



70TH
ANNIVERSARY

“I SAT WATCHING LIFE GO BY MY WINDOW FOR SO LONG”

The experiences of people seeking asylum living in hotel
accommodation

April 2021



Photo by Rhea Lofranco on Unsplash

INTRODUCTION

Since November 2019, the Refugee Council has been supporting people seeking asylum who have been placed in hotel accommodation. During 2020, the number of people placed in hotels increased and subsequently this work expanded to cover hotels in Leeds, London, Hull and Rotherham through visiting these sites, as well as supporting people who have contacted the Refugee Council's telephone Infoline. Since March 2020, the Refugee Council has worked with over 400 individuals in hotels, and has delivered briefing sessions to many more. This experience has informed this report.

Throughout this period Refugee Council staff have been extremely concerned about gaps in support for people, and have often had to step in to provide basics like shoes and coats and make sure that people receive the food they need. People's mental and physical health has declined, and they have spoken about their feelings of isolation and abandonment. In a pandemic, placing people seeking asylum in self-contained accommodation is sensible to reduce the risk of the spread of COVID-19, but when these stays extend to months, it is vital that the right support and services are in place to make sure people can live safely and in dignity. However, all too often this has not been the case.

BACKGROUND

Since March 2020, the Home Office has increased its use of 'contingency accommodation', due to a rise in the number of people seeking asylum in need of accommodation. Hotels have been the most common type of contingency accommodation although ex-military barracks have also been used.

The increase in the number of people living in contingency accommodation is not due to a rise in asylum applications but due to a lack of flow through the system. In March 2020, the Home Office paused evictions from asylum accommodation for those who had received decisions on their asylum claim in response to the pandemic which led to more people entering the asylum support system than exiting it. In usual (non-Covid) times, use of asylum accommodation is reasonably static at about 50,000 at any one time, but at the end of 2020 the total supported population was 64,041. Contingency accommodation was in use prior to the pandemic due to delays in accommodation providers commissioning dispersal accommodation, but its use increased sharply as a result of the pandemic.

People seeking asylum are not eligible for mainstream welfare benefits. Instead, if they are destitute, they can apply to the Home Office for accommodation and/or financial support, known as 'asylum support'. Asylum accommodation is provided through three contractors, each responsible for specific geographical regions of the UK¹. They are responsible for providing short term (usually full-board hostel style) Initial Accommodation, used to house people whilst their eligibility for asylum support is assessed, a process usually lasting three to four weeks. Ordinarily people would then be moved to dispersal accommodation which are small self-catering units (mainly flats and shared houses) across the UK where they will be expected to live until a decision is made on their case.

Contingency accommodation, usually in the form of hotels, is designed for use as a short term stop-gap to fill gaps in provision of either Initial Accommodation or dispersal accommodation, or both, and historically was used when there was an unexpected rise in asylum applicants in need of support. Since the pandemic, people have been accommodated in hotels for much longer periods of time with people typically in this accommodation for many months, and the Refugee Council has worked with some people who have been living in hotels for over a year. The Home Office normally aims to move people from Initial Accommodation and into dispersal accommodation within 35 days.²

The Home Office has announced its intention to move people from hotels into dispersal accommodation as soon as possible (a process referred to as Operation Oak). However, accommodation providers are struggling to find alternatives meaning that thousands of people are still living in hotels and people are still being moved into them. At the end of February 2021, approximately 8,700 people were living in over 90 hotels across the UK.³

1. Details of the provides for each region available here <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-asylum-accommodation-contracts-awarded>

2. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8990/> (page 2)

3. This figure was included in a letter from the Home Secretary to the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee on 18th March 2021 <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/5348/documents/53233/default/> (page 11)

LIVING IN HOTELS – THE NIGHTMARE FACING PEOPLE SEEKING ASYLUM

Hotels are designed for short stays. They are often on the outskirts of urban areas away from essential services such as supermarkets and GP surgeries, and specialist support such as mental health services and English language classes that help people to integrate into local communities. They also have no cooking facilities. These factors make stays of many months very challenging for anyone. This has been worsened as a result of COVID-19 restrictions that have reduced freedoms, leading to people being instructed to remain in their rooms for many days on end. As a result of supporting people in hotels, the Refugee Council has identified a number of serious concerns.

NEGATIVE IMPACT ON PEOPLE'S MENTAL HEALTH

People seeking asylum in the UK can often be deeply traumatised, having lived through dreadful experiences and faced devastating losses. While waiting for a decision on their asylum claim people live with the worry that they will be returned to the country they fled from. The lack of social spaces, repeated lockdowns in individual hotels and no opportunities to take part in meaningful activities has led to some feeling desperate. People have said that the confinement feels like prison, and that they feel abandoned and forgotten. For some, this has had a negative impact on their mental health, and Refugee Council staff have seen people who are self-harming, in crisis and contemplating suicide. Due to the pressure on mental health services, it is extremely difficult to get support for people and while they continue to live in these circumstances, their distress is more likely to deteriorate than improve.

LACK OF CLOTHING AND FOOTWEAR

Many people are lacking adequate clothing and footwear, often having arrived in the UK with just the clothes they are wearing. The Home Office does not provide clothing for people seeking asylum and the Refugee Council routinely works with people whose only footwear has been a pair of worn flip flops. Having such unsuitable footwear means people are unable to leave the hotel for exercise or to access services which are typically a fair walking distance from the hotels. The Refugee Council has helped to provide clothing and appropriate footwear by securing donations from businesses and the general public. While this has been useful as a short-term response, it is not sustainable over a longer period and means that people can have inappropriate clothing for many weeks. Living in hotels provides additional challenges in terms of laundry. Hotels often do not allow people to clean and dry clothes in their room so they have to rely on a laundry service. When people only have one set of clothes, they are forced to stay in their rooms until their clean clothes are returned to them which can sometimes take several days.

LACK OF ACCESS TO CASH

The majority of people living in hotels are accommodated on a 'full board' basis so have no access to cash, making it impossible for them buy or replace essential items. Refugee Council staff often receive requests for items such as plasters, paracetamol, umbrellas, nail clippers, combs, pens and notebooks, none of which can be considered luxuries but are not supplied to them. It took until the end of October 2020 for the Home Office to agree to pay a small cash payment of £8 per week to some of the people living for extended periods in full-board accommodation. This allowed some people to buy essential items for themselves or take a bus so they can live with a greater level of independence and dignity. However, these payments have only been made available to people who are on a specific form of asylum support, and can take a while to be paid, which leaves many others excluded.

LACK OF ACCESS TO HEALTH SERVICES

People accommodated in hotels have been provided with little or no information on how to access primary health care. The Refugee Council works with many people who have complex health needs who have not been able to access appropriate treatment due to the fact that they have received no assistance to register with a GP. Physical health needs have often been overlooked, such as people with mobility problems being placed on higher floors of hotels that have no lifts.

Not being registered with a GP is of particular concern given that access to the COVID-19 vaccine is dependent on a person having an NHS number, which is generated when they register with a GP. This leaves many people who would be eligible to access the vaccine unable to do so as they are not in the system.

ACCESS TO SCHOOLING FOR CHILDREN

Families with school age children living in hotels have often not been supported or encouraged to enrol their children in school, leaving many children unable to access formal education. When schooling was only happening remotely, those families who had secured school places struggled to support their children's learning because the whole of the family's life was confined to one room and the internet connection from hotel Wi-Fi was often too weak for remote learning. This situation was made worse in families with more than one child. Now schools have re-opened, these problems persist when children are trying to do their homework. As people have been staying in hotels for many months, children's education has been severely disrupted.

QUALITY OF FOOD

The quality of food provided in many of the hotels is a major cause of concern. Food often arrives in small portions, with limited options available to people. The quality varies widely across hotel sites, with some hotels providing little or no fruit. People with specific dietary needs have found it difficult getting food that meets their needs, for example the case of a man who has underlying kidney problems not being able to access enough water and fresh fruit and vegetables which made his condition worse. Children are often given the same type of food as adults despite having different needs. The Refugee Council was contacted by a mother whose teenage son had been hospitalised after losing three kilograms in weight. As people are currently staying in this full-board accommodation for many months, repeated poor quality meals contribute to the declining physical health of people placed there.

SAFETY

The presence of people seeking asylum living in hotels has periodically been in the news, which has attracted the attention of groups of people who hold anti-migrant and racist views. There have been several incidents of people entering the hotels and harassing and verbally abusing people seeking asylum, sometimes whilst filming these activities and sharing them on the internet. These incidents have made people feel extremely unsafe and sometimes afraid to leave their rooms or the hotel. In addition to abusive behaviour coming from anti-migrant groups, a Refugee Council staff member witnessed a hotel worker shouting racist abuse at residents. This unacceptable behaviour, coupled with reports of a lack of empathy and sensitivity by people working directly at hotels or the catering companies that supply food, creates an unsafe environment. As people seeking asylum have no choice about where they live, they are forced to endure hostility which can create an atmosphere of fear. The Refugee Council has also worked with unaccompanied children who have been placed in hotels because they have incorrectly been deemed to be adults. These children have often been afraid to enter communal areas, and need to be supported as children rather than being placed in adult-only accommodation. This is a key safeguarding consideration.

DIGITAL EXCLUSION

People in hotels have limited access to the internet and many do not have mobile phones. This situation has been made worse by the widespread confiscation of people's mobile phones by the Home Office on arrival in the country. This means many people have to rely on charities such as the Refugee Council providing mobile handsets. Mobile phones are not a luxury item – they are needed to access vital information, contact Migrant Help⁴, advice agencies or connect with health services. As many services are currently operating remotely due to the pandemic, access to phones and data are even more crucial. In some places, the Home Office has instructed the accommodation providers to distribute SIM cards to people but those are only useful if people have mobile phones. Additionally, providers can distribute phones, but the Refugee Council's experience shows this has not been done for everyone - usually just a few handsets have been provided for all the residents or they only have access to the phone when the welfare manager visits the accommodation site. This is entirely inappropriate when people need to speak about sensitive and urgent issues such as their asylum claim or health needs. Lack of access to phones and data has also been a barrier in accessing COVID-19 testing and receiving results.

ACCESS TO LEGAL ADVICE

Before the pandemic, people seeking asylum were not usually given information about legal aid providers whilst living in Initial Accommodation as they would soon be moved to dispersal accommodation. Given that people now have prolonged stays in Initial or contingency accommodation like hotels, they are much more likely to need this before being dispersed. Those in hotels are not routinely being given information which makes it difficult for them to get advice and representation at an appropriate time. People who do get a legal representative struggle to find confidential space to discuss their case, have access to the phone, the internet or the ability to scan and print documents. This can seriously affect the progress of their case and the ability of people to fully engage with the asylum process so that the decision on their claim is right the first time. It can also lead to increased anxiety as their futures depend on the outcome of their claim.

⁴. Migrant Help are contracted by the Home Office to provide advice and guidance, issue reporting and help with asylum support payments to people seeking asylum.

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?

In February 2021, the Home Office announced its intention to move people out of hotels through Operation Oak, but this process has yet to be completed. The Home Office has said it intends to complete it “by the summer”.⁵ Meanwhile people continue to live in these conditions and new arrivals will still be placed in hotels. The Refugee Council supports the plan to move people into dispersal accommodation but until this happens, it is essential that people still living in hotels are properly supported and their needs are met rather than focusing on an end date that there is no certainty will be reached.

It is unacceptable that people are being forced to live in conditions that are so dehumanising to people who have experienced great trauma in their lives. The problems discussed in this report interact with each other and are all having an impact on people's health and well-being. Given that people are in hotels for extended periods of time, accommodation providers should be required to give the same level of support as they would to people in dispersed accommodation. As well as prioritising moving people on to more appropriate accommodation as a matter of urgency, plans need to be put in place to ensure that stays in full board accommodation are minimised and people living in hotels can receive advice, support and assistance to access legal advice. As the Windrush Lessons Learned report stated, it is vital that when making decisions the Home Office sees the ‘face behind the case’.⁶

WE CALL ON THE HOME OFFICE TO TAKE THE FOLLOWING URGENT ACTION:

- **Provide people with essential clothing, such as coats and shoes, so they can go outside and are not confined to their rooms when clothes are being laundered.**
- **Provide a cash allowance to all people accommodated in hotels so they can buy essentials.** People are given basic toiletries, but without cash they cannot buy items such as such plasters, paracetamol, umbrellas, nail clippers, combs, pens and notebooks. They also cannot catch a bus to attend appointments or access crucial services.
- **Ensure that people are helped to register with GPs so they can receive critical medical help and allow them to access the COVID-19 vaccine.** People in hotels should receive the same information and support from the accommodation providers as those in dispersal accommodation, which includes information to help contact and register with a local GP surgery.
- **Assess people's needs prior to placement to ensure that people's needs can be met.** For example, those with mobility issues should not be placed on high floors in buildings with no lifts, and for some with particular health and dietary needs hotels will never be suitable so alternative accommodation should be found. Robust processes should be put in place to ensure that children are not placed in adult accommodation.
- **Support families to register their children with schools, to prevent children missing out on education.** Accommodation providers should support families living in hotels to access schooling in the same way that they are contracted to do for those in dispersal accommodation.
- **Ensure that people are provided with appropriate and nutritious food. This includes making sure that specific dietary needs are catered for.**
- **Ensure people feel safe while living in hotels.** People seeking asylum should be protected from abuse and harassment from anti-migrant groups. If people become targets, they should be moved from that site. Hotel staff and other contractors should be briefed on the needs and experiences of people seeking asylum, and employers should adopt a zero-tolerance approach to any staff found to be abusive or inappropriate.
- **Replace mobile phones confiscated by border officials, and provide mobile data so people can access critical support from GPs, legal representatives and other services.** Individuals should have their own devices and data, rather than having to share with others or rely on hotel or support staff.
- **Ensure that people are given information about accessing legal advice.** Accommodation providers are required to provide this information as part of their ‘move in’ briefing when they are placed in dispersal accommodation. This should also be provided to those in hotel accommodation.
- **The length of stays in hotels should be reduced.** The Home Office usually aims to move people from Initial Accommodation into dispersal accommodation within 35 days and this limit should be rigorously applied to those in hotels which are not designed for long-term living.

5. This timescale was included in a letter from the Home Secretary to the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee on 18th March 2021

<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/5348/documents/53233/default/> (page 11)

6. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/windrush-lessons-learned-review>

The current situation for many people living in hotels is unacceptable and unsustainable. Those who have sought safety in the UK should be able to live safely, healthily and in dignity while awaiting the decision on their asylum claim. The experiences highlighted in this report show that this is not the case for many, which is having a significant impact on their health and well-being. They feel abandoned, unsupported and subject to treatment that is disrespectful and harmful. Fundamental gaps in support need to be addressed to prevent further suffering.

“

MARY*

Mary is a single mother of three children who called the Refugee Council's Infoline service, asking them to support her relocation from the hotel she was living in with her children. She was given the number of the Infoline at a hospital as a doctor was very concerned about her child's health. Her 14-year-old son was admitted to the hospital because he had lost 3 kilograms of weight and was diagnosed with depression. The child had lost weight since living at the hotel, due to the poor quality food supplied in the hotel. All three of her children could not eat the food because it was not suitable for children and were all incredibly unhappy at the hotel. Mary was very distressed and worried about her children's health and well-being. She had constantly raised the issues about food with Migrant Help and asked when they could be moved to dispersal accommodation. Mary had been waiting to be dispersed for over six months. The Refugee Council supported her in escalating her case to Migrant Help and provided her with a voucher for her local foodbank and information regarding a daily free food distribution in her area.

”

“

AMIR*

Amir contacted the Refugee Council because his physical and mental health was declining as a result of him living in a hotel. This was due to a range of factors, including the poor quality of food and lack of water being provided at the hotel. As Amir has underlying kidney problems, the poor quality and lack of nutritious food being provided at the hotel was making his condition worse. His GP advised him to change his diet by drinking more water, eating more vegetables and oily fish in order to address his kidney problems. It was not possible for Amir to do this as the hotel had stopped providing bottled water and juice which meant his fluid intake was reduced, and the accommodation provider failed to ensure he had access to food suitable to his health needs. He experienced very low moods due to the conditions at the hotel and because of his deteriorating overall health. The Refugee Council supported him to be relocated to a single self-contained accommodation where he could cook for himself and purchase food through asylum support payments.

”

* The names have been changed to protect the identity of the individuals

The Refugee Council is one of the leading charities in the UK working directly with refugees and supporting them to rebuild their lives. We also speak up for refugees using our direct work as an evidence base, and ensure refugees have a stronger and more influential voice in decisions that will affect them.