



# LIVES ON HOLD

Experiences of people living in hotel asylum accommodation. A follow-up report.

JULY 2022



SUPPORTING AND  
EMPOWERING  
REFUGEES

# The Refugee Council

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The Refugee Council is the leading organisation dedicated to supporting people seeking asylum and refugees in the UK.

We work directly with thousands of refugees each year, supporting them from the moment they arrive in the UK. We provide crisis advice and practical support, help them to integrate into their new communities and offer mental health counselling to help them come to terms with the trauma so many of them have experienced.

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.

## Acknowledgements:

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Particular thanks to colleagues working in the services at the Refugee Council in the Destitution, Hotel, Infoline and Therapeutic Teams for their support in producing this report. We are deeply grateful to all of the people who shared their experiences to contribute to the report.



# Contents

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<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Summary of recommendations</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Methodology</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>The asylum support system</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Overview</b>	<b>5</b>
Asylum support accommodation	5
Asylum support payments	9
<b>Issues with asylum support and Covid-19 pandemic context</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Findings</b>	<b>14</b>
Follow-up on previous findings	15
Trends from the Monitoring Evaluation and Learning (MEL) study	19
Case Study: Gebre* (38) from Eritrea	19
Case Study: Mariame* (36) from Ivory Coast	20
<b>Key trends identified through the MEL project:</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Appendix 1: Background on Asylum support contracts</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Annexes</b>	<b>31</b>
Annex A – FOI Response 68735, April 2022	31
Annex B – FOI Response 69523, May 2022	35
Annex C – Anonymous case summaries	37





# Introduction

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A year ago, the Refugee Council published a research report, **I sat watching life go by my window for so long**,<sup>1</sup> which looked into the experiences of people seeking asylum living in hotel accommodation in England. The report identified a range of problems and challenges as a result of insufficient support provided in asylum hotels. It made ten recommendations to the Home Office to improve the situation for people in hotels. Additionally, the Refugee Council had meetings with the Department to discuss the implementation of those recommendations.

This report provides an update on the situation for people living in hotels, with new information and evidence. It does not look at the experiences of unaccompanied children<sup>2</sup> as there are separate specific issues that relate to the use of hotels which impact them.

Unfortunately, a year on, the report findings confirm that people seeking asylum continue to experience the same issues whilst living in hotel accommodation, facing barriers and delays when they raise problems with relevant authorities. It is of huge concern that the scale of the issue is now significantly greater, as the hotel population almost tripled over the course of 2021 with 26,380 people accommodated in hotels across the UK at the end of 2021.<sup>3</sup>

Following the publication of the Refugee Council's previous report, the Home Office announced its intention to move people from hotels into dispersal accommodation under 'Operation Oak'. However, over the course of 2021, limited progress was made, as Operation Oak failed to meet its objective of moving people out of hotels by the end of summer 2021. Rather than reducing the overall hotel population, the number of people being accommodated in hotels has continued to increase.

This report shows that for people living in hotels, very little has improved over the last year. The prolonged stay in hotel accommodation is increasingly damaging people's health and well-being, causing depression and suicidal ideation. The Monitoring Evaluation and Learning (MEL) study set out in the report and additional evidence clearly show the scale and damaging impact the prolonged use of hotels continues to have on vulnerable individuals.

The continued use of hotels is also having an impact on accommodation providers. There has been a high rotation of staff, and Welfare Managers are struggling to visit accommodation sites as regularly as they used to.

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1 Available at: [https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/information/resources/i-sat-watching-life-go-by-my-window-for-so-long-the-experiences-of-people-seeking-asylum-living-in-hotel-accommodation/?doing\\_wp\\_cron=1650833075.1643030643463134765625](https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/information/resources/i-sat-watching-life-go-by-my-window-for-so-long-the-experiences-of-people-seeking-asylum-living-in-hotel-accommodation/?doing_wp_cron=1650833075.1643030643463134765625).

2 Refugee Council has raised this issue with parliamentarians and government ministers and will continue to do so.

3 The Refugee Council submitted FOI request to the Home Office on 4<sup>th</sup> May 2022 and received a FOI response 68735. See included in Annexe A.

It is disappointing that the Home Office has continued to open up new hotels with little or no engagement with Local Authorities (LAs) and Strategic Migration Partnerships (SMPs) who ordinarily play a pivotal role in the process of procuring asylum accommodation.<sup>4</sup> This also makes it much more challenging for NGOs like the Refugee Council to develop an operational service response, if services are not informed when new hotels are being opened.

In addition to the human impact, the cost of hotels is extremely high.<sup>5</sup> The Home Office needs to ensure the efficient use of public money, and that their policy and practice take a compassionate, person-centred approach so that people are treated with dignity and receive the level of support they deserve. Accommodating vulnerable people in hotels on such a widespread basis, with little or no support to meet their needs, runs counter to this.<sup>6</sup>

The government must urgently act to reduce the use of hotels and ensure that people seeking asylum accommodated in hotels are moved to community-based dispersal accommodation without delay.

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4 HASC report 'Asylum accommodation and support transformation programme', November 2020. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/127/public-accounts-committee/news/132736/elements-of-new-asylum-services-set-up-to-fail/>. Most recently, the Independent Chief Inspector of Border and Immigration in its report published in May 2022, 'An Inspection of the asylum contingency accommodation', recommended that the Home Office has to improve communication and engagement when developing new hotel sites and dispersal, particularly with Local Authorities.

5 According to the Home Office estimate it is £4.7m per day (which includes the cost of running Afghan bridging hotels). More information in a letter from Second Permanent Secretary at the Home Office to the Home Affairs Select Committee dated 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2022: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/8784/documents/88934/default/>

6 Following the Windrush Scandal, the Home Secretary made firm commitment to improve the way the Home Office works and head recommendations made by Wendy Williams in her 'Windrush Lessons Learnt' review, including to incorporate a more compassionate and person-centred approach. Yet, Wendy Williams's 2022 review found that the progress on the recommendations in this area has been insufficient. Review report available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1065012/14.12\\_HO\\_Windrush\\_Lessons\\_Learned\\_Review\\_Accessible\\_6\\_.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1065012/14.12_HO_Windrush_Lessons_Learned_Review_Accessible_6_.pdf).



# Summary of recommendations

The report makes 13 recommendations to the Home Office. The majority of them are a follow-up on points raised in the report from last year.

## **The Home Office must urgently undertake the following actions:**

1. Review asylum support provisions and focus on procuring dispersal accommodation to prioritise housing people in communities.
2. Take concentrated steps to strengthen meaningful and productive relationships with key stakeholders and people on asylum support as well as communities who support them, with a particular focus on supporting local authorities to provide local information and advice.
3. Ensure better compliance with Statements of Requirements for asylum support contracts and seek regular feedback on performance and adequacy of provisions from key stakeholders.
4. Review and improve escalation routes via the AIRE provisions considering significant gaps in people's ability to raise and resolve problems with accommodation and asylum support.
5. Put in place additional impartial advocacy support for people on asylum support so that there is the capacity to provide them with escalation and support on common issues (asylum support appeals, complaints, backdating support etc.) which are not currently covered under the AIRE contract.
6. The length of stay in hotels should be reduced to 35 days and this limit should be rigorously applied to those in hotels which are not designed for long-term living.
7. Urgently review the type of provisions and services which people have access to whilst in hotels. There should be a particular focus on appropriate and nutritious food, access to appropriate clothing and other essentials (e.g. plasters, paracetamol, umbrellas, nail clippers, combs, pens and notebooks), transport and communication needs, including access to mobile phones and data packages.
8. Provide a cash allowance to all people accommodated in hotels. Review and increase the current rate of support of £8.24 to reflect the cost associated with the use of mobile and internet data and an overall increase in the cost of living.
9. Ensure that people are helped to register with GPs so they can receive critical medical help, including from specialist mental health services. The Home Office needs to work closely with local health providers to assess their capacity and discuss the need and support which will be required during the planning process for dispersing people into a particular area.
10. Assess people's needs before placement to ensure that these can be appropriately met. Robust processes should be put in place to ensure that children are not placed in adult accommodation and a policy of allowing for room sharing between unrelated adults should be stopped.
11. Support families to ensure children are registered with schools and are given a school place, to prevent children missing out on education. AASC providers and local partners have to work together to address barriers which children might be facing in accessing education.
12. Ensure people feel safe while living in hotels. People seeking asylum should be protected from the risk of abuse and harassment from far-right groups.
13. Ensure that people have access to quality legal advice shortly after they make a claim for asylum, particularly since it now takes significantly longer before they are dispersed.

# Methodology

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The Refugee Council's advocacy and research work is rooted in information obtained through its service delivery. Information and data was analysed from the Refugee Council's relevant services including the national information and casework telephone service (Infoline), national Therapeutic Service, London based Destitution Service, and three projects which are delivered across Yorkshire and Humberside: Barnsley Advice Project (BRAP), HARP (Health Access to Refugees and Asylum Seekers) project and Asylum Hotel Project.

Additionally, a MEL (Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning) study was conducted to record and report on cases which have been escalated for resolution between February 2020 and June 2021. In total 39 cases were escalated in that period.<sup>7</sup> Although the sample is relatively small, the problems which have been recognised confirm the prevalence of issues that have been identified by the Refugee Council in the past as well as by other NGOs, parliamentary committees and the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI) in relation to the situation of people on asylum support.

The Refugee Council's internal casework database was also used to obtain quantitative data across all relevant services. Those services supported 6,241 people seeking asylum in 2021 and 3,071 so far this year;<sup>8</sup> the majority of those clients will be on asylum support.<sup>9</sup>

Information was also obtained through two Freedom of Information (FOI) requests<sup>10</sup> to provide context to the findings.

Lastly, information regarding relevant legislation, policy and practice has been obtained through desk-based research as well as the Refugee Council's stakeholder work with the Home Office over the years.

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<sup>7</sup> See MEL summary in Annexe C.

<sup>8</sup> Note this is a number of 'unique clients'. Number of clients for 2022 has been provided until 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Data recording fields vary between the projects so this is an approximation.

<sup>10</sup> See Annexes A and B for details of those FOI requests.





# The asylum support system

## Overview

The asylum support system was created by the provisions in Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999.<sup>11</sup> The Home Secretary was granted new powers to provide accommodation and subsistence support to people (main applicants and their dependants) who have claimed asylum in the UK and cannot meet their essential living needs. These provisions, known as asylum support, are administered by the Home Office and exist outside of the mainstream housing and welfare support. In consequence, a new area of law developed to address the asylum support issues and the Asylum Support Tribunal was established to adjudicate cases involving refusal or discontinuation of asylum support.

Despite being in place for over two decades the asylum support system has not changed much, although the Home Office has gradually started to outsource elements of the support provisions to private contractors.

Asylum support can be provided through sections 98, 95 or section 4. Section 98 support, known as initial support, is provided to people pending a full determination of their asylum support claim as long as they 'appear to be destitute'. In order to qualify for section 95 support, a person has to be destitute (or likely to become destitute in the next 14 days) and with an ongoing asylum claim. People who are destitute, but had their asylum claims fully determined (are now Appeal Rights Exhausted), might be eligible for support under section 4, providing that apart from being destitute, they can fulfil at least one of the eligibility criteria set out in the 2005 Regulations.<sup>12</sup>

## Asylum support accommodation

Historically, people on section 98 support would be moved to Initial Accommodation (IA) which is short-term, full-board housing. People should stay in IAs on average for 35 days,<sup>13</sup> following that time they will be dispersed to section 95 dispersal accommodation, providing they are successful in their asylum support application (ASF1).

People receiving section 95 and section 4 can be housed either in shared dispersal accommodation (where they share bedrooms and facilities with people who are not their family members) or dispersed to independent housing where they don't share bedrooms and/or facilities with other people. The latter form of accommodation is rare and usually awarded to people with special and additional needs (e.g. survivors of torture) or big families.

There has been an increase in the use of asylum hotels in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The ministerial directive<sup>14</sup> allowed for a temporary pause on cessations of asylum support. It meant that people continued to receive asylum support even when they were no longer eligible. This measure was introduced to support the objectives of the national lockdown and efforts to curb the spread of the Covid-19 virus in the community.

According to information obtained through the FOI request,<sup>15</sup> the Home Office was using 207 hotels to house people seeking asylum on 31<sup>st</sup> December 2021.

11 See: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1999/33/contents>

12 Regulations 3(2)(a) to 3(2)(e) of the Immigration and Asylum (Provision of Accommodation to Failed Asylum-Seekers) Regulations 2005, available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2005/930/contents/made>

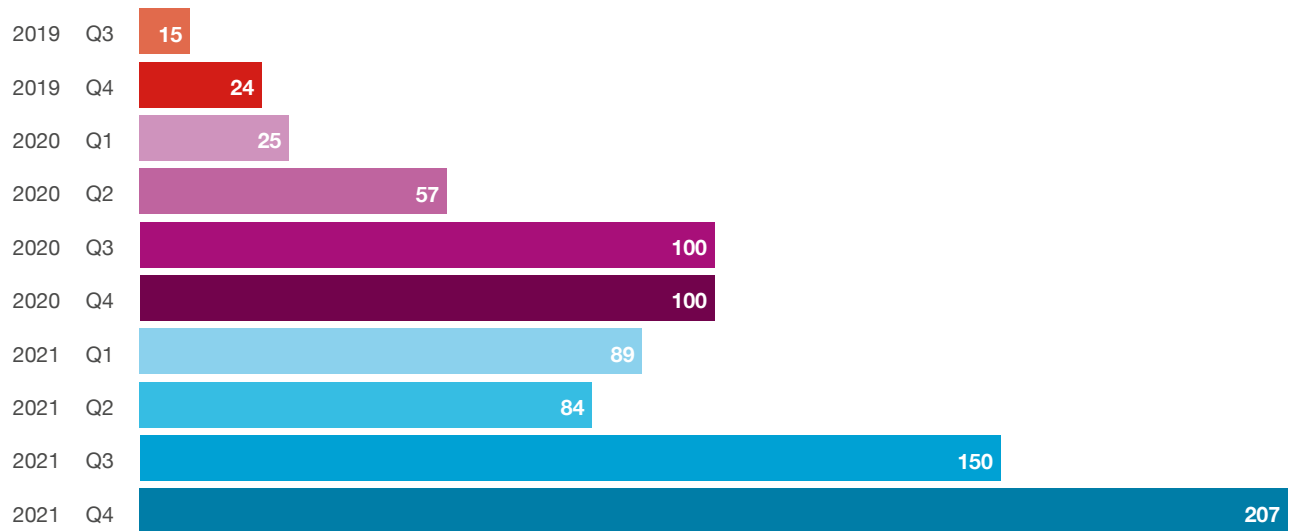
13 See NAO report 'Asylum accommodation and support', July 2020, page 4 for further detail. Available at: <https://www.nao.org.uk/report/asylum-accommodation-and-support/>

14 Letter from the then Home Office Minister, Chris Philp to the refugee NGO sector, 27<sup>th</sup> March 2020, available at: <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/27.03.20-Chris-Philp-Letter.pdf>

15 FOI request, Op. cit.

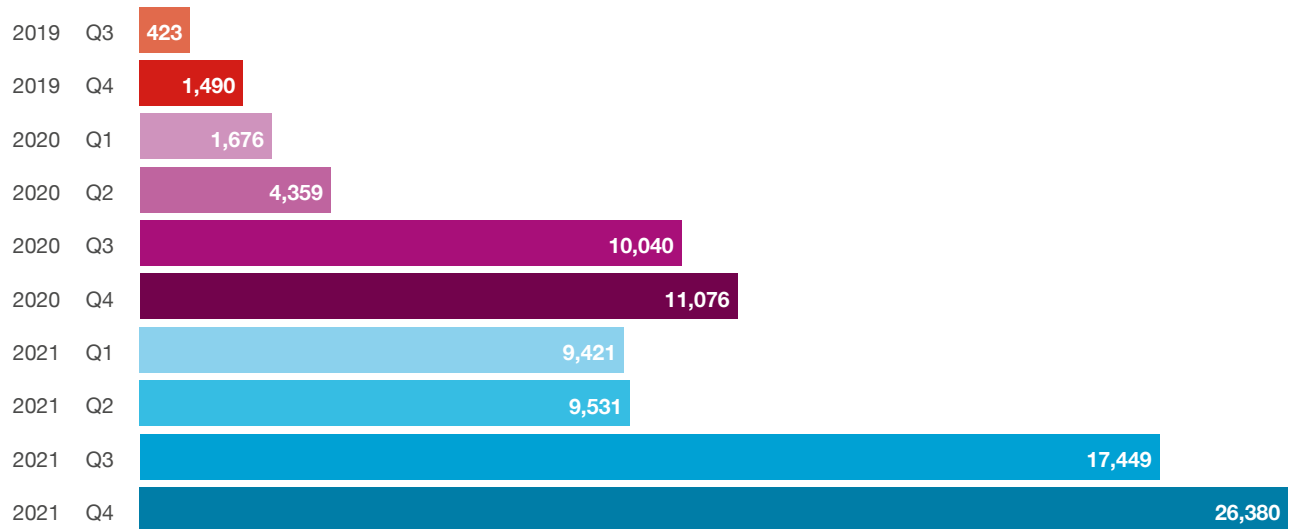


### Breakdown of the number of hotels in use at the end of each quarter for 2019, 2020, and 2021.



The Home Office was accommodating 26,380 people in hotels on 31<sup>st</sup> December 2021. Precise occupancy levels vary daily, and within the same day, therefore, the figure quoted below is a snapshot and will not necessarily account for all arrivals and departures that occurred on the day. Significantly, the number of hotels more than doubled in 2021 compared to the previous year.

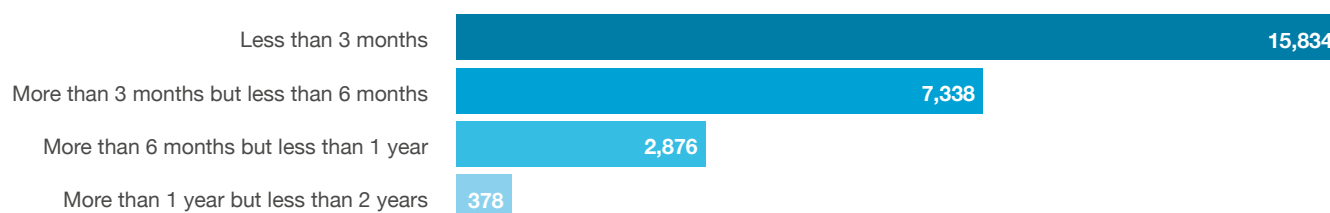
### Breakdown of the number of people seeking asylum accommodated in hotels at the end of each quarter for 2019, 2020, and 2021.<sup>16</sup>



As noted above, there has been a significant increase in the use of contingency accommodation (predominantly commercial hotels) and a much slower movement of people into dispersal accommodation. This meant that people stayed in hotels and other forms of contingency accommodation for much longer than 35 days. Significantly, the number of people in hotels nearly tripled from the start of 2021 to the end of 2021, and is more than double the number in 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

## Number of people seeking asylum accommodated in hotels at the end of 2021, broken down by the length of stay.<sup>17</sup>



Procuring dispersal accommodation has been a substantial challenge for the Home Office and its subcontractors. According to the Home Office internal data, the majority of people who stay in contingency asylum hotels are on section 95 support, meaning they should be moved to dispersal accommodation across the country to make space for those who are on section 98 support. However, those transfers are not possible or are not taking place at pace.

After a significant decline in the number of asylum applications at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been an increase in the number of people who claim asylum in the UK which also means more people apply for asylum support.

Moreover, the cooperation between the central government and local authorities on opening new dispersal areas has been poor and local authorities are often kept in the dark about the Home Office dispersal plans.<sup>18</sup> Those new demands add to existing pressures built into the asylum support system.

Poor management of the asylum accommodation estate has been widely documented both by the NGO sector as well as public bodies who scrutinise the work of the Home Office.<sup>19</sup>

It is particularly concerning to see the number of families accommodated in hotels continued to increase in 2021. A report from the ICIBI found that the number of family groups in contingency hotels had risen from 1,425 in September 2021 to 1,808 by mid-November 2021.<sup>20</sup>

According to FOI data, obtained from the Home Office, 10% of all people living in contingency hotels at the end of 2021 were children.

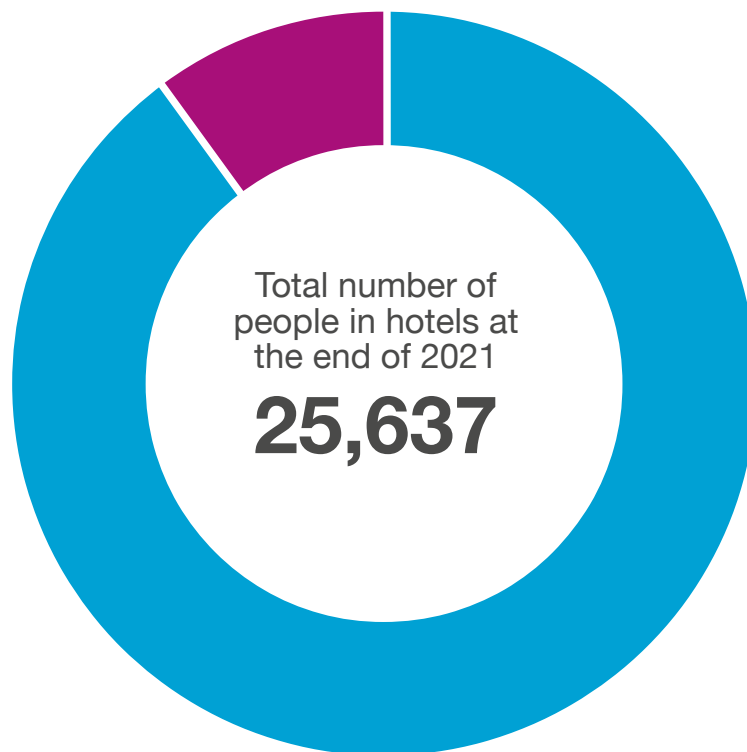
<sup>17</sup> Ibid.


<sup>18</sup> See article in the Independent regarding local council considering legal action against the Home Office, from September 2021 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/councils-asylum-legal-action-home-office-b1919837.html>.

<sup>19</sup> See the following reports for further detail: the House of Commons Library: 'Asylum accommodation: the use of hotels and military barracks', November 2020, available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8990/> and 'Policy on the dispersal of asylum seekers', 2016, available at:

<sup>20</sup> Independent Chief Inspector of Borders & Immigration report on Contingency Asylum Accommodation – May 2022

Number of children accommodated in hotels at the end of 2021.<sup>21</sup>



 Number of children

**2,569**

 Number of adults

**23,637**

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<sup>21</sup> Op cit.



## Asylum support payments

Apart from housing, people on asylum support are also provided with subsistence support by the Home Office. The rates of those payments are significantly below the level of the lowest mainstream welfare benefit entitlement, a situation which forces many people on asylum support into abject poverty.<sup>22</sup> At the moment, people on section 95 and section 4 are awarded just £40.85 per week per person to meet their essential living needs.<sup>23</sup>

Payments are made to a pre-paid payment card issued by the Home Office, called the ASPEN card. People on section 98 support who are living in full-board Initial Accommodation (IA) are not eligible to receive any asylum support payments because all their needs should be met in IAs.

However, during the pandemic, an increasing number of people on section 95 continued to live in full-board contingency accommodation and faced long delays in being dispersed. Despite provisions being very basic,<sup>24</sup> the government decided to not provide this group with asylum support payments, arguing that all their needs are met in hotel accommodation.

After intense lobbying from the UK refugee sector as well as the threat of legal challenge, the Home Office agreed to provide people living in hotel accommodation (but only those on either section 95 or 4) with £8.00 per week per person to meet the cost for buying items to meet needs related to clothes, non-prescription medicines and travel.<sup>25</sup>



<sup>22</sup> House of Commons Library 'Asylum support: accommodation and financial support for asylum seekers', April 2021, pages 23-24. Available at: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN01909/SN01909.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> See: <https://www.gov.uk/asylum-support/what-youll-get> for further information.

<sup>24</sup> Provisions were delivered as a standard package, same items for everyone with little choice. Additionally, many items were not deemed essential, e.g. paracetamol, money towards travel costs. The extended period of living in such conditions coupled with basic support which was offered meant that many people found it extremely challenging to adequately look after themselves and their families.

<sup>25</sup> Letter from the Home Office Minister to chief executives of the UK refugee NGOs, dated 27<sup>th</sup> October 2020, available at: <https://media.refugeecouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/04120727/27.10.20-Chief-Executives.pdf>.

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**“Living in the hotels is mentally and emotionally exhausting for all involved. Often suffering from physical and social isolation, clients struggle to integrate into their local communities due to a lack of access to local opportunities, clothing, public transport, mental health support and English classes.”**

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Refugee Council Hotel Co-ordinator



# Issues with asylum support and Covid-19 pandemic context

The asylum support system was created to provide temporary support to people for a limited period of time. It wasn't envisaged that people would stay on support for months and years because the plan was to make swift decisions on asylum claims and either grant protection in the UK or remove people.<sup>26</sup>

The asylum support provisions are rudimentary, they only ensure people have a roof over their head, along with access to food and basic essentials. The rate of asylum support is intentionally set to match the level of income of the poorest 10% of households in the UK. The majority of people on asylum support present with welfare, physical and mental health needs<sup>27</sup> which are often more complex than those of the general UK population.

Unfortunately, as the backlog of asylum decision-making continues to grow<sup>28</sup> so does the length of time people stay on asylum support. This trend has a knock-on effect on the flow of people between initial and contingency accommodation into dispersal and onwards to the mainstream support system. Addressing this overarching issue is crucial in resolving any subsequent problems with asylum support.

A well-documented body of evidence, including the Refugee Council research from last year, *I sat watching life go by my window for so long*, provides a comprehensive analysis of a range of issues that make the asylum support system dysfunctional and not fit for purpose.<sup>29</sup>

Additionally, the Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on people on asylum support. Existing problems and barriers were exacerbated and many people were left without access to advocacy and support because refugee NGOs had to suspend their frontline work. People on asylum support live on the breadline, they don't have sufficient funds available to purchase mobile phones, top-up and internet credit and data. They are digitally excluded and the Home Office's understanding of essential living needs hasn't changed in the last 20 years, meaning the costs associated with modern communication needs are not covered by subsistence provisions.

26 See the government's policy paper, 'Fairer, Faster And Firmer - a modern approach to immigration and asylum', July 1998 for further detail. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fairer-faster-and-firmer-a-modern-approach-to-immigration-and-asylum>.

27 See an analysis of the British Medical Association (BMA) from April 2022, available at: <https://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/ethics/refugees-overseas-visitors-and-vulnerable-migrants/refugee-and-asylum-seeker-patient-health-toolkit/unique-health-challenges-for-refugees-and-asylum-seekers>

28 The Refugee Council research into backlogs, 'Living in a Limbo - a Decade of delays in the UK asylum system', July 2021., available at: [https://refugeecouncil.org.uk/information/resources/living-in-limbo-a-decade-of-delays-in-the-uk-asylum-system-july-2021/?doing\\_wp\\_cron=1652171946.6030890941619873046875](https://refugeecouncil.org.uk/information/resources/living-in-limbo-a-decade-of-delays-in-the-uk-asylum-system-july-2021/?doing_wp_cron=1652171946.6030890941619873046875).

29 For example, Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration and HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 'An inspection of the use of contingency asylum accommodation - key findings from site visits to Penally Camp and Napier Barracks', 8 March 2021. Available at: <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>. Home Affairs Committee, 'Home Office preparedness for COVID-19: institutional accommodation', 28 July 2020. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/2171/documents/20132/default/>. National Audit Office, Op. cit. Public Accounts Committee, 'Asylum accommodation and support transformation programme', 20 November 2020. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/3561/documents/34409/default/>. Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, 'An inspection of the Home Office's management of asylum accommodation provision February - June 2018', 20 November 2018. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/757285/ICIBI\\_An\\_inspection\\_of\\_the\\_HO\\_management\\_of\\_asylum\\_accommodation.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/757285/ICIBI_An_inspection_of_the_HO_management_of_asylum_accommodation.pdf). Home Affairs Committee, 'Asylum accommodation: replacing COMPASS', 17 December 2018. Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmhaff/1758/1758.pdf>. Home Affairs Committee, 'Asylum Accommodation', 31 January 2017. Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmhaff/637/637.pdf>.



As research into the risks and spread of Covid-19 shows, people on asylum support are at an increased risk of contracting Covid-19, having complications and even dying because of the virus.<sup>30</sup> Yet many people seeking asylum were allocated shared accommodation during the pandemic. Some of them contracted the virus and died because they were sharing facilities with people who were not members of their households.<sup>31</sup> At the height of the pandemic, when most of us could enjoy the relative safety of our homes, people on asylum support were exposed to unnecessary risks.<sup>32</sup>

Ensuring contract compliance has been a significant challenge. During the pandemic, both AIRE and AASC providers had to make changes to their operation so that services can be provided in a Covid-19 compliant way and they are able to appropriately respond to the need of people on asylum support. The Home Office decided to exercise discretion and allowed, e.g. for non-urgent accommodation repairs to be put on hold and Migrant Help staff withdrew from on-site support in asylum accommodation. It was a time when contractors (who had already been criticised for insufficient protection and support) received even less external and impartial scrutiny.

This situation put organisations like the Refugee Council and other refugee NGOs in a difficult position. On the one hand, caseworkers were getting daily reports from clients about often significant problems they were experiencing, on the other, the feedback and issue reporting mechanisms did not provide many of them with redress and resolution.

People should be able to raise issues directly, through Migrant Help, and have them addressed within specified time-frames. However, the experience of both caseworkers and clients has been quite different. Frontline staff had to support clients with raising and following up on cases because they were either not able to do this themselves (due to long waiting times to be connected with Migrant Help's telephone helpline, calls on hold often being cut off, no access to the Internet or phone) or there has been no reply regarding the status of their case and the Refugee Council's staff had to advocate on their behalf.


On occasions, caseworkers had to escalate cases to the advocacy team because there was no response from the providers to escalations raised through official channels. All these escalations were recorded and monitored through the MEL project.

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30 This includes government own research, e.g. PHE, 'Disparities in the risk and outcomes of COVID-19', August 2020. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/908434/Disparities\\_in\\_the\\_risk\\_and\\_outcomes\\_of\\_COVID\\_August\\_2020\\_update.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/908434/Disparities_in_the_risk_and_outcomes_of_COVID_August_2020_update.pdf) or Women and Equalities Committee research, 'Unequal impact? Coronavirus and BAME people', December 2020. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/3965/documents/39887/default/>.

31 An article in the Independent reports on a death of a 30-year-old man in asylum accommodation, 11 May 2020. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/coronavirus-asylum-seeker-uk-hotel-death-a9507696.html>

32 Doctors of the World and University of Birmingham research report: 'They have just left me. Asylum seekers, health, and access to healthcare in initial and contingency accommodation', April 2022. Available at: <https://www.doctorsoftheworld.org.uk/news/report-proves-home-offices-accommodation-plans-leave-people-seeking-sanctuary-in-the-uk-without-adequate-medical-care/>.



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**“Many people say that living in hotels is centred around waiting. Waiting for their ASPEN card, waiting for their dispersal accommodation, waiting for the interview etc. They constantly face a lack of certainty about when they will leave the hotel, or even if they will be deported out of the country. This makes it very difficult for clients to settle into the UK as they do not know where they will be living even one week later.”**

Refugee Council Hotel Co-ordinator

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# Findings

When the Refugee Council published its report on people seeking asylum in hotels last year the Home Office was in the process of delivering 'Operation Oak' which was aimed at moving people from hotels into dispersal accommodation by the end of summer 2021. Unfortunately, a year on, hotels and other forms of contingency accommodation are still being used – and a new accommodation centre in Linton-On-Ouse could be opened soon. Instead of planning and procuring dispersal places and housing people in the community, the Home Office is in crisis mode struggling to see 'the face behind the case' when it comes to people in the asylum system. Rather than finding solutions, including allowing people in the asylum system to work, which would serve both people seeking asylum as well as the local communities who host them, the Government is setting up wholly inappropriate large-scale accommodation centres in disused military barracks.

Such accommodation has a very harmful impact on the people accommodated there, preventing sufficient access to the legal and health services they need. They also remain cut off from the rest of society and support networks.

The Refugee Council is deeply concerned to observe the impact that providing asylum support in hotel accommodation has on individuals, families and children. By gathering information and evidence through the Refugee Council's therapeutic work with people, staff have seen an increase in poor mental health as well as suicide ideation, including amongst children. It is unacceptable that people have to live in conditions which are dehumanising and directly cause their health and well-being to deteriorate, and that they don't even have access to clothing or appropriate footwear.

The safety of people housed in hotels is an issue of huge concern. On one hand, an increase in far-right activity and harassment has been on a rise, on the other, there are reports of people who went missing from hotels and are suspected to have been trafficked.





# FOLLOW-UP ON PREVIOUS FINDINGS

Following on from the publication of the previous report, the Refugee Council engaged with the Home Office to discuss and take forward the key recommendations. It is disappointing that very limited progress has been made toward implementing these recommendations.

The following section looks at each of the previous recommendations and provides a commentary on the level of progress made over the last year.

**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.**

## PROGRESS AFTER A YEAR:

People still rely on donations organised by local charity groups and refugee NGOs. Because those on sections 95 and 4 still don't receive their full weekly asylum support, they cannot afford to purchase clothing, even in second-hand shops. Moreover, those who are on section 98 support still don't receive any money, meaning they rely solely on the goodwill of people who donate and distribute clothing in asylum hotels. This is especially problematic for families with children who need to replace clothing at a much faster rate than adults. People the Refugee Council services support struggle, particularly with access to new underwear, socks and tights.

**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 plasters, paracetamol, umbrellas, nail clippers, combs, pens and notebooks. They cannot catch a bus to attend appointments or access crucial services.**

## PROGRESS AFTER A YEAR:

Unfortunately, no progress has been made to accommodate additional needs that people have are not being covered through standard provisions. The Home Office did not assess whether the essential items provided by AASC providers are sufficient, there are also significant variations between providers in terms of the items they give to people and even between hotels run by the same provider, especially when they sub-contract to commercial providers. This situation is deeply concerning, especially since contingency hotels no longer operate like Initial Accommodation, but resemble dispersal and people stay in those places for much longer than intended.

**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 them contact and register with a local GP surgery.**

## PROGRESS AFTER A YEAR:

Not only are providers not registering people when more than 10 of them arrive at the accommodation in the same week (in line with AASC SoR) but they often fail to provide transportation to hospital appointments. The Refugee Council's health project, HARP, has been assisting a significant number of people who missed their hospital appointments because transport did not arrive at an agreed time. Some of those people are cancer patients receiving life-saving treatments.



**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.**

#### **PROGRESS AFTER A YEAR:**

With a significant deficit of available accommodation people are usually housed in hotels which have places available. They are also being moved with little or no notice between asylum hotel sites. Furthermore, and contrary to the Home Office's own guidance, providers often don't give information to people about the type of accommodation or location they are going to be moved to.

**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.**

#### **PROGRESS AFTER A YEAR:**

It's a serious concern that children living in contingency hotels are missing key development milestones and are placed in a situation where they face prolonged disadvantages. They do not have the space to be active and they struggle to find appropriate space to study. Families share hotel rooms which by design are not set up with children and young people in mind, who need to do activities such as homework or prepare for an exam.

**Ensure that people are provided with appropriate and nutritious food. This includes making sure that specific dietary needs are catered for.**

#### **PROGRESS AFTER A YEAR:**

Although providing food suitable to personal needs is already a requirement under the SoR for AASC contracts, the Refugee Council staff have found that there has been a drastic decline in people's overall health as a result of poor-quality meals distributed across asylum hotels. This is not an issue specific to one provider and staff have also observed that the situation tends to get particularly bad when a provider sub-contracts to a commercial partner, who usually has no prior experience of catering for such a diverse and vulnerable group of people, including children and people with health problems. The Refugee Council's staff have also found that some providers are withholding snacks, providing smaller portions, and under or over-cooking food when people complain about conditions at a particular hotel.

**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.**

#### **PROGRESS AFTER A YEAR:**

Although the Home Office is quick to reassure us that they will not tolerate any form of abuse towards people living in contingency hotels, far-right groups continue to try to gain access to hotels, harassing people outside, e.g. in the car parks and filming them without permission. It is clear that the steps which the Home Office and AASC providers have been taking are insufficient and more care and planning is needed when a new hotel site is going to be open. This is yet another argument as to why housing people in the community is the best and safest option.

**Replace mobile phones confiscated by border force 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.**

#### **PROGRESS AFTER A YEAR:**

Although the Home Office initially stringently denied that any confiscations at the border took place, the Home Secretary had to later apologise for misleading the court when the evidence became available that indeed they had been taking place, unlawfully. The Covid-19 pandemic clearly showed how vital access to a phone and the internet is; there is no good reason to not provide access to technology to people who are living in contingency hotels.

**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.**

#### **PROGRESS AFTER A YEAR:**

Although under the AIRE contract, people should be given a list of legal aid asylum solicitors in their area, it is the accessibility and quality of such advice that matters the most. Additionally, people should be supported with obtaining legal advice at the point they claim asylum or soon after. There is no reason to delay sharing information about locally available legal advice particularly since people stay in hotels for months and some for more than a year. It is vital that people are connected with respectable legal advisers. Too often people fall prey to disingenuous providers or are moved to areas where there is no legal advice available.



**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.**

**PROGRESS AFTER A YEAR:**

Unfortunately, there has been very little progress. Asylum hotels are still in use, and there are no plans to close them down completely and move people into dispersal accommodation. Fixing the problem by procuring additional accommodation should be the government's top priority along with widening dispersal across the UK. It is vital that modelling and plans are long-term and sustainable.



## Trends from the Monitoring Evaluation and Learning (MEL) study

The start of the Covid-19 pandemic has been an extremely challenging time for the Refugee Council's staff working in the services as well as for the people they support. The staff had to rapidly change the way they operate to ensure they could continue to provide care to as many people as possible. It became obvious quite quickly how overwhelming the need is and that clients are left with very few places they can turn to for help. At the time when the asylum system was put to the test, it failed to provide an adequate level of support and protection to adults and children. The Refugee Council responded by scaling up the Infoline service so even more people could call the organisation for information and advice. Also, it was decided to provide 1:1 and group advocacy to people living in contingency hotels through the Asylum Hotel Project and continue to offer support through HARP, the London Destitution and Therapeutic Projects.

The caseworkers in the Asylum Hotel Project were often the first NGO representatives who started visiting hotels, when it became safe and possible to do so. Staff were overwhelmed by the level of need and urgency of issues people were requiring help with. It became apparent fairly quickly that the helpline operated by Migrant Help couldn't address the needs of the many people on asylum support.

Staff also saw dedication from many colleagues at the Home Office and Migrant Help who worked around the clock to progress urgent escalations and get to the bottom of issues staff had raised. Thanks to their support the Refugee Council were able to escalate cases and make sure that the right people had information and evidence to help. The staff appreciated this understanding and willingness to work together.

### Case Study: Gebre\* (38) from Eritrea

The Refugee Council have been supporting Mr Gebre through the Destitution Service, he has complex mental health issues resulting from the torture he sustained in his home country as well as an ongoing physical condition for which he is being treated at the hospital. The client was placed in a contingency hotel in London, but the accommodation wasn't suitable for a number of reasons. One of the residents was taken into police custody after he wielded a knife, and threatened to attack and injure residents living at this site. He was then released back to the accommodation.

The client was terrified and asked, several times, to be moved, because he feared further attacks. He wasn't able to contact the accommodation manager for the site, who had left, and no information about their replacement had been provided. He did not know how to respond other than by calling the police.

The case was escalated through MEL and it was established that there were significant

communication gaps and safeguarding concerns which were not properly addressed. Specifically, the Home Office did not receive safeguarding alerts on this case despite Clearspring and Migrant Help assuring staff at the Refugee Council that the case has been escalated through appropriate channels. Additionally, the communication with residents was very poor and the way this case was handled showed a lack of safeguards and procedural failures.

The second issue in the client's case was the lack of payments and food vouchers for four days.

This meant the client was unable to eat and meet his other essential living needs during this time. He escalated his case with Migrant Help, to no avail, and the situation was only resolved after the involvement of senior officials at the Home Office.

The client was distraught by the whole experience, and became even more fearful and withdrawn.

*\*We take safeguarding extremely seriously. Names have been changed to protect identities.*

Despite following agreed processes, there were many situations where the Refugee Council staff weren't getting answers to issues raised, often despite repeated chasing, progress was very slow or they needed support with urgent escalations. Staff agreed on an additional internal system where cases which got stuck in the escalation process were raised internally with the Refugee Council's advocacy team. Those cases were then raised directly with senior teams at Migrant Help and the Home Office and eventually, most of them were successfully resolved. All those cases, 39 in total, spanned the period of time between February 2020 – June 2021, and have been recorded and processed through the MEL project.

**“Food is one of the biggest problems and we often support clients to access food that is suitable for their particular dietary requirements. As a result of our intervention, several of our clients are now able to have their first good meal in two months, without stomach pain.”**

Refugee Council Hotel Co-ordinator

## Case Study: Mariame\* (36) from Ivory Coast

At the time the Refugee Council started to support this client she was 37 weeks pregnant and living in shared contingency accommodation in London. Her accommodation was cockroach infested, she was scared to live there, and terrified by the prospect of bringing her newborn baby into this situation.

The client made several relocation requests through the established routes but these were denied. The Refugee Council's adviser had also been following up on this case, however, there had been no progress so the advisor decided to instruct a solicitor. This was because of the risk to the client as well as her newborn child. Eventually, the relocation was granted following an appeal, and the client was moved – 3.5 months after making a first complaint and a month after the Court's Order instructing the Home Office to move her and her newborn child.

However, the client's problems did not end there, she was prevented from taking all her belongings

to her new accommodation, including items for her newborn child. It was not explained why she could not take all of the essentials with her and when she complained about it to the accommodation staff, she felt harassed by them. Over a year has passed and the client is still waiting for all her possessions to be returned and has an outstanding complaint which was made several months ago.

This case shows how the asylum system can fail to provide support to pregnant women and new mothers. Despite the Court Order, the progress on the client's case has been too slow and the safeguarding and support processes were not used properly to assist her. Rather than focusing on giving birth and looking after her child, the client had to go through a stressful appeal process to defend her rights and be relocated from accommodation which should not have been used in the first place, considering the infestation.

The overarching finding has confirmed a view by the Refugee Council and other refugee NGOs that the AIRE process is not providing effective solutions to people on asylum support. The fact that the Refugee Council staff and also colleagues who normally don't do casework had to be involved in pursuing escalations in 39 cases shows significant gaps. The system is not accessible to people and even if they raise concerns via AIRE they very often need support from refugee NGOs to ensure their cases are resolved.

The type of issues the Refugee Council has been involved in concerned compliance on the part of the AASC providers. It was concerning to discover that all AIRE can do is to record an issue and pass it on either to the Home Office or AASC provider. There has been no feedback or follow-up mechanism whereby Migrant Help would check on the progress of an escalation or complaint. On the contrary, they consider the case as being closed at their end and only re-engage with an issue if either an individual or their advisor got in touch with them to say that problems were still outstanding.

Lastly, the Refugee Council staff were able to successfully resolve clients' cases and often avoided costly and long litigation, only because of their capacity to support clients and by being able to contact senior management at the Home Office and Migrant Help to progress issues. This is not an avenue which is available to many refugee NGOs and is out of reach to individuals. Although the Refugee Council is very appreciative of being able to do this and it is an example of good leadership and crisis response by the Home Office, it is not the type of support which is available to everyone.

On top of the above general findings, trends have been identified through the MEL project. Issues have been tracked back in individual cases and response time-frames were analysed to understand the barriers each of the Refugee Council's clients were facing in seeking redress in their cases. Not all of those the Refugee Council works with were living in contingency hotels when they sought support, some were already dispersed, however, their accommodation was unsuitable, e.g. they did not have working heating during the winter months. It is a real concern that a new property was signed off by the AASC as ready to rent despite basic amenities not working.





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**“Clients often trust us during a time that they may find it difficult to trust other organisations. One gentleman I supported was missing many of his documents and was scared of making a complaint, saying ‘if I file a complaint, it may cause damage to my file’.”**

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Refugee Council Hotel Co-ordinator



# Key trends identified through the MEL project:

## DISPERSAL

Delays in relocating people to dispersal accommodation even in cases where dispersal has been approved by the Home Office.

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## REPAIRS

Delays in addressing urgent repairs in accommodation, e.g. lack of heating, broken windows despite repair tickets raised through AIRE.

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## COMMUNICATION

Home Office letters are often sent to the wrong address meaning some of the clients were marked as 'failed to travel' on a system when they did not even know that the dispersal has been arranged. It resulted in asylum payments being incorrectly stopped in the case of one of the clients, and took around four months for the missing payments to be correctly backdated. The Home Office never disputed the fact that they have incorrect addresses for people on their database, this was one of the main reasons why the ASPEN card transition in May 2021 was so poorly managed.

## FOOD

As reported in the report published in 2021, the Refugee Council has assisted numerous clients because they were not getting appropriate food. One of the recorded cases concerned a mother with small children who were drastically losing weight, another client who was undergoing chemotherapy and had problems with swallowing solid food often went hungry for days. Through the therapeutic work, the close link between poor diet and an increase in overall stress and anxiety is clearly evident. People's health deteriorates rapidly when their basic needs are not managed properly.

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## COVID-19

It has been deeply concerning and inappropriate for the Home Office to treat unrelated adults living in contingency hotels as one support bubble. Although people could isolate in hotel rooms and the Home Office paused room-sharing between unrelated adults, those people still needed to use shared facilities. There have been deaths, many hotels had to enter quarantine and to this day people struggle with long-term Covid symptoms. We think the Home Office failed to ensure the safety of everyone on asylum support, and that the scale of the problem would not have been as bad if people were predominantly housed in the community.





## PAYMENTS

Many of the escalation cases concerned incorrect (insufficient) asylum support payments, wrongful cancellations of payments and delays in issuing emergency payments and transferring funds to ASPEN cards. The process of rectifying those mistakes has been slow and laborious. As a result, people who were getting a minuscule amount of money to survive were left with no funds, often for weeks before payments were reinstated and backdated. It is shocking that people had to resort to using food banks and rely on support from refugee NGOs to be able to feed themselves and their children or buy essentials, such as paracetamol.

## ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

There has been an increase in anti-social behaviour, amongst residents as well as the hotel staff, and an increase in the far-right activity around contingency hotels. The Home Office and asylum support providers failed to ensure sufficient safeguards time and time again and cases only got the required level of attention after they were escalated with senior staff at the Home Office. In one of the client's cases, it took 41 days to resolve an urgent safeguarding issue.

## CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

As noted earlier, there were 2,569 children in hotels at the end of 2021. The Refugee Council has supported and spoken to many families and children and it was poignant to learn about the depth of unmet needs. Children, in particular, struggled with accessing education since many schools did not want to enrol them initially because their stay in a hotel was meant to be temporary. When they eventually joined their new class, many did not have an appropriate place to study and lacked the facilities to join remote classes.

## MENTAL HEALTH

There has been an overall decrease in people's mental health and well-being as a result of living in accommodation which is not suitable especially for long periods of time. It is not unusual for a healthy person to develop mental health issues as a result of living in contingency hotels for months with no information about when they are going to be moved. Additionally, people feel disempowered and not in control of their lives, even in relation to basic activities like being able to choose the food they eat or able to afford to buy new underwear. The system is dehumanising and many people feel deeply traumatised by the experience of living on asylum support



# Conclusion and recommendations

This report's findings highlight the continued issues and damaging impact arising from the use of contingency hotel accommodation. They echo the findings and recommendations made in previous reports and enquiries into asylum support. Sustaining the use of hotels as contingency accommodation is not only costly and ineffective, it also has a hugely damaging impact on the wellbeing of people seeking asylum, and places a huge amount of pressure on councils and refugee NGOs who struggle to fill gaps in provisions and respond to unmet needs. The Home Office must take urgent action to address these issues and reduce the number of people accommodated in contingency hotels.

## Recommendations:

1. Review asylum support provisions and focus on procuring dispersal accommodation to prioritise housing people in communities. There has to be a clear plan for transferring people from hotels to suitable and safe dispersal accommodation. The process should be transparent, with updates available to stakeholders, and early information provided to those in the asylum system.
2. Take concentrated steps to strengthen meaningful and productive relationships with key stakeholders and people on asylum support as well as communities who support them. Particular effort should be made to assist Local Authorities to provide local information and advice to people living in contingency hotels. Local Authorities and refugee NGOs should be included in the induction process when new people arrive at a contingency hotel.
3. Ensure better compliance with the Statement of Requirements for asylum support contracts and seek regular feedback on performance and adequacy of provisions from key stakeholders. The Home Office should also further develop the survey process it is currently undertaking with people on support by enabling alternatives to on-line surveys and arranging focus group meetings with people throughout the year to hear directly about their experiences.
4. Review and improve escalation routes via the AIRE provisions considering the significant gaps in people's ability to raise and resolve problems with accommodation and asylum support. Ensure the robust escalation process is available to everyone on asylum support and that there is a dedicated route for advisers to raise urgent cases.





5. Put in place additional impartial advocacy support for people on asylum support so that there is the capacity to provide them with escalation and support on common issues (asylum support appeals, complaints, backdating support etc.) which are not currently covered under the AIRE contract.
6. The length of stay 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.
7. Urgently review the provisions which people have access to whilst in hotels, with a particular focus on ensuring access to nutritious food, including providing people with an opportunity to cook their own meals where possible. Ensure people are able to access basic essentials such as clothing for children and adults as well as plasters, paracetamol, umbrellas, access to transport and their communication needs, including access to mobile phones and data packages.
8. Provide a cash allowance to all people accommodated in hotels so they can buy essentials and can afford to buy healthy food and supplements. Review and increase the current rate of support of £8.24 to reflect the cost associated with the use of mobile and internet data and an overall increase in the cost of living.
9. Ensure that people are helped to register with GPs so they can receive critical medical help, including specialist mental health services. The Home Office needs to work closely with local health providers to assess their capacity and discuss the need and support which will be required during the planning process for dispersing people into a particular area.
10. Assess people's needs before placement to ensure that these can be appropriately met. Robust processes should be put in place to ensure that children are not placed in adult accommodation and a policy of allowing for room sharing between unrelated adults has to stop.
11. Support families to ensure that children are registered with schools and are given a school place, to prevent children missing out on education. AASC providers and local partners have to work together to address barriers which children might be facing in accessing education.
12. Ensure people feel safe while living in hotels. People seeking asylum should be protected from abuse and harassment from far-right groups. 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. The Home Office should prioritise housing people in the community where such risks would significantly decrease.
13. Ensure that people can access quality legal advice early in the process, considering it now takes significantly longer before they are dispersed. The Home Office needs to work with the Legal Aid Agency and the Ministry of Justice to ensure there is enough matter starts for legal aid advice and that people are not dispersed to Legal Aid 'advice deserts'.



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# Appendix 1:

## Background on Asylum support contracts

### ASYLUM SUPPORT CONTRACTS

Over the years, a range of the Home Office functions have been contracted to private companies although the Home Office retains overall control and responsibility of how its contractors deliver on agreed areas.

### OVERVIEW OF ACCOMMODATION CONTRACTS

The Home Office contracted out accommodation and transportation elements of the asylum support, initially through the COMPASS (Commercial and Operational Managers Procuring Asylum Support Services) contract which was delivered across six UK regions by three accommodation providers: SERCO, G4S and Clearer. These companies had separate contracts with the Home Office, which they have further subcontracted to partner private companies in the regions.

The COMPASS contract was awarded in 2012 and became fully operational in January 2013. The contract was awarded for five years (until 2017) with a possibility of a two-year extension (until 2019). The total cost of COMPASS is not easily accessible, however, in the financial year 2011 – 2012 the cost of providing asylum support accommodation was £150 million per year.

On 8<sup>th</sup> December 2016, the then Immigration Minister, Robert Goodwill, announced in Parliament that the COMPASS contract will be extended until August 2019. The procurement process to replace COMPASS started in November 2017, however, there were initially no successful bids from three regions (Northern Ireland, North East of England and Yorkshire and Humberside) and the procurement had to take place again in May 2018. The Asylum Accommodation and Support Services (AASC) contract was awarded for 10 years to three commercial providers: Clearspring, Serco, Mears on 8<sup>th</sup> January 2019. AASC started in September 2019 and will run until 2029 with a break-clause after seven years. The estimated cost of the AASC is £4 billion.





## OVERVIEW OF THE ADVICE CONTRACT

The announcement about the Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility service (AIRE) contract was made by the then Immigration Minister, Caroline Nokes, on 8<sup>th</sup> January 2019, together with the announcement on AASC. The AIRE contract was awarded to Migrant Help and it commenced in September 2019. Like the AASC, AIRE is a 10-year contract with £235 million awarded. Migrant Help was responsible for delivering previous Home Office contracts on asylum support: Consolidated Advice and Guidance Service (CAGS) and Consolidated Asylum Support and Application Services (CASAS), however, AIRE is not a continuation of the previous services. The Aim of AIRE is to provide impartial and independent information, advice, guidance and assistance to help Service Users to understand and navigate the Asylum Support System effectively.

Preparations to transition to new contracts took eight months and a new unit was set up at the Home Office in order to ensure it is a smooth process. The contract requires close co-operation between Migrant Help, accommodation providers (especially their Welfare Officers) and local councils and other relevant stakeholders in relation to Positive and Negative Move-On support.

Migrant Help works with four subcontractors across Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England to deliver AIRE work on Positive Move-On. These are Scottish Refugee Council (Scotland), Welsh Refugee Council (Wales), Reed in Partnership (England) and Bryson Intercultural (Northern Ireland). Negative Move-On support is provided by Migrant Help.

They are the first port of call for people on asylum support and their advisers who want to raise issues with accommodation and asylum support, including complaints. To enable this, Migrant Help operates a telephone line, e-mail service as well as a web portal where issues can be logged. Migrant Help staff will process issue tickets within 30 minutes, meaning they will raise a problem with a relevant body (AASC provider or the Home Office) on behalf of the claimants or their advisers. According to the Statement of Requirements for the AIRE contract, telephone calls should be answered within one minute and all calls queued for a maximum of three minutes before being connected to a member of staff.



## Annex A: FOI Response 68735, April 2022



Freedom of Information  
Central Correspondence Team  
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Kama Petruczenko

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FOI Reference: 68735

1 April 2022

Dear Ms Petruczenko

Thank you for your enquiry of 4 March in which you requested information about accommodation for people seeking asylum. Your request has been handled as a request for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA).

### Information Requested

*I'm writing to request the following information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA).*

- 1. Number of hotels in use to accommodate people seeking asylum at the end of 2021.*
- 2. Number of hotels in use at the end of each quarter for 2019, 2020, and 2021.*
- 3. Number of people seeking asylum accommodated in hotels at the end of 2021.*
- 4. Number of people seeking asylum accommodated in hotels at the end of each quarter for 2019, 2020, and 2021.*
- 5. Number of hotels in use to accommodate people seeking asylum broken down by UK region.*
- 6. Number of people seeking asylum accommodated in hotels at the end of 2021, broken down by age groups. Can we please ask for the following breakdown:*
  - Under 15*
  - 15-24*
  - 25-44*
  - 45-64*
  - 65 and over*

7. *Number of people seeking asylum accommodated in hotels at the end of 2021, broken down by gender.*
8. *Number of people seeking asylum accommodated in hotels at the end of 2021, broken down by the length of stay. Can we please ask for the following breakdown:*
  - *Less than 3 months*
  - *More than 3 months but less than 6 months*
  - *More than 6 months but less than 1 year*
  - *More than 1 year but less than 2 years*
  - *More than 2 years but less than 3 years*
  - *More than 3 years*

## **Response**

We can confirm that we hold most of the data you have requested. However, please note the following caveats to the information provided in response to your request:

- A) The data have been drawn from internal Management Information and are not assured statistics.
- B) The data represent a snapshot in time and may have changed as records are updated.

Unless explicitly stated otherwise all numbers relating to the population are numbers of people, not numbers of claims. They therefore include dependents and family members of claimants.

**Q1** - The Home Office were using 207 hotels to house supported asylum seekers on 31 December 2021.

**Q2** - The Home Office introduced new contracts for the provision of accommodation to supported asylum seekers during 2019 and information relating to the use of contingency accommodation prior to September of that year is not available.

At the end of Q3 2019 the Home Office were using fifteen hotels to house supported asylum seekers. At the end of Q4 2019 this had increased to 24 hotels.

For each consecutive quarter of 2020 the figures were as follows: 25, 57,100,100.

For each consecutive quarter of 2021 the figures were as follows: 89, 84,150, 207.

**Q3** - The Home Office were accommodating 26,380 people in hotels on 31 December 2021. Please note that precise occupancy levels vary daily, and within the same day. The figure quoted is a snapshot and will not necessarily account for all arrivals and departures that occurred on the day.

**Q4** - The Home Office introduced new contracts for the provision of accommodation to supported asylum seekers during 2019 and information relating to the use of contingency accommodation prior to September of that year is not available.

Please note that precise occupancy levels vary daily, and within the same day. The figure quoted is a snapshot and will not necessarily account for all arrivals and departures that occurred on the day.

At the end of Q3 2019 records indicate that 423 supported asylum seekers were accommodated in hotels. At the end of Q4 2019 that had increased to 1490 supported asylum seekers.

For 2020 the figures for each consecutive quarter are: 1676, 4359, 10,040, 11,076.

For 2021 the figures for each consecutive quarter are: 9421, 9531, 17,449, 26,380.

**Q5** - Precise number and location of contingency sites being used will vary on a daily basis and the figures quoted are a snapshot from the end of December 2021.

In the East Midlands region there were 10 Hotels housing supported asylum seekers.

In the East of England region there were 9 Hotels

In London Region there were 76 Hotels

In the North East Region there were 6 Hotels

In the North West Region there were 17 Hotels

In the Northern Ireland Region there were 13 Hotels

In the Scotland Region there were 5 Hotels

In the South East Region there were 20 Hotels

In the South West Region there were 11 Hotels

In the Wales Region there were no Hotels

In the West Midlands Region there were 18 Hotels

In the Yorkshire & Humber Region there were 22 Hotels

**Q6** - Please note that figures are based on "stated age" rather than "verified age". At the end of December 2021 records indicate that:

There were 2,220 people under 15 years of age accommodated in hotels. These were dependents of supported adult asylum seekers.

There were 8,397 people between the age of 15 & 24.

There were 13,762 people between the age of 25 and 44

There were 1,157 between the age of 45 and 64

There were 101 aged 65 or over

There were 743 for whom the age was unconfirmed or not recorded.

**Q7** - At the end of December 2021 there were:

22,160 supported asylum seeking people of Male gender accommodated in hotels.

4,193 supported asylum seeking people of Female gender accommodated in hotels.

27 people for whom gender was not known or not recorded.



**Q8** - Please note that length of stay records are calculated from the date of first entry to supported accommodation. They may therefore not account for periods of absence or subsequent return to hotel accommodation.

Records indicate that on 31 December 2021 there were:

15,834 supported asylum seekers housed in hotels for less than three months.

7,338 housed in hotels for between three and six months.

2,826 housed in hotels for over six months but less than one year.

378 housed in hotels for more than one year but less than two years.

Nobody housed in hotels for over two years.

Four people for whom the length of stay had not been recorded.

If you are dissatisfied with this response, you may request an independent internal review of our handling of your request by submitting a complaint within two months to: [foirequests@homeoffice.gov.uk](mailto:foirequests@homeoffice.gov.uk), quoting reference 68735. If you ask for an internal review, it would be helpful if you could say why you are dissatisfied with the response.

As part of any internal review the Department's handling of your information request will be reassessed by staff not involved in providing you with this response. If you remain dissatisfied after this internal review, you would have a right of complaint to the Information Commissioner as established by section 50 of the Freedom of Information Act.

A link to the Home Office Information Rights Privacy Notice can be found in the following link. This explains how we process your personal information:  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/information-rights-privacy-notice>

Yours sincerely

J Jones  
Central Operations

We value your feedback, please use the link below to access a brief anonymous survey to help us improve our service to you:  
<http://www.homeofficesurveys.homeoffice.gov.uk/s/108105TAZNG>

## Annex B: FOI Response 69523, May 2022



Freedom of Information  
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FOI Reference: 69523

23 May 2022

Dear Kama Petruczenko,

Thank you for your enquiry of 25 April in which you requested information on asylum seekers in hotels. Your request has been handled as a request for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

### Information Requested

*Further to the information which you have kindly provided (reference 68735), I'm writing to request the following information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA):*

1. *Number of people seeking asylum accommodated in hotels at the end of 2021, broken down by age groups. Can we please ask for the following breakdown:*

- *Under 18*
- *18 and over*

### Response

The Home Office holds the information you have requested.

Under 18: 2,569

Over 18: 23,068

Age unconfirmed or not recorded: 743.

The information relating to the age of service users is based on “stated age” and has not necessarily been fully verified by the Home Office. A small number of service users may be awaiting formal age assessment, and others may not have had their age or date of birth confirmed at the point of admission to accommodation.

If you are dissatisfied with this response, you may request an independent internal review of our handling of your request by submitting a complaint within two months to [foirequests@homeoffice.gov.uk](mailto:foirequests@homeoffice.gov.uk), quoting reference 69523. If you ask for an internal review, it would be helpful if you could say why you are dissatisfied with the response.

As part of any internal review the Department's handling of your information request will be reassessed by staff not involved in providing you with this response. If you remain dissatisfied after this internal review, you would have a right of complaint to the Information Commissioner as established by section 50 of the Freedom of Information Act.

A link to the Home Office Information Rights Privacy Notice can be found in the following link. This explains how we process your personal information:  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/information-rights-privacy-notice>

Yours sincerely

K Wells  
Central Operations

We value your feedback, please use the link below to access a brief anonymous survey to help us improve our service to you:

<http://www.homeofficesurveys.homeoffice.gov.uk/s/108105TAZNG>

## Annex C: Anonymous case summaries

Client details		Case Details				Case outcomes
INFORM NO.	RC SERVICE	CASE TREND 1	CASE TREND 2	AGENCIES INVOLVED	ESCALATED TO	TIME TAKEN TO RESOLVE
INF-140234	Infoline	Relocation	Communication and information/admin systems	MH, HO, legal adviser	MH (senior management), HO	Almost 3 months.
INF-141743,	BRAP	Accommodation conditions		MH	MH (senior management)	2 weeks
INF-134646	Destitution Service	Communication and information/admin systems	ASPEN	MH, HO	HO (senior management)	It took around 2 months to consider the client's case. It took 4 months for payments to be backdated.
INF-141060	BRAP	Accommodation conditions		Accommodation provider, MH	MH (senior management)	Nearly 3 months.
INF-131711	Destitution Service	Asylum Support payments	ASPEN	MH, HO	HM (escalation manager)	It took around 7 months for client to receive new ASPEN card after the previous one was swallowed by the ATM.
INF-143820	Destitution Service	Communication and information/admin systems	Decision letters	MH	MH (escalation manager)	Applied in June 2020. Decision made on 17/09/20. The client only learnt about the decision in March 2021 when they contacted MH. Received the letter on 20/04/21, over 6 months later.
INF-136990	RAP	Communication and information/admin systems	Decision letters	MH, HO	MH (senior management)	Received eviction letter after 3,5 months. A letter was received a month after escalation with MH.
INF-143177	Infoline	Accommodation conditions		MH	-	The client did not receive the HO decision letter. It took 10 months for the letter to be provided.
INF-140694	Infoline	Accommodation conditions		MH, HO	HO (Deputy Director of Asylum Services)	Case signposted, the client moved and we lost contact with them.
INF-140548	Infoline	Communication and information/admin systems		HO, MH	MH (senior management)	Relocation request made 25/01/2021, no response 15/04/21. The response did not address the relocation request.
INF-133704	BRAP	Asylum support payments		Accommodation provider, MH	MH (senior management and escalation manager)	It took one month to reinstate payment.
INF-140060	Infoline	Relocation	Communication and information/admin systems	MH, RC, HO	HO (senior management)	It took over one month for the relocation request to be approved. It took 4 months and a PAP letter for the client to be relocated after the request was approved.



INF-076614	Destitution Service	Relocation	Asylum support payments	MH	MH	It took 7 days for MH to respond to the relocation request.
INF-131987	Destitution Service	Asylum support payments	Unsafe environment	HO, MH, Accommodation provider	MH, HO	Client never received any money on his ASPEN card.
INF-136719 INF-125315	Destitution Service	ASPEN	Asylum support payments	MH	MH (senior management)	41 days
INF-100533	BRAP	Maternity grant and child payments	Asylum support payments	MH, HO	MH (senior management), HO (senior management)	4 days
INF-141982	Destitution Service	Communication and information/admin systems	Decision letters	MH, HO	+++MH (senior management)	It took 7 months to process a one-off maternity payment. The application was made before the baby was born. Getting fully backdated payments took 3 months.
INF-132737	BRAP	Accommodation conditions	Communication and information/admin systems	MH	MH (senior management)	It took one month to issue a decision letter after escalation. It has been 2 months since the client's support was refused.
INF-139248	BRAP	Accommodation conditions		MH, HO, Accommodation provider		4 months
INF-132304	Destitution Service	Asylum Support payments	Communication and information/admin systems	HO, MH	MH, HO (senior management)	Over a month.
INF-135561	BRAP	Relocation	Unsafe environment	MH, HO	-	It took 6 months for payments to be made. It took
INF-150536	HARP	HC2 certificates	Communication and information/admin systems	MH, HO	MH (escalation manager), HO (senior management)	1 month for client to receive a new ASPEN card and backdated payments.
INF-133447	BRAP	Maternity grant and child payments		MH, HO	MH (senior management)	It took 1,5months for urgent relocation to happen.
	HARP	Relocation	Unsafe environment	MH	MH (escalation manager)	It took 2 months for clients to received renewed HC2 certificates.
INF-089184	BRAP	Accommodation conditions	Communication and information/admin systems	MH	MH (escalation manager)	It took 2 months for a maternity grant to be processed and 3 months for child payments to be processed.
INF-137631	Destitution Service	Accommodation conditions	Relocation	MH, Accommodation provider, HO, Legal adviser	HO, Legal Aid Agency	It took one month to support the survivor of GBV, no final resolution.
INF-140082	Infoline	Relocation	Unsafe environment	MH, HO	HO (senior management)	Date unknown

n/k	Destitution Services	ASPEN		MH	MH (escalation manager)	10 weeks
INF-136151	BRAP	Relocation	Accommodation conditions	MH, Accommodation provider	MH (escalation manager, senior management), Housing provider	n/k
INF-133554	RAP	Communication and information/admin systems	Unsafe environment	MH	MH (senior management)	Clients dispersed on 27/01/2021 and received an ASPEN card on 04/02/21 (8 days to resolve).
INF-136496	BRAP	Maternity grant and child payments	Communication and information/admin systems	MH, HO	MH (senior management), HO (senior management)	4 months
INF-142226	Destitution Service	ASPEN		MH	MH (escalation manager)	It took 3,5 months for the client to receive an eviction letter after being confirmed as a refugee status. It took 3 months to receive a latter following escalation with MH.
INF-137958	Destitution Service	Relocation	Communication and information/admin systems	MH, HO, Accommodation provider	MH, HO	The family submitted a request for additional asylum support payments for a new dependant on 30/01/2020. They received backdated payments after over 5 months of waiting, on 07/07/2020.
	HARP	HC2 certificates		MH	MH (senior management)	Dispersed on 19/03/2021 with £25 Tesco voucher and no ASPEN card. Received ASPEN card on 27/03/21, after 8 days.
INF-112554	Destitution Service	ASPEN	Relocation	MH, HO	MH, HO	Initial escalation was made on 23/11/2020. The client was moved on 27/01/2021, after 2 months. Payments were made on 4/12/2020 but the client was not getting the appropriate amount until it was resolved on 02/03/2021, after 3 months.
INF-141494	BRAP	HC2 certificates		MH, HO	MH (senior management)	The client's HC2 certificate expired in February. Followed up with MH in March to ask for a replacement. It took over a month for the request to be addressed.
INF-122995	BRAP	Relocation		HO, MH, Accommodation provider	MH (senior management)	It took a week to provide the client with ASPEN card/food vouchers after they have been dispersed.
INF-137486	Destitution Service	ASPEN	Communication and information/admin systems	HO, MH, Accommodation provider	MH, HO	The client had to pay for dental treatment because their HC2 certificate wasn't issued on time.
INF-142534	Destitution Service	Communication and information/admin systems	Wrongful refusal of claim	MH, HO	MH (escalations manager), HO (senior manager)	Request made in July 2020 and only actioned after an escalation. The issue was addressed in October, after 4 months.



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[supporter@refugeecouncil.org.uk](mailto:supporter@refugeecouncil.org.uk)  
or 020 7346 1205

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