

AMBASSADORS FOR CHANGE

Briefing on asylum accommodation

HELEN
BAMBER
FOUNDATION
strength to fly



Introduction

The Ambassadors for Change is a group of survivors with experience of the UK asylum system who campaign to ensure London is welcoming and fair for other people seeking safety. The Ambassadors for Change collectively decided to focus their advocacy targets on the standards of asylum accommodation and the impact it has on mental health in London.

The briefing seeks to share the realities of various types of asylum accommodation and the outcomes of this, through lived experience testimonies and published reports. The final section of the document outlines recommendations put forward by the Ambassadors that would enable the asylum-seeking community to feel safe, secure and able to recover and rebuild their lives.

Increased numbers in asylum accommodation

The government has a [statutory obligation](#) to provide accommodation and/or financial support to anyone applying for asylum who would otherwise be destitute. Prior to 2019, people seeking asylum would usually arrive in the UK, spend three to four weeks in a hostel style full-board accommodation ('initial accommodation'), and then be moved to housing across the country, usually on a no-choice basis to areas where properties were cheapest ('dispersal accommodation'). 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 (in London) Clearsprings Ready Homes.

However, due to hostile government policies, in recent years the backlog of people waiting for a decision on their asylum claims has grown to historic levels. In March 2024, there were [86,460 asylum claims awaiting an initial decision](#). As more people have been left waiting for decisions, the number of people reliant on Home Office accommodation and financial support has increased. People seeking asylum are not allowed to work and are forced to live on very [low levels of asylum support](#) which is set at £8.86 a week for those living in hotels and £49.18 per week for those in dispersal accommodation.

Use of hotels and accommodation centres

In response to increased need, the [Home Office started to use what was called 'contingency accommodation'](#) – hotels and ex-military barracks – for asylum accommodation. Despite the previous government pledging to end the use of hotels, there is [no sign of this happening](#) and it had committed to [significantly expanding the use of ex-military sites](#), and [even barges](#), as large scale asylum accommodation centres, even though this form of 'quasi-detention' has been widely condemned as ['prison-like'](#) and [highly re-traumatising](#) for survivors of torture, trafficking or other serious forms of violence.

[Over 30,000 people](#) (half of all supported people seeking asylum) are currently living in initial and contingency accommodation, including hotels and accommodation centres.

The average length of stay is over six months, during which [people are stuck](#) living in cramped rooms, with limited freedom to come and go, not enough money for essentials, and extremely limited access to healthcare, legal advice, or means of communication. In London there were over [10,000 people living in hotel accommodation](#) at the end of March 2024, despite this accommodation for prolonged periods being severely damaging to their health and well-being. Moreover, the use of hotels confirms a common misconception that asylum seekers are living in luxury which is not true. This creates a further segregation from the public and heightens tensions. At times, this has resulted in [attacks on hotels](#) in which people seeking asylum are residing, further enhancing the unsafe nature of the accommodation.

Unsuitable and unsafe housing in the community

For those who are moved to housing in the community, inadequate scrutiny and oversight from the Home Office has left systemic issues unaddressed, and people are too often forced to live in unsuitable, unsafe, and insecure housing. In London in March 2024, there were [4,735 people in dispersed accommodation](#) and too often the state of this accommodation falls short of acceptable standards.

Key issues Ambassadors have experienced include overcrowding, lack of privacy, substandard hygiene, and unsafe environments. Often residents are placed in properties that are unsuitable given their health or other care needs (e.g., a person with a mobility issue being placed in an 5th floor flat). Inspections do not occur as frequently as they are supposed to, with residents often not present, which allows landlords / inspectors to disregard serious issues as they are not pointed out to them.

Lived experience testimonials

“Upon requesting asylum accommodation, I provided medical evidence outlining the necessity for me to be placed on the ground floor which was accepted by the Home Office. Despite this, when I arrived at the accommodation I found my belongings dumped in the carpark and was informed I had to move them up to the 5th floor where my accommodation was located.

One particular occasion, I returned to the accommodation to find that the lift to the 5th floor was broken. I reported this to the accommodation manager onsite who informed me that the lift would be fixed at some point that day. After a six and a half hour wait, the engineer confirmed that it wasn't possible to fix the lift and it would be completed in a few days' time. At this point, I asked the housing manager what she suggested I do as I wasn't able to access my accommodation on the 5th floor. She informed me that I needed to call Migrant Helpline. I did this and waited for several hours without a response, despite the urgency. Ultimately, I had to contact a lawyer at 10pm to intervene and the Home Office safeguarding team was contacted. The safeguarding team sent a taxi to drive me to alternative emergency accommodation in another town. I didn't have anything but the clothes I was wearing. Upon arriving at the emergency hotel, I discovered they had not been notified of my arrival and refused to allow me to stay. I was left homeless at 3am in an unfamiliar location. I had no option but to sleep on the train which felt the safest option. I remained homeless for around 5 days until I discovered the lift was working. I didn't receive any follow up calls from the safeguarding team or the home office during this time.

This wasn't the first time that I had been left either street homeless or stuck inside my accommodation, unable to leave for days. I was stuck in quasi-detention. The impact that this had on my mental and physical health was extremely detrimental. It has continued to influence my wellbeing and mental state, I now always carry around spare clothes with me for fear of this happening again. There was no accountability taken or risk assessment to ensure it was suitable.”



“Unsuitable accommodation became the tragedy of my life. We moved homes many times and despite the Home Office’s acknowledgment that I had broken my spine and ankle and was struggling to flight staircase and medical evidence that the accommodation was not suitable and had to be moved, still no one was moving us to suitable accommodation.



One example of this was that we had to share property with other families and on three occasions my husband was attacked and at one point I thought they would nearly kill my husband. I had reported this to the police and the Home Office twice and I still had not been moved. Instead, I got a letter from the Home Office blaming my family for anti-social behaviour because my three year-old child was crying. We had to continue living together with our very small children. It was complete neglect.

Finally, after many months my family was moved away from this dangerous situation. The Home Office was aware of my physical health needs and my diagnosis of PTSD, but I was still placed in first floor accommodation with two children who needed me to carry them and no lift. I was not provided a table or sofa to sit and I was not allowed to bring my own furniture. We had no kitchen on our floor, sharing a 4 sq-metre kitchen with other families with children.... I was not given any medical assessment or help with my disabilities even though the Home Office had all my evidence and was aware of my struggles. With so much stress on my body and mind, my bones were cracking when carrying everything up and down. Finally, I fell and left me with increased pain and a walking stick. Since, my two children are dreaming if their mother ever will walk without a walking stick outside. Simply speaking it was a very stressful, tense and dangerous situation. Mentally and physically accommodation became a traumatising, scary spot. I had a feeling that I would be taken out from that place by a coffin. The Home Office does not consider health and social circumstances.”

Inadequate living conditions can have a [detrimental impact on the physical and mental health](#) of individuals and families seeking asylum. This can lead to increased stress and anxiety. It can create a sense of powerlessness, frustration, and distress, contributing to a cycle of inadequate housing and limited agency. Without suitable living conditions, it also becomes more challenging to focus on language learning, education, and recovery, all of which are crucial for successful integration into the local community.

People living in the properties often do not know their rights and the complaints processes regarding accommodation standards. This means that breaches of licensing requirements and other issues are often not raised or resolved, and leaves people seeking asylum vulnerable to potential exploitation by unscrupulous landlords or substandard accommodation providers. It is vital that people in asylum accommodation understand their rights and proper channels for raising their concerns or complaints. In doing so, individuals can protect themselves from unjust treatment and unsafe living conditions.

Conclusion

By refusing to abandon the use of institutional accommodation and by failing to take action to improve contracted accommodation in the community, the Home Office has overseen a steady decline of the asylum accommodation system, with people seeking asylum suffering the effects. We want an asylum system that enables people to feel safe, secure and able to recover and rebuild their lives. As part of this, people seeking asylum should be housed in homes that guarantee their safety, privacy, and freedom, and enable them to live as part of the wider community.

Recommendations

- **The government should commit to housing people seeking asylum in communities**, by urgently addressing the long-standing structural issues in the management of contracted provision, and by significantly investing in improvements to the current stock of dispersal housing.
- **Complaints must be handled properly** and within reasonable timeframes.
- **People living in asylum accommodation should be regularly informed about the complaints processes** in a language they understand, and the Home Office should be transparent about the number of complaints received and resolved.
- **Housing for people seeking safety should be brought to the same standards with those of the rest of the population** and adjusted for their specific needs, in line with Refugee Action's [accommodation principles](#).
- **Asylum support should be set at a level that allows for an acceptable standard of living**, at a minimum of 70% of the rate for mainstream benefits.
- **Asylum accommodation should be managed by the local council**. This ensures proper safeguarding move-on processes are in place.
- There should be Home Office inspections on dispersal accommodation as well as hotels and large scale sites.

Large accommodation sites & hotels

- **Reliance on hotels should be phased out as a matter of urgency**, with strict time limits on people's stays there while they continue to be used.
- The government should recognise the vulnerability of asylum seekers in obvious accommodation sites (i.e. hotels) and **increase the security available** to protect them.
- **The government should reduce the backlog of asylum decisions**. This will reduce the need for large-scale sites and long-stays in hotels.
- **The government should introduce 'Houses in Multiple Occupation' (HMO) licensing** of hotel asylum accommodation as a matter of urgency, with stronger enforcement and regular inspections of HMOs.
- **All hotels should have an advisory service within them** instead of reliance on MH telephone line.
- **Thorough support needs assessments should be completed to inform asylum accommodation placements**, resulting in suitable placements for people with physical and mental health conditions:
 - The outcome of the assessment should be acted on promptly and without further need for GP medical letters etc unless the individual wishes to submit this.
 - Accommodation allocation assessments should be conducted by Home Office staff only and not by sub-contracted organisations such as Clearsprings.
 - Recommendations given by medical professionals and organisations such as Helen Bamber Foundation should be taken as priority information when conducting assessment.

Move On Process

- **Eviction letters and Biometric Residence Permits should be sent on the same day as asylum decision letters** are provided. If not, the 'notice to quit' should begin on the date the letter was received.
- **Additional support and funds should be allocated within the local authority for asylum seekers moving house**. Help with document gathering, translations, practical help with moving and costs of this.
- **All survivors of trafficking with a positive final ('conclusive grounds') decision from the NRM should be automatically granted support**, including leave to remain and recourse to public funds, for at least 30 months with a route to settlement.