales

The Home Office has recently repurposed disused military sites as accommodation for people in its care. These include the Ministry of Defence Barracks at Penally Training Camp, Pembrokeshire; Napier Barracks in Kent; and RAF Coltishall in North Norfolk. British Red Cross teams have supported people in all three of these sites.

By their very nature military sites can re-traumatise people who have fled war, persecution, imprisonment and other traumatic situations. People we are supporting have described how living inside barbed wire fences and being packed into dormitories gave them flashbacks of war, violence and time spent in captivity. From the outset, medical experts, including the Royal College of Psychiatrists and the British Medical Association, have maintained that military barracks are not appropriate places to house people seeking protection who may be survivors of trafficking, torture and imprisonment³⁰.

The Home Office has stated that all residents at the military barracks are screened for vulnerability, modern slavery or exploitation³¹. However, doctors and medical organisations attending the barracks are supporting people with serious health conditions and vulnerabilities and have

reported witnessing deteriorating mental and physical health³². Most people that British Red Cross teams have supported at Penally Barracks report having no health screening before or after arriving. Residents reported facing long delays to access medical treatment, including people who described being in pain for prolonged periods. The Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration found that most residents at Napier Barracks had experienced depression and a third had felt suicidal, with people at risk of self-harm placed in a decrepit isolation block³³.

“They don’t care about our life. If somebody gets coronavirus, we all get it and all other measures are non-existent in terms of hygiene. If you say anything about hygiene, they will laugh at you.”

Resident, Penally Camp

People we have supported at the barracks report feeling afraid of the cramped conditions in large dormitories of six to 20 other people, with very little space between beds. All the facilities on site are shared, including sleeping areas, dining areas and toilets. British Red Cross staff attending the barracks at Penally Camp reported that it was simply not possible to practice social distancing on site. Similar concerns were raised by Public Health Wales³⁴. The Home Office has recently confirmed that a total of 197 people living at Napier Barracks have tested positive for Covid-19 since the start of 2021, this is more than 50% of the total population at full capacity of 380 people³⁵.

30 Letter to the Home Secretary on the use of MOD sites as accommodation (2020) doctorsoftheworld.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Letter-on-the-use-of-MoD-sites-as-accommodation_26.11.2020.pdf

31 Home Office (2020) Contingency Asylum Accommodation Ministry of Defence sites Factsheet (2020) folkestone-hythe.gov.uk/media/3000/Contingency-Asylum-Accommodation-Ministry-of-Defence-Sites-Factsheet/pdf/Contingency_Asylum_Accommodation_Ministry_of_Defence_Sites_Factsheet.pdf?m=637381172008830000

32 Written evidence submitted by Doctors of the World, the Helen Bamber Foundation, Forrest Medico-Legal Services and Freedom from Torture (2021), Asylum Accommodation: clinical harm caused by the use of barracks as housing for asylum seekers committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/22982/html/

33 Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (2021), An inspection of the use of contingency asylum accommodation – key findings from site visits to Penally Camp and Napier Barracks gov.uk/government/news/an-inspection-of-the-use-of-contingency-asylum-accommodation-key-findings-from-site-visits-to-penally-camp-and-napier-barracks

34 Ibid.

35 The Guardian (2021), Covid cases among asylum seekers at Napier barracks higher than thought theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/feb/24/covid-cases-among-asylum-seekers-at-napier-barracks-higher-than-thought



People were moved to the military sites at Penally and Napier in the autumn and winter, moving into accommodation blocks that have limited heating or insulation and with toilet blocks located outside. Some people were moved to the barracks with no warm clothing or coats, walking around the sodden ground without warm shoes. Clothing is not provided to residents on site and they have no financial support. An inspection carried out by the Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration in early 2021 found that *“the environment at both sites, especially Napier, was impoverished, run-down and unsuitable for long-term accommodation”*³⁶.

In March 2021, the Home Office made the significant and welcome decision to end the use of the barracks at Penally Camp, moving all residents out by the end of March and working with the Welsh Government to expand community-based accommodation³⁷. The Government has made no commitments to end the use of military barracks at Napier and has not pledged to prevent future use of military sites to house people seeking asylum.

The Home Office should immediately end the use of military barracks as asylum accommodation and move people remaining in the barracks into safe and suitable housing in the community.

36 Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (2021), An inspection of the use of contingency asylum accommodation – key findings from site visits to Penally Camp and Napier Barracks [gov.uk/government/news/an-inspection-of-the-use-of-contingency-asylum-accommodation-key-findings-from-site-visits-to-penally-camp-and-napier-barracks](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/an-inspection-of-the-use-of-contingency-asylum-accommodation-key-findings-from-site-visits-to-penally-camp-and-napier-barracks)

37 BBC News (2021), ‘Run-down’ Penally asylum camp to close on 21 March [bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-56418361](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-56418361)

Penally Training Camp, Pembrokeshire

"It's like a prison here and there isn't enough space, we are crowded together. This scares me."

Resident, Penally Camp

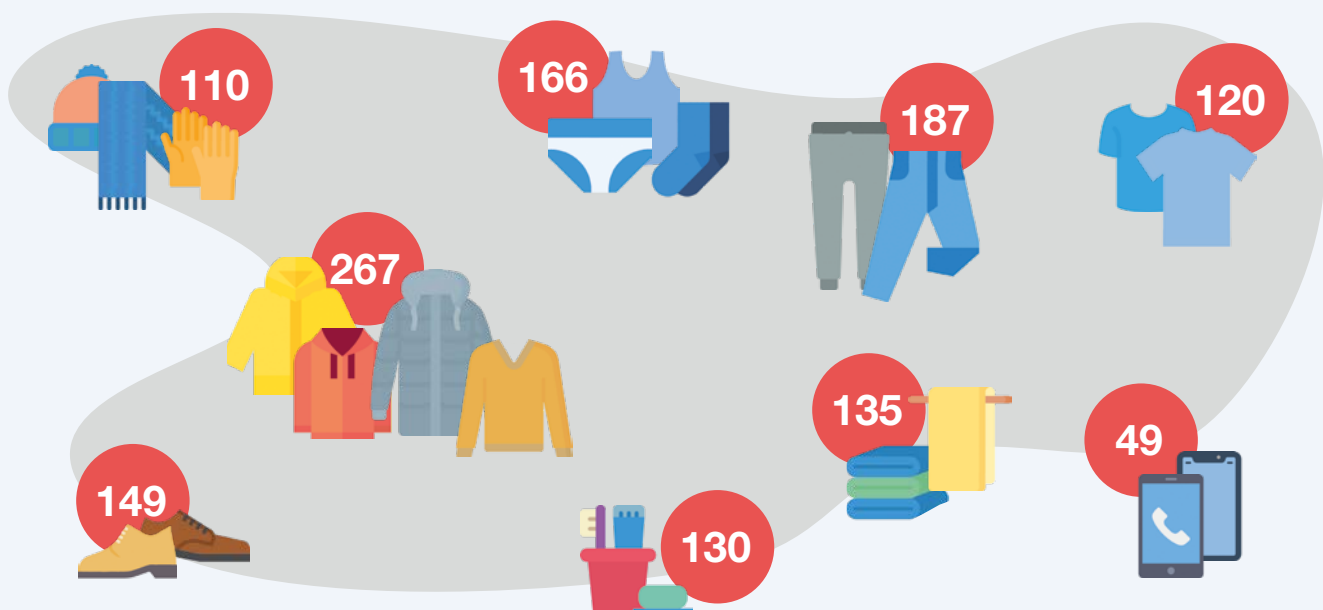
In Autumn 2020, the British Red Cross started to provide emergency support at Penally Camp in recognition of the immediate humanitarian concerns for people housed at the camp and to ensure individuals could speak with and access support from an independent organisation. Since November 2020, the Red Cross has been working to provide essential items to residents and provide access to independent advice and support.

Based on standardised interviews with 88 people we found that:

- **Most people did not feel safe on the site.** The reasons for this included the on-site facilities and sleeping arrangements, lack of privacy, health concerns, fears about Covid-19 transmission, tensions between residents at the camp and previous experiences of violence and imprisonment.

- **People did not feel their complaints were being listened to** and had not seen improvements as a result of raising issues.
- **People were experiencing a range of health issues, and long delays in accessing healthcare**, including people experiencing nightmares, internal bleeding and chronic pain.
- **Over 70%** of residents we spoke to had **been in hotels or barracks for over 90 days**, with some people reporting up to 8 month stays in hotels prior to arrival.
- **Only 36%** of people reported having had a health screening, **most people stated that they did not have a health screening before or after arrival.**
- **Two thirds (69%)** reported **not getting an advance notice of their move.** Some residents reported moving in the early hours of the morning or arriving late at night, with little or no understanding about what was happening. Some people reported that they thought they were being removed from the UK.
- **Half of people** we spoke to stated that they had **not received an induction on arrival.** A **significant majority (81%)** said that they had **not received translated information** on arrival about facilities at the site, public health measures or support available.

Most people on site were in urgent need of clothing and toiletries and many did not have a mobile phone. The British Red Cross has provided **emergency items to 130 people** including:



Experiences shared by Kaveh, Staff member, Refugee Support Wales

Kaveh came to the UK in 2015 and sought asylum. He was housed in asylum accommodation while his asylum application was processed and lived in several different types of accommodation including Initial Accommodation hostels and shared accommodation.

Kaveh described living in extremely poor-quality accommodation, in areas with very little support or community connections. *“You don’t know the culture, you don’t know the language. You don’t know simple things like how to shop here.”* Kaveh found that the staff and management of the accommodation were often absent, unresponsive and had little to no training about how to support people seeking asylum, which he found especially concerning given the trauma people seeking protection have experienced.

For Kaveh his experiences were not simply a few bad examples or related to individual staff members, the issues were systemic. He describes the complaints process as *“simply on paper”*, and that after submitting a complaint he found he was treated differently. The racism and discrimination he experienced during the asylum process still stay with him today, and he feels that people’s experiences in the asylum system reinforce trauma they have previously experienced, making it hard to move on with their lives even after being granted refugee status.

“ Trauma is not something you can just get rid of. It’s like a prison, I used to lie down and stare at the ceiling for hours and hours, and you think about everything you have lost.

Kaveh was granted refugee status and now works as a staff member, and a volunteer for Refugee Support at British Red Cross. He has been part of the team supporting people placed at the military barracks in Penally, South Wales. He recalls his first time visiting the Penally Camp as truly shocking, and that the conditions, the toilets, the showers, the dorms were simply not fit to house people.

“ The whole camp is shouting from a distance - hostile environment... It’s not a place to live, and especially for people with those backgrounds who may have been tortured or been through other trauma.

Kaveh and his team quickly worked to set up an emergency response at Penally Camp, initially assessing people’s essential needs, and providing basic provisions like clothes and shoes and building up towards understanding more sensitive needs around health, care and legal advice.

Kaveh describes serious concerns for the men’s physical and mental health at the camp and the tensions created by the lack of privacy and conditions. Kaveh has found the men are often suffering from depression, hair loss, sleep issues and deep anxiety, and he can relate – *“Even now, when I sleep in my own bed, my mind jumps all the way back to being in that accommodation. I can’t sleep as I think about people who are there now.”*

Kaveh wants to see housing that can support people seeking protection to integrate and be a part of communities.

“ The main things we need as humans: we need to feel like we belong, we have a route, we have people around us who care and want to be around us. When you don’t have that you feel lonely and no one is there to help you. It leaves you in a devastating situation. And for [those at] Penally, they don’t know when it’s going to end.

7. Moving forward: a safe place to call home

People seeking asylum should have access to safe, clean, private and appropriate housing and support at all stages of their asylum application. This includes any contingency or temporary accommodation.

Over the years the shortfall in accommodation and the concentration of accommodation in certain areas of the UK has had an increasing impact on people seeking asylum, local communities and the asylum system.

What needs to change?

We asked people what they felt needed to change in their accommodation. Some people could not think of any improvements that would make their current accommodation better; military sites made people feel unsafe and imprisoned, and nothing could change that. Some people felt the same about full-board hostels and other forms of contingency accommodation.

Others spoke about hoping for accommodation that was safe, private, clean, warm and had enough space. Independence was also often cited – not feeling your movements were monitored and having facilities to be able to cook for your family. Some people we spoke to reflected on the lack of internet in dispersal accommodation and the barriers this posed for staying in contact with family and friends, accessing information and advice, and educating their children.

Many people spoke less about the actual accommodation and more about the barriers they faced in accessing healthcare, education, mental health support, information and advice or community support because of where they live and the limited support they receive through the asylum support system.

The things people described were often basic and fundamental needs but were lacking in their current accommodation.

Community connections

“People need to feel they are a part of something, rather than be a branch in the river – the river can take them anywhere...”

Staff member, Refugee Support Wales

People we spoke to reflected on the importance of making connections and having some stability in their lives. One person described moving so many times across different asylum accommodation sites that she never felt comfortable unpacking her clothes as she was always expecting to move again.

Human connection is essential. Being able to make connections with other people, family, friends or new communities is vital for people’s wellbeing, but also for their safety and ability to engage with the asylum process. Without these connections people are not able to access information about their asylum case, or to find out about public health measures or where to seek help when they need it.

Working with local communities

“Being in dispersal accommodation...[people] are able to make connections and start feeling part of a city.”

Staff member, Refugee Support Yorkshire

Providing support for people seeking asylum, including finding suitable accommodation, should be carried out in partnership with local government and local community groups. As we have seen in the Northeast and other areas, accommodation is often procured at short notice and in areas of high deprivation³⁸.

As with many other voluntary sector groups, British Red Cross services across the UK provide orientation and community support to people newly arrived in their area, showing people

³⁸ Asylum Matters (2020), Wake Up Call: How government contracts fail people seeking asylum [asylummatters.org/2020/07/03/wake-up-call/](https://www.asylummatters.org/2020/07/03/wake-up-call/)



Experiences shared by Aisha

Aisha has a six-year-old daughter and lives in London. She previously lived in a different part of the country but had to leave her accommodation due to domestic violence. After applying for asylum support from the Home Office, Aisha and her daughter were moved to a hotel in London in the summer of 2020.

Living in the hotel was difficult for Aisha and her daughter. They both struggled with their mental health, while spending most of their time confined to one hotel room. Aisha did not feel safe in the hotel and often felt scared. Due to the large number of other people seeking asylum living in the hotel, Aisha was worried that she might be recognised by someone from her community and that her abusive ex-partner might be able to find her. Having very recently experienced domestic violence, Aisha felt unsafe living in a busy hotel alongside so many strangers, particularly the men. While living in the hotel, Aisha experienced flashbacks and nightmares about her past experiences. There was no support in place in the hotel for Aisha, and she did not know her rights or entitlements or how she could access support.

Eventually, Aisha was able to access the support of the British Red Cross. Aisha was very anxious about her daughter's education and alongside other support, her caseworker at the British Red Cross tried to support Aisha's daughter to enrol in a school. However, living in a hotel meant that Aisha was not able to provide a permanent address to schools, which made this difficult.

In December, Aisha and her daughter were moved into alternative accommodation in a self-contained property with two bedrooms and cooking facilities. Aisha was moved into this accommodation without an ASPEN card³⁹, any money or food. The British Red Cross was able to provide two weeks of food parcels to get her through the Christmas break.

Despite these ongoing challenges, Aisha is pleased to be living in a self-contained place after six months in the hotel. She has now been able to register with a GP and has been supported by the Local Authority to enrol her daughter in school. Aisha feels like her life is finally moving in the right direction. In a short period of time, her mental health has substantially improved. Her new accommodation may not be permanent, but it allows her to access community-based services and support and it is a marked improvement on the period when her and her daughter's lives were confined to one hotel room.

around their nearest supermarket, locating community services such as libraries, going sightseeing and sharing local history⁴⁰. Too often British Red Cross Refugee Support Services only find out about people who have been moved to new asylum support accommodation in their area when people make their way, confused and distressed, to one of our drop-in services. In one example from the West Midlands, residents of a hotel in Coventry had walked for over an hour to reach a British Red Cross welfare drop-in session.

Across the UK there are many refugee-led community groups, voluntary sector agencies and individual volunteers ready to support newcomers as they settle into their area. It is extremely difficult for these groups to support people when they have no notice or are not involved in plans to move people seeking asylum into their area.

The Home Office and its providers should draw on the expertise of local government, local health services and local organisations as they make plans to source accommodation and move individuals and families into specific

39 ASPEN cards are pre-paid cards that the Home Office uses to provide people with financial support. For more information see Gov.co.uk, Asylum support: [gov.uk/asylum-support/what-youll-get](https://www.gov.uk/asylum-support/what-youll-get)

40 More information about our services is available at [redcross.org.uk/get-help/get-help-as-a-refugee](https://www.redcross.org.uk/get-help/get-help-as-a-refugee)



areas. The UK's City of Sanctuary movement demonstrates the breadth of welcome available across different cities, towns and villages⁴¹. Originating in Sheffield in 2005, the movement has grown into a large network of towns, cities and villages across all four nations in the UK, all pledging to welcome people seeking refuge.

Asylum decision-making

People seeking asylum often face long delays in receiving a decision on their asylum application. The number of people waiting over six months for a decision doubled over the course of 2020, with 72% (a total of 46,796 people) waiting more than six months for a decision on their asylum claim in the year ending 31st December 2020. People we interviewed described the impact of perpetually waiting, feeling anxious, fearful and being unable to work or move on with their lives.

There are immediate steps that the Home Office could take to reduce the number of people awaiting the result of their asylum application, by making quick decisions on a positive grant of refugee status wherever possible. At the end of September 2020, there were 3,621 Sudanese, Syrian and Eritrean nationals who had been waiting longer than six months for a decision on their asylum application⁴². The grant rate across those three countries at initial decision was 94% in the year to the end of March 2020⁴³. If only half of those people were receiving asylum support that would be 1,800 people who should have had their cases progressed quickly and been able to move on from asylum accommodation with the right support.

Making decisions on asylum applications faster and more effectively would mean fewer people are left waiting in limbo and reliant on Home Office support. It would mean more men, women and children who have fled war, persecution and danger can start to rebuild their lives.

41 City of Sanctuary UK cityofsanctuary.org/about/

42 Home Office (2020), Quarterly Immigration Statistics, year ending September 2020, table Asy_D03 gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-statistics-year-ending-september-2020/list-of-tables

43 Home Office (2020), Quarterly Immigration Statistics, year ending September 2020, table Asy_D02 gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-statistics-year-ending-september-2020/list-of-tables

8. Conclusion

The British Red Cross is deeply concerned about the ongoing failures of the asylum support system to meet people's basic needs in a safe and appropriate manner. While waiting for a decision on their asylum application, too many people are living in unsafe and insecure accommodation.

An increasing amount of accommodation is unsuitable for people who have fled war, violence and persecution, exacerbating existing mental health problems and creating new ones. This not only reduces people's ability to engage with their asylum claim and extends the process, it also creates long-lasting damage to people's ability to recover from past trauma, and to rebuild and integrate their lives in the UK.

This report describes a rapid review and highlights people's experiences right now in

asylum accommodation. Urgent change is needed and at the British Red Cross we are committed to playing our part in ensuring that individuals and families who need our protection have a safe place to call home.

Sadly, the UK Government's current proposals for changes to the asylum system will do little to bring about this change. Instead they risk making matters worse through the introduction of reception centres.

The recommendations we have made in this report offer an alternative, to enable people to feel part of a community, to ensure social contact between people in the asylum system and local populations, and to enable people to engage fully with the asylum process.

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[redcross.org.uk](https://www.redcross.org.uk)