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CSAN Guide to Asylum Accommodation Across England & Wales

Migrants are among the first victims of multiple forms of poverty. Not only is their dignity denied in their home countries, but also their lives are put at risk because they no longer have the means to start a family, to work, or to feed themselves. Once they have arrived in countries that should be able to accept them, “migrants are not seen as entitled like others to participate in the life of society, and it is forgotten that they possess the same intrinsic dignity as any person. [...] No one will ever openly deny that they are human beings; yet in practice, by our decisions and the way we treat them, we can show that we consider them less worthy, less important, less human.” Therefore, it is urgent to remember that “every migrant is a human person who, as such, possesses fundamental, inalienable rights that must be respected by everyone and in every circumstance.” Receiving migrants is an important and meaningful way of defending “the inalienable dignity of each human person regardless of origin, race or religion.”

Dignitas Infinita, 40

Introduction:

Pope Francis has called on us to respond to refugees **by welcoming, protecting, promoting, and integrating people**, with the reminder that: “Every stranger who knocks at our door is an opportunity for an encounter with Jesus Christ, who identifies with the welcomed and rejected strangers of every age (Matthew 25:35-43).”

The Catholic community across England & Wales embraced the community sponsorship programme and subsequent Homes for Ukraine Programme, welcoming individuals and families seeking sanctuary into their homes and communities. However, recent Government policy and rhetoric has been far from welcoming as we have seen a shift from protection to punishment of those seeking asylum.

Human dignity is the cornerstone of Catholic Social teaching and ‘underlies the primacy of the human person and the protection of human rights’ (Dignitas Infinita, 1). Recognising the lack of dignity afforded to refugees as they flee their home countries in search of sanctuary, we must play our part in providing a genuine and compassionate welcome.

We are each responsible for the realisation of human dignity and can assist with ensuring refugees rights are upheld, not least of all via access to decent accommodation that meets the needs of individuals and allows them to integrate into their new community.

Amidst the ongoing challenges we face in the UK, we continue to advocate for the dignity of refugees and migrants in a continually hostile environment and highlight the importance of the teaching document **Love the Stranger** from the Department of International Affairs at CBCEW. The document speaks into the contested space and reinforces Catholic social teaching, offering guidance on our response to refugees and migrants. The document outlines several principles, calling to action both the Catholic community and the Government – whilst recognising states’ right to control their borders, it reinforces their responsibility to promote the common good of those within their borders and uphold their obligations to the wider world, encouraging a warm welcome for those who come to our country, as is our Christian duty.

You can learn more about this document and what you can do to help in our call-to-action, which is compiled as a toolkit to inform and assist the community to love the stranger in the way God intended: <https://www.csan.org.uk/love-the-stranger-call-to-action/>.

We have also compiled a Guide to Resettlement to help you understand the many programmes and schemes available in the UK and how you can get involved and support refugees in your community: <https://www.csan.org.uk/resettlement-toolkit/>

To complement the previously published guides and toolkits, we have developed this **Guide to Asylum Accommodation** to assist communities in better understanding the asylum accommodation system, the rise in asylum hotels and the repurposing of military sites and barges, as well as the detrimental effect this has on refugees and communities.

Every human person possesses an infinite dignity, inalienably grounded in his or her very being, which prevails in and beyond every circumstance, state, or situation the person may ever encounter. This principle, which is fully recognizable even by reason alone, underlies the primacy of the human person and the protection of human rights.

Dignitas Infinita, 1

Contingency hotels are costing the taxpayer around £6 million a day, with approximately 47,500 people noted to be accommodated in hotels across the country (M. Gower, 2023). The Government has a duty to provide destitute asylum seekers with accommodation but after many years of reforms, the UK asylum system is described as 'one of increasing restrictions, controls and experimentation with various means of detention, dispersal and, above all, deterrence' (J. Darling, 2011).

BACKGROUND

Duty To Accommodate:

The Government has a statutory duty under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 to provide support, including accommodation, for those awaiting a decision on their asylum claim if they would otherwise be destitute. It is important to note that people in the asylum system are prohibited from working and cannot access mainstream support, thereby increasing their reliance upon the Home Office for support. Asylum accommodation is offered on a no-choice basis as per dispersal policy, and via private sector providers.

Dispersal as a policy was introduced by the government in a structural overhaul of asylum accommodation, which saw the introduction of the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) to disperse asylum seekers to towns and cities across the UK. In 2022, this was extended and all local authorities became asylum dispersal areas, with the aim of allowing those accommodated in hotels to be moved to appropriate accommodation¹.

Privatisation of Asylum Accommodation:

Asylum accommodation was initially under the remit of the local authority but since the early 2000s has seen a move to privatisation with the introduction of private contractors and sub-contractors, such as Serco, Mears Group and Clearsprings Ready Homes. In assigning these service

Textbox:

J. Darling, 2011: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2011.04.011>

M. Gower, 2023: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9831/CBP-9831.pdf>;

¹ <https://naccomm.org.uk/resources/>

contracts, the government promised better communication and liaison between providers, local authorities, local communities and the voluntary sector but that has not been the case, with many expressing concern at the lack of accountability for contractors and overall service fragmentation as the result of a complex network of contractors, sub-contractors and private providers'², which has inevitably led to the voluntary sector extending their services and programmes to support those who should otherwise be supported by the contracted service providers.

Communities Not Camps

The lack of housing across the UK, coupled with contractor issues and an increase in asylum applications impacted the availability of initial/dispersal accommodation, subsequently resulting in the use of contingency accommodation such as hotels, hostels and B&Bs for a prolonged period. Local communities, alongside the voluntary sector, have expressed concern over such accommodation, citing the isolation and poor conditions as well the impact on the mental and physical wellbeing of asylum seekers. In addressing these concerns and in an attempt to end the reliance on contingency accommodation, the government procured a barge and repurposed a number of disused military sites, but these too have been met with criticism from local groups and charities due to their prison-like conditions and inadequate support available, as well as the risk of re-traumatisation for individuals³.

The use of barges and disused military sites is arguably intentionally hostile given the Government's consistent rhetoric around 'illegal migrants', small boats and their plans to crackdown on asylum seekers, as is evident via their Rwanda Plan. Further, the use of such sites was noted as part of the New Plan for Immigration, whereby the Government will increase use of large-scale accommodation sites, but they are only to provide a 'basic' level of accommodation⁴, thereby ignoring the needs of vulnerable individuals and the expertise of frontline providers who have advocated for the accommodation needs of asylum seekers and refugees.

In particular, the negative impact on the mental health of people accommodated in such sites, is well-documented – in 2021, written evidence was submitted by multiple organisations, including

² Fée, D. (2021) 'The Privatisation of Asylum Accommodation in the UK: Winners and Losers', *Revue française de civilisation britannique*, XXVI(2), p.10.

³ <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Lives-on-hold-research-report.-July-2022.pdf>.

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/new-plan-for-immigration/new-plan-for-immigration-policy-statement-accessible>

the Helen Bamber Foundation and Doctors of the World, on the clinical harm caused by the use of barracks as housing⁵. Following assessments of individuals housed in the Napier and Penally sites, it was concluded that the sites were harmful to health and wellbeing, with many individuals suffering from lack of sleep, lack of appetite and also lack of nutritious food, and many being identified as having PTSD, depression and anxiety as well as suicidal ideation. In 2023, JRS UK released a report highlighting the experiences of men held in quasi-detention at Napier barracks⁶, which included similar findings to those provided in the written evidence submitted in 2021. Additionally, the JRS report highlighted the impact of remote location which contributed to the sense of being confined, forcing them to re-live past trauma and thereby exacerbating existing depression, anxiety and/or PTSD symptoms, with some attempting suicide.

In response to government policies on asylum accommodation, civil society groups and communities have launched a campaign titled 'Communities Not Camps', calling for the accommodation of people seeking asylum within communities where they are able to access necessary support, build community and integrate.

Voluntary sector expertise

The voluntary sector, comprising of charities, church groups and community movements, has a specialist understanding of its communities and in tailoring support accordingly, something which is required when supporting newcomers who are particularly vulnerable and mostly without the necessary language skills, such as asylum seekers and refugees. Its support and expertise are vital to communities it serves.

Equally, the statutory services are reliant upon the voluntary sector for providing outreach and wraparound services, where they are unable to meet demand and lack the resources to do so. Voluntary organisations are rightly wary of duplicating or displacing services which should be provided by statutory authorities but have experienced public sector staff expecting them to do just that. In contracting the voluntary sector, statutory services are in effect recognising its specialism and skills for working with vulnerable populations, providing vital services and assisting with integration support, but at too late a stage.

⁵ <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/22982/html/>

⁶ <https://www.jrsuk.net/napier-report/>

With specific regard to the asylum accommodation system, the statutory services have consistently failed to include the voluntary sector in planning, coordination and communications, when placing groups of vulnerable people in their communities. This was proven to be the case at the start of the asylum dispersal programme and continues to be the case in the present day with the use of hotel accommodation and overnight arrivals without any warning or word to the voluntary sector which thus creates a chaotic situation. Further, in some contexts, the Government has actively sought to restrict voluntary sector access and involvement, such as in Wethersfield, which the Helen Bamber Foundation has noted needs to be shut immediately⁷.

This lack of preparation and inclusion of the voluntary sector by the statutory services places the voluntary sector in a working situation to be considered an *emergency*, in which services are then required to be 'delivered on an *ad hoc* and reactive basis, in response to immediate and urgent need, rather than through carefully considered strategic planning'⁸. The voluntary sector is relied upon to support individuals and families accommodated in hotels and to fill the gaps in services, regardless of any appropriate training and provision of funding and resources. As such the voluntary sector finds itself becoming the main provider of support as opposed to the supportive role it originally envisaged.

⁷ <https://www.helenbamber.org/resources/latest-news/press-release-governments-disgraceful-dismissal-concerns-about-wethersfield>

⁸ Wren, K. (2007) 'Supporting Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Glasgow: The Role of Multi-agency Networks', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 20(3), p.400. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fem006>.

We must not allow the concerns that some communities might have about migration to be exploited for political purposes or allow such concerns to develop into a xenophobic attitude; Christian communities must play their part in providing a genuine welcome to migrants and refugees.

Love The Stranger, Principle 10

Catholic Bishops' Conference of England & Wales (CBCEW)

A Hostile Environment:

The UK asylum system is described as 'one of increasing restrictions, controls and experimentation with various means of detention, dispersal and, above all, deterrence'⁹. Such restrictions are demonstrative of the hostile environment in the UK for those considered *illegal immigrants* and the last couple of years has seen the introduction of a number of policies which go further to expand the existing hostile environment¹⁰.

The Nationality and Borders Act 2022 introduced a number of controversial policies, including the criminalisation of asylum which resulted in the Rwanda plan, and proposals for reception centres for asylum seekers, which would further isolate them from communities and the necessary support¹¹. The Act was criticised by civil society for punishing those seeking protection but as small boat arrivals continued to rise, the Government felt the Act was not enough and subsequently passed the Illegal Migration Act in 2023, which further criminalised asylum by preventing those arriving *illegally* from claiming asylum, and placing a duty on the Home Secretary to remove them from the UK, thus undermining the fundamental right to asylum and further contributing to the hostile environment¹².

⁹ Darling, J. (2011) 'Domopolitics, governmentality and the regulation of asylum accommodation', *Political Geography*, 30(5), p.264. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2011.04.011>

¹⁰ Bailey, C. (2020) 'Basic safety first: trauma-informed care in a hostile environment', *BJPsych Bulletin*, 44(2), pp. 41–43. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjb.2019.91>.

¹¹ <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/information/refugee-asylum-facts/what-is-the-nationality-and-borders-act/>

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/illegal-migration-bill-factsheets/nationality-and-borders-act-compared-to-illegal-migration-bill-factsheet>;
<https://www.jcwi.org.uk/illegal-migration-bill-2023-briefing>

Harmful Rhetoric & Media Reporting:

The hostile environment is also evident in British media headlines and reporting, which fuels public hostilities and has resulted in numerous incidents and anti-migrant protests outside contingency accommodation, due to continued Government rhetoric about *illegal immigrants*¹³.

This rhetoric of ‘crisis’ has been used by the Government to further their hostile environment and enact increasingly restrictive and harsh policies criminalising asylum and punishing those seeking sanctuary. Sensationalised news headlines employing scare tactics without providing any context or lived experience testimonies, whilst utilising incorrect and damaging terminology, have dehumanised refugees, and lent to fear-mongering across the country, further dividing communities¹⁴. The hostile environment and damaging rhetoric exacerbate the existing trauma of refugees whilst further emboldening the far-right in their harassment of migrants and refugees.

Hope Not Hate, an organisation dedicated to exposing far-right extremism, ‘found a 149% increase in messages on anti-migrant far-right channels on Telegram from 2021 to the first months of 2023’¹⁵ but this extremism is not only limited to online chat forums and messaging apps, as reports have also linked inflammatory comments made by MPs to violent attacks against migrants and refugees¹⁶.

In October 2022, a supporter of a number of far-right figures, firebombed a migrant processing centre in Dover¹⁷. Many like him consider themselves ‘migrant hunters’ and have been protesting outside asylum accommodation centres and hotels, inciting violence and harassing refugees and migrants across communities. A far-right demonstration outside Knowsley, Merseyside, in February 2023 resulted in the outbreak of violence and multiple arrests – it was reported that demonstrators turned up with the intention to cause as much damage as possible, resulting in the

¹³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-merseyside-64955270>;
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/feb/13/attack-migrants-knowsley-ministers-violence-asylum-seekers>

¹⁴ <https://theconversation.com/uk-press-is-the-most-aggressive-in-reporting-on-europes-migrant-crisis-56083>

¹⁵ https://hopenothate.org.uk/2023/05/21/stoking_the_flames/

¹⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/may/21/uk-governments-anti-migrant-rhetoric-is-feeding-the-far-right-claims-campaign-group>

¹⁷ <https://hopenothate.org.uk/2022/11/02/dover-attackers-twitter-reveals-strong-support-for-far-right-migrant-hunters/>

deployment of riot police and fears for the safety of refugees as well as that of police officers¹⁸. Following the violence in Knowsley, many from across civil society called out the Government for its 'anti-asylum seeker rhetoric'¹⁹ and the demonisation of refugees by politicians²⁰.

Hope Not Hate reported an almost 18-fold increase in far-right demonstrations in 2023 compared to the previous year, with 158 'migrant hunter' accommodation visits throughout the year, with the infiltration of far-right activists within communities across the country to influence local politics and community engagement, including the set-up of anti-migrant camps outside proposed accommodation centres, such as RAF Scampton²¹. It is also to be noted that whilst there exist legitimate planning disputes regarding some centres, these disputes are taken advantage of by far-right demonstrators to protest against refugees and migrants, further creating division within communities.

Language and framing are of utmost importance in the discourse on migrants and refugees, as is context - we have seen the UK and European media refer to a refugee 'crisis', employing terms such as 'invasion' and 'swarms', however, 36% of those forcibly displaced are hosted in 5 countries, with Turkey hosting the largest number of refugees – Germany is the only European nation in the top 5. The majority of countries hosting large refugee populations are in the Global South and it is widely acknowledged that the vast number of refugees stay in their region of displacement, where they are hosted by neighbouring countries, with a low percentage travelling onwards to Europe and the UK²².

Ongoing anti-migrant protests and far-right infiltration of communities has impacted community cohesion and prevented the welcoming and integration of refugees into the community, thereby

¹⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/feb/11/merseyside-violence-outside-hotel-housing-asylum-seekers-arrests#:~:text=Police%20arrest%2015%20people%20after%20violence%20outside%20hotel%20housing%20asylum%20seekers,-After%20the%20far&text=Fifteen%20people%2C%20aged%20between%2013,night%2C%20Merseyside%20police%20have%20said.>

¹⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/feb/13/attack-migrants-knowsley-ministers-violence-asylum-seekers>

²⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/mar/05/uk-government-implicit-asylum-seeker-hotel-attacks-say-unions>

²¹ <https://hopenothate.org.uk/state-of-hate-2024-shifting-terrains/>

²² <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/about-unhcr/who-we-are/figures-glance>



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further exacerbating the isolation and existing trauma of vulnerable individuals who fled persecution and conflict and are seeking sanctuary in the UK.

We defend the fundamental human dignity of all migrants and refugees, regardless of their legal status, including through policies providing access to decent accommodation, healthcare, and childhood education, as well as facilitating family reunification.

Love The Stranger, Principle 12 (CBCEW)

Types of accommodation:

Initial accommodation is provided for asylum seekers who request housing support upon applying for asylum and is temporary until dispersal accommodation is assigned.

It is important to note that people are now spending an increasingly longer time in initial accommodation due to a lack of available dispersal accommodation and delays in case processing.

It is also referred to as 'section 98 support'. This may be in the form of a hostel or hotel, together with others also seeking asylum.

Dispersal accommodation is assigned to asylum seekers who request housing support and is available to them until they receive a decision on their application. It is also referred to as 'section 95 support' and was previously known as 'NASS accommodation'.

Dispersal accommodation is located across the country and is usually in the form of privately owned flats and houses, managed by private contractors. Dispersal accommodation is often allocated outside of London.

Contingency accommodation is provided for asylum seekers in place of initial and dispersal accommodation and can be in the form of hotels, repurposed military barracks and barges.

Section 4 support comprises of accommodation and financial support and is available to some destitute individuals whose asylum claims have been refused and they are considered 'appeal rights exhausted' but now have an outstanding fresh claim for asylum.

This accommodation is similar to dispersal accommodation in that there is no choice of location – this has a negative impact on relationships and community ties as re-location often ruptures family ties and support networks people may have cultivated.

Additionally, there is criteria to be met for eligibility which will be reviewed periodically by the Home Office. Further information on this can be found at:

<https://righttoremain.org.uk/toolkit/asylum-support/#section4>

It is to be noted that appeals rights exhausted individuals normally cannot access any support, and the circumstances in which they can access section 4 support is limited, such as new claims.

Bridging accommodation is the term applied to temporary accommodation provided to Afghan refugees evacuated from Afghanistan following the withdrawal of allied forces in August 2021, and those resettled to the UK thereafter²³. Bridging accommodation can be in the form of hotels and serviced apartments.

Note on unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC):

In the case of unaccompanied children who do not have close family members in the UK to care for them, they are the responsibility of the local authority in which they are present. However, there may occur a transfer of responsibility whereby a local authority may ask another to take over its duties towards the child.

There are concerns of UASC being accommodated with adults in contingency accommodation, and in hotels, which has raised serious safeguarding concerns as hundreds of children have been reported missing, with many remaining missing. A failure to safeguard UASC in appropriate accommodation places them at increased risk of harm and exploitation, including human trafficking and modern slavery.

Further reading:

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2023-01-24/debates/290AF292-5D7E-411C-8FB8-A6E0F288365C/UnaccompaniedAsylum-SeekingChildren>

<https://inews.co.uk/news/home-office-wont-say-how-many-children-still-missing-migrant-hotels-2712776>

<https://www.gardencourtchambers.co.uk/news/high-court-rules-home-office-use-of-hotels-for-unaccompanied-asylum-seeking-children-unlawful>

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/jun/11/home-office-faces-legal-action-over-children-missing-from-uk-asylum-hotels>

²³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/bridging-accommodation-exit-plans-for-resettled-afghans/bridging-accommodation-exit-for-the-afghan-citizens-resettlement-scheme-and-afghan-relocations-and-assistance-policy-policy-guidance>

Hotel Closures & Evictions:

The Government has confirmed it is closing hotels, noting they were only a temporary measure²⁴. They have stopped procuring new hotels and are working on closing existing hotels, citing the cost-saving benefits of dispersal accommodation in comparison to hotels.

The Government is moving those accommodated in hotels to other sites, with as little as 5-days' notice, and has reaffirmed its commitment to the use of large sites as accommodation – this includes repurposed barracks and the Bibby Stockholm barge.

The Government notes that hotels are an inappropriate form of accommodation, and it recognises the strain they cause on local authorities but fails to recognise the same for barracks and barges.

Those awaiting a decision on their asylum claim are to be moved to dispersal accommodation, including acquired barracks and barges, but for those who receive a positive decision on their claim and are granted refugee status, they are required to find their own private rented accommodation.

In the second half of 2023, there was much concern over the lack of notice as individuals were provided less than 7-days' notice of eviction from asylum accommodation. In December 2023, faith leaders from across London united to call on the Home Office to reexamine the change in practice which had reduced the usual 28-day period to 7 days²⁵. The Home Office has since confirmed that the 28-day move-on period has been reinstated and that it is to start from the date the Biometric Residence Permit (BRP) is received.

Additionally, the joint letter also called for the move-on period to be extended to 56 days, which NGOs have also been calling for, as 28-days does not allow for Universal Credit application processing. Further, the lack of savings and income coupled with the lack of affordable accommodation and difficulty in finding move-on accommodation has resulted in high numbers of homelessness.

A recently published report²⁶ found a 239% increase in homelessness amongst those evicted from asylum accommodation across the UK within 2 years, with a large rise in numbers for 2023 compared to 2021.

²⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/asylum-hotels-exit-summary-information/asylum-hotel-summary-and-faq>

²⁵ <https://www.london.anglican.org/articles/faith-leaders-call-on-home-office-to-re-examine-seven-day-evictions-practice/>

²⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/apr/10/number-of-asylum-seekers-left-homeless-after-home-office-eviction-soars#:~:text=The%20report%2C%20which%20is%20published,of%20the%20households%20include%20children>

Multi-Agency Working in Hotels: the Caritas Experience

Many CSAN members work on the frontlines, providing support and outreach to people seeking asylum in their communities, whether it be in the form of advice, ESOL classes, women friendly spaces or children's activities. In recent years, with the increase in use of hotels as asylum accommodation, and the unsuitable conditions and lack of support provided therein, some members found themselves extending their support to assist those assigned contingency accommodation, such as hotels.

Refugee support organisations, including CSAN members, utilised their expertise and organically developed a multi-agency working partnership with likeminded organisations to address the needs of a vulnerable population despite numerous challenges. Such challenges include the lack of a centralised strategy and recognition of voluntary sector expertise, which lent to a lack of funding and resources for their work in addressing the gaps in services for those in hotels to ensure vital support services were provided.

Multi-agency working is an existing form of partnership working between different agencies and organisations, and there exist many different reasons for such partnership working, not least of which is meeting gaps in services and resource sharing. Accordingly, Caritas Shrewsbury worked together with partners in the Greater Manchester area to coordinate and provide vital support to hotels across the region. Caritas Shrewsbury initially ran wellbeing projects in its community to create safe spaces for asylum seeking and refugee women, as well as English classes, before they were asked by their local MP to support asylum seekers in a nearby hotel – this was the start of its work in asylum hotels.

Caritas Shrewsbury was interviewed about its work in hotels and its experience of multi-agency working, to identify best practices, challenges and recommendations for outreach support to hotels housing asylum seekers and refugees. CSAN also spoke with the St Vincent de Paul Society (SVP) about its model of support which differs from that of Caritas Shrewsbury.

The SVP is a national charity with multiple projects throughout the country focused on tackling poverty, as well as campaigning for social justice which includes advocating for refugees and asylum seekers. SVP engages community groups and volunteers in social action projects and extending support to asylum hotels is one such action taken by community groups.

The findings from these semi-structured interviews, together with organisational impact reports, were analysed to identify prevalent themes and issues, and contributed to the recommendations. The following is a summary of the findings and a list of recommendations to be used for advocacy purposes.

FINDINGS

1) Lack of strategy

- ***‘there was no such strategy, [no] clear vision [of] who is responsible for what’*** (CS, July 2023).
- The voluntary sector was not informed about the hotels opening in their local area, nor included in any initial plans to provide support in the hotels, leading to inadequate support upon their opening and a gap in the provision of vital services.
- The voluntary sector was actively engaged by the healthcare services who recognised the expertise available, but as they were not part of the Home Office strategy, the voluntary sector lacked the necessary funding to cover the level of support provided and resources required, particularly for a prolonged period.
- In other locations, community groups took the initiative to reach out to hotels and coordinate support upon learning of the arrival of people seeking asylum, recognising the need for support and lack of services available, further illustrating the impact of a lack of strategy and community involvement.

2) Voluntary sector expertise

- ***‘what can we offer? What is our capacity? And how can we offer this to [hotels]?’*** (CS, July 2023).
- The voluntary sector is recognised for its specialist understanding of its communities, and how to tailor support distinctly for asylum seekers and refugees, particularly in a hostile environment with reduced support from the authorities.
- Its reactive response to organise itself, liaise with the necessary stakeholders and discuss a collective response to ensure support fill the gaps in services illustrates its expertise and ability to operate in an ad-hoc manner and emergency setting.
- The government’s repurposing of barracks and further use of isolated accommodation sites fails to recognise the importance of the voluntary sector and its expertise in providing vital support services, as charities and community groups are prevented from extending support due to the isolated locations of such places.

3) Communication and collaboration

- The lack of communication from the Home Office and authorities regarding the opening of hotels and their locations prevent the voluntary sector from planning and allocating resources accordingly.
- The voluntary sector has not only the expertise but the existing relationships with local stakeholders, including the community, upon whom they can call to collaborate and ensure consistency of support across accommodation as well as a clearer understanding of responsibilities.

4) Authority and Accountability

- **'In general, [the work] is about who's got the authority, who's got the power, who can decide things, how people look at the third sector'** (CS, July 2023).
- The Home Office's failure to recognise the expertise of the voluntary sector arguably affects how the sector is viewed by the contractors, thereby leading to miscommunication and lack of collaboration by accommodation staff, which can in turn impact service provision.
- There is noted to be a lot of mistrust of the Home Office and Home Office officials by people seeking asylum, which means they are more likely to engage with the voluntary sector and community groups when accessing support, thus demonstrating the importance of the voluntary sector's involvement in planning and implementing asylum accommodation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) In developing and rolling out an accommodation strategy, the Home Office should consult with the voluntary sector to fully understand the needs of the refugees and asylum seekers they will be accommodating, so they are able to develop a framework with identified roles and responsibilities for all involved, to avoid gaps in services.
- 2) The voluntary sector must be invited to discussions related to supporting asylum seekers and refugees in hotel accommodation to utilise their expertise and allow them prior notification of involved stakeholders and the location of proposed hotels, so as to avoid ad-hoc and reactive responses by allowing them adequate time to prepare and coordinate.

- 3) The statutory authorities need to ensure the voluntary sector has the funding and resources necessary to carry out their work and to extend adequate support to those in hotels, including paid staff.
- 4) Monitoring and evaluation of accommodation services and support must be incorporated from the initial stage to allow for best practices to develop, ensure efficient multi-agency working and effective communication.
- 5) Crisis/emergency working is not conducive to staff health and wellbeing and so should be avoided (where possible), with recognition for the effects of vicarious trauma on staff and the need for psychosocial support for staff.

⇒ *The interview and findings are taken from a study into multi-agency working in asylum accommodation, which reviewed multi-agency working and focused on the Caritas experience to gain an understanding of the challenges and benefits of multi-agency working in asylum accommodation across the country. As such, the recommendations are based on the findings and discussion therein and targeted primarily at the Home Office and local authorities.*

Each individual and also every human community is responsible for the concrete and actual realization of human dignity. Meanwhile, it is incumbent on States not only to protect human dignity but also to guarantee the conditions necessary for it to flourish in the integral promotion of the human person: “In political activity, we should remember that ‘appearances notwithstanding, every person is immensely holy and deserves our love and dedication.’”^[115]

CSAN member experiences in Asylum Hotels (change title)

The following are some reflections from our members of their experiences in asylum hotels:

In the **Diocese of Plymouth**, the community banded together to support the newly arrived in a nearby hotel, ensuring they had the essentials – clothes, shoes, bags and phones, as well as extending friendship. The community has wholeheartedly engaged with the newcomers, arranging sporting activities, supper clubs and English language classes.

The Saint Vincent de Paul Society (SVP) is a national charity whose members have been providing practical support in hotels for several years, including ESOL classes and integration support as well as financial support. Their volunteers have noted that the food provided in hotels is wholly inadequate and the support extended is insufficient in assisting with local integration, including the minimal allowance provided which does not cover transport costs and thus leaves them further isolated and increases their reliance on the support of local SVP groups.

Father Hudson's Care & Brushstrokes Sandwell, located in the Archdiocese of Birmingham have noted a surge in potential unaccompanied minors arriving at hotels, which has raised concerns about the screening process at ports but also about safeguarding young people who are resultantly forced to share rooms with adults. They also supported many individuals who were provided with 7 or less days' notice of discontinuation of support on receiving a positive decision on their asylum claim and were thus forced into destitution.

Caritas Westminster operates as a network to support projects and volunteers, some of whom are engaged in supporting people placed in asylum hotels, tending to the gaps in provision. The lack of nutrition and quality of food is a big concern and contributes to the deteriorating health of individuals, together with anxiety about being moved away from where they may have made a connection, into barracks. Further, there are many concerns about the hotel maximisation policy which forces individuals to share rooms with individuals who do not share a language, lending to further isolation. However, many health concerns, both mental and physical remain unaddressed as GP appointments are difficult to obtain.

CSAN members and voluntary sector organisations across the country are doing the most with the little resources they have, but the asylum accommodation system has been a concern for many years, with many reports of inadequacy and abuse, and the recent move to barracks and barges has further exacerbated the situation.

The impact of asylum hotels

The impact of residing in asylum hotels is detrimental to the mental and physical health of those residing there, with a disproportionate impact on children as they are without access to education, to others their age, and without space to move around freely or to play in.

One of the most common complaints across accommodation sites is the lack of appropriate and nutritious food. The food provided is not suitable for the varied diets of the many people accommodated in any one site nor does it take into consideration their individual delicacies, preferences, or needs. This can be especially detrimental to pregnant women and new mothers, but also for the health and development of children.

Community groups have recognised this need and sought to address it in a manner of ways. One such community group is the Hitchin Pantry, which has deepened community bonds through its extension of support to those residing in asylum accommodation:



Image: Bishop Paul McAleenan (CBCEW) at the Hitchin Pantry with Elizabeth Wills (Caritas Westminster),
Credit: CBCEW Flickr

When it was heard that an asylum hotel had opened locally, a call out to the parish of Our Lady Immaculate and St Andrew in Hitchin raised enough money to give anybody who wanted it a membership to 'Hitchin Pantry', a community food project which runs twice a week from the parish's Scout Hut with support from Caritas Westminster.

On Friday and Saturday, when Hitchin Pantry is open to shoppers from across Hitchin, the community comes together in the parish hall over a cup of tea and cake and live music before going into the Scout Hut to do their shopping.

Now on any given day you can find people laughing, chatting, cooking together and sharing meals that have been made with items from the pantry. The parish kitchen has been opened so that people staying in the local asylum hotel can cook fresh and healthy food and request specific ingredients so that they can make recipes from home.

The parish has become a place of mutual support for people who have been placed by the Home Office in local asylum accommodation.

Food experiences of people seeking asylum in London: areas for local action, a report from Sustain's London Food Poverty Campaign and JRS UK published in March stated "People seeking asylum do not have access to sufficient money, kitchen facilities or food to meet their needs, are provided with food that does not meet food hygiene or nutritional standards, in some cases resulting in hospitalisation" it continues "Experiences of food were broadly experienced as degrading and dehumanising, especially for mothers unable to feed their children adequately."

This was reflected in conversations Caritas Westminster had with people who attended the Hitchin Pantry Project. One parent said "It feels like we are in jail...the [hotel] food is very bad. My [child] spent every day in hospital because [child] isn't eating. Sometimes the food is tasteless and sometimes it is too spicy. When we call Migrant Help, they ask us about the food, but they don't listen." Somebody else shared that "the food they give us goes to waste."

In contrast, when asked about positive elements at Hitchin Pantry one parent with a baby on the way said "Friendship between charities and refugees. They are helpful and friendly guys here – we have the kitchen here and free shopping. If it wasn't here, we would die because we only have £8 to live on. It is not enough for clothes or for preparing for a baby. There is a poster that says the hotel should help provide baby items but then nothing happens."

Some pantry members have started volunteering at the project. Reflecting on this one person said "I enjoy volunteering at the pantry and kitchen and using what other people throw out. The pantry is very good, and I find very lovely friends. I would like to do other voluntary work."

Sustain and JRS UK's report highlighted the Mental Health impact of asylum hotels, lack of adequate food and seeking sanctuary more broadly. One young person shared that the pantry project "helps to relieve from stress. Some of the products have helped by getting the products for free. The community has helped solving an education problem. They encourage me."



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Overnight on Monday 22nd April the Rwanda Bill passed in Parliament. This has been extremely distressing for people who have overcome huge challenges and have come to the UK seeking safety, freedom and hope to build a better future, as well as people who are alongside them. Projects like Hitchin Pantry which bring people together and bridge divides are proof that communities want welcome and encounter.

⇒ *Case study provided by Caritas Westminster.*

Barracks & Barges

Following concerns around the cost of hotels and the issues therein, the Government vowed to end the use of hotels as accommodation. This subsequently has resulted in the acquisition of barges and the repurposing of military barracks²⁷ – all of which have resulted in much criticism from the voluntary sector and community groups, as well as local authorities, due to their unsuitability and dehumanising effect²⁸.

Bibby Stockholm

In 2023, the government acquired a barge by the name of Bibby Stockholm, to house asylum seekers. The barge is docked in Portland and has faced a number of issues, not least of which is NGO concerns over its suitability. The barge failed to comply with safety procedures and risk assessments from the outset, delaying its opening, with firefighters calling it a 'deathtrap'²⁹. It thereafter had a legionnaires outbreak, and in December 2023, Leonard Farruku, an Albanian seeking asylum, was found dead on the barge.

Despite ongoing concerns regarding the suitability of the barge, its isolated location and detention like conditions, as well as its impact on vulnerable individuals who have suffered persecution and torture, the Government continues to advocate for its use, citing the savings made, but a report by NGOs Reclaim the Seas and One Life to Live concluded that the most generous saving the Home Office can make is £9.28 per person, per day³⁰.

Additionally, earlier this year, the Home Affairs Select Committee visited the Bibby Stockholm as part of its inquiry into Migration and Asylum, following which they wrote to the Home Secretary noting the poor conditions on board, lack of mental health support and lack of communication from the Home Office to residents³¹.

The letter also notes the lack of consultation and engagement with local communities in the area, which is noted to be the case with repurposed military barracks across the country.

²⁷ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9831/>

²⁸ https://www.jrsuk.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/JRS-UK-Report_Napier-Barracks-the-inhumane-reality_March-2023_WEB.pdf

²⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/aug/01/bibby-stockholm-asylum-bergo-is-potential-deathtrap-say-firefighters>

³⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/jul/11/housing-asylum-seekers-on-bergo-may-only-save-10-a-person-daily-report-says>

³¹ committees.parliament.uk/publications/43175/documents/214806/default/

Repurposed Military Barracks

Napier Barracks, located in Kent, was repurposed in September 2020 to accommodate those seeking asylum due to the Covid outbreak and its subsequent impact on asylum system. Napier Barracks is the first to be repurposed into camp-like settings in the UK.

In June 2021, the High Court found that Napier Barracks provided inadequate accommodation, the Home Office's selection process was flawed and unlawful, and individuals were unlawfully detained under purported Covid rules³².

In 2022, CSAN member, JRS UK, concluded an in-depth report of the experiences of the individuals accommodated in Napier Barracks. The key findings in the report were as follows:

- 1) Taken to an unknown place: people were routinely brought to the camp without their prior knowledge, which caused deep anxiety.
- 2) A daily struggle: the camp was noisy and crowded, lacking privacy and resulted in sleep deprivation for many. The military and prison-like physical setting of the camp forced many to relive their trauma and greatly impacted the mental health of those in the camp.
- 3) Failing those with vulnerabilities: serious failures in screening for vulnerabilities led to survivors of torture and survivors of human trafficking to be placed in the camp, where there was inadequate welfare support available and barriers to accessing healthcare.
- 4) Lack of legal advice: it was almost impossible to secure legal advice in the camp, and what was available was highly inadequate.

The report recommends the immediate and permanent closure of Napier Barracks, and the abandonment of any plans for the use of large-scale institutional asylum accommodation, alongside the provision of safe and dignified accommodation for asylum seekers, within communities.

The report can be accessed in full on the JRS UK website: <https://www.jrsuk.net/napier-report/>

The report was published in March 2023, identifying the harms caused to asylum seekers when accommodated in camp-like settings which are considered quasi-detention, and calling for accommodation within communities, but the Government has since acquired a barge and repurposed further military barracks, all of which have been opposed by locals and NGOs.

Other repurposed barracks include:

RAF Wethersfield began accommodating asylum seekers from 12 July 2023³³. It accommodates single adult male asylum seekers between the ages of 18 and 65, with capacity capped at

³² <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/the-use-of-napier-barracks-to-house-asylum-seekers-regret-motion/>

³³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/asylum-accommodation-wethersfield/wethersfield-factsheet>

maximum 800 individuals. The site is operated by Clearsprings Ready Homes, a private contractor, under supervision of the Home Office.

Braintree Council have expressed concerns over the lack of transparency and limited information provided to stakeholders and the local community, including bypassing the local planning authority to extend the use of the camp for a further 3 years³⁴. The local MP, James Cleverley, has also criticised the use of the barracks and has noted he wishes to close the centre down ‘as soon as possible’³⁵.

The centre is isolated due to its rural location, placing it miles away from any amenities and forcibly restricting the movement and community support and integration of individuals. There is much concern regarding the severe mental health harms to residents following the removal of 178 people from the camp since its opening – including 15 of whom were children and are now under the care of Essex County Council³⁶.

Due to the unsuitability of the accommodation, four individuals who were accommodated at the centre issued claims for a judicial review against the Home Secretary and in February 2024 were granted permission by the High Court to proceed to trial³⁷. The claimants are challenging, amongst other things, the use of the accommodation and the Home Secretary’s failure to provide a dignified standard of living, providing evidence of extremely vulnerable individuals being accommodated at the centre, including survivors of torture, survivors of human trafficking and modern slavery, and individuals with significant mental and/or physical health issues

RAF Scampton, an ex-RAF site located in Lincoln, is due to house single adult male asylum seekers between the ages of 18 and 65, capped at 800 individuals. The site is to be operated by Serco, a private contractor, under supervision of the Home Office.

The site is not yet functional as the Home office is still developing the Operational Management Plan for the site, but also due to the local council having served a planning Enforcement and Stop Notice on the site due to the Home Office’s failure to engage in meaningful consultation with the local community and recognise the impact it will have on the local area and heritage site³⁸. It was

³⁴ <https://www.braintree.gov.uk/news/article/624/home-office-special-development-order-process-for-wethersfield-asylum-accommodation-runs-against-the-spirit-of-national-planning-policy-claims-council>

³⁵ <https://www.itv.com/news/anglia/2023-12-18/asylum-seeker-warns-centre-not-safe-as-fight-footage-emerges>

³⁶ https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c1415112lqgq?at_medium=RSS&at_campaign=KARANGA

³⁷ <https://dpglaw.co.uk/high-court-grants-permission-to-proceed-to-trial-in-challenge-to-the-use-of-raf-wethersfield-as-asylum-accommodation/>

³⁸ <https://www.west-lindsey.gov.uk/council-news/2024/02/council-votes-unanimously-launch-fresh-legal-challenge-governments-long-term-asylum-plans-raf>

also recently reported that the site is contaminated with 'ground gases and unexploded ordnance'³⁹.

The council, local politicians and the community have noted the unsuitability of the site for accommodating asylum seekers and the site has witnessed a rise in assaults and demonstrations⁴⁰.

CSAN member Caritas Nottingham is part of the conversation and involved in planning frontline support for those due to be accommodated at the centre:

When news first broke of the Home Office's plans to repurpose the airbase, Lincolnshire YMCA convened local voluntary, community and faith representatives to organise a constructive response. Some 20 local and national organisations and networks now form the Scampton Alliance, which is chaired by Just Lincolnshire, the county's single equality organisation. Caritas Nottingham administers the Alliance and has worked with partners to develop a four-pronged workplan, for which funding is now being sought:

- 1. A new Lincoln City of Sanctuary organisation will be established to enable local residents and organisations to provide a practical welcome, gather donations of goods, cash and services, and build cohesion in the community*
- 2. Alliance member organisations aim to provide an integrated range of services. These include health (especially mental health) support; information, advice and guidance; English teaching and conversation; interpretation; sport and cultural enrichment; opportunities for asylum seekers to volunteer; and support for legal issues and move-on accommodation.*
- 3. A Chaplaincy and Wellbeing Hub will seek to provide culturally-sensitive, trauma-informed pastoral care, religious provision, wellbeing support, friendship networks and signposting to specialist services.*

The Alliance will work with statutory providers to ensure that asylum seekers and local people experience a decent quality of life. They hope their experience will help to inform future asylum policy and support, both nationally and locally. In May 2024 the local planning authority finally reached a settlement with the Home Office enabling the plans to go ahead. However earlier in the same week a general election was called. Despite £27m having already been spent on the plan, it remains uncertain whether the site will ever open to asylum seekers. If it does not, the Alliance, and Lincolnshire as a whole, will be well-placed to respond, whatever the next chapter in UK asylum policy has in store.

³⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/apr/01/former-raf-base-to-house-asylum-seekers-is-contaminated-government-letters-say-scampton-lincolnshire>

⁴⁰ <https://www.lincs.police.uk/news/lincolnshire/news/2024/feb-2024/increase-in-reports-of-incidents-at-former-raf-scampton-site/>

The availability, quality, location, and security of accommodation has been shown to have a direct effect on people's ability to integrate. The current piecemeal approach to accommodation is expensive, inefficient, and detrimental to integration outcomes. The movement of people from place to place and the reliance on temporary accommodation negatively impacts upon people's ability to integrate. Immigration detention should only be used as a last resort.

Commission on the Integration of Refugees

Commission on the Integration of Refugees

The Commission was convened and funded by the Woolf Institute to run from September 2022 to December 2023. The Commission was led by a number of community leaders, professionals and academics from across civil society and the public sector, including individuals with lived experience – Bishop Paul McAleenan, the Lead Bishop for Migrants & Refugees, also formed part of the Commission.

The Commission recognises that the UK asylum system is broken – it is noted to be expensive, ineffective and harmful. The Commission has proposed a number of solutions that would be more compassionate and fairer for asylum seekers and refugees, upholding their human dignity whilst of economic benefit to the UK.

The Commission produced a total of 6 reports, the final of which is titled **From Arrival to Integration: Building Communities for Refugees and for Britain**. In this final report the Commission have included a number of recommendations, including those for new and more community-oriented approach to asylum accommodation. The recommendations are as follows:

1. To develop a new comprehensive resettlement scheme, drawing on the successes of Community Sponsorship and the Homes for Ukraine scheme, to be coordinated nationally and administered through local integration partnerships.
2. To deliver housing through local integration partnerships, led by local authorities, with some properties reserved for refugees and asylum seekers. This would ensure central government and independent sector resources are invested in the expansion of accommodation in communities, thereby benefitting the whole population and channelling funding to local councils instead of private contractors.



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3. To extend the move-on period for those granted refugee status from 28 days to 56 days. This would reduce the likelihood of homelessness and pressure on local authorities, whilst bringing the policy into line with existing homelessness regulations.
4. Community accommodation should be the default for asylum seekers and refugees as it upholds the dignity of individuals and allows for better integration - detention should only be used as a last resort and as a precursor to rapid removal where genuine absconding and/or security risks cannot otherwise be managed. It is noted that integration-based approaches are cheaper and more successful.
5. To avoid moving refugees and asylum seekers to different accommodation following their initial placement, without their consent, unless there are exceptional circumstances. Repeated relocations negatively impact individuals' integration and is particularly harmful for children's education.

You can read the report in full online: <https://refugeeintegrationuk.com/publications/>.

Migrants are not seen as entitled like others to participate in the life of society, and it is forgotten that they possess the same intrinsic dignity as any person. Hence they ought to be “agents in their own redemption”. No one will ever openly deny that they are human beings, yet in practice, by our decisions and the way we treat them, we can show that we consider them less worthy, less important, less human.

Pope Francis, Fratelli Tutti, 39

Call-To-Action

There are a number of ways individuals and communities can get involved within their communities to support refugees and migrants.

To learn more about refugees and asylum seekers in the UK and how you can help, please see the CSAN Love the Stranger Call to Action: <https://www.csan.org.uk/love-the-stranger-call-to-action/>

To better understand resettlement and the various programmes available in the UK, please see the CSAN Guide to Resettlement: <https://www.csan.org.uk/resettlement-toolkit/diocese-resettlement-services-map/>

If you are interested in hosting a refugee, there are a number of organisations running such schemes, including CSAN member Jesuit Refugee Service UK: <https://www.jrsuk.net/at-home-hosting-scheme/>

Other hosting schemes include:

<https://refugeesathome.org/>

<https://homesforukraine.org.uk/resources-for-ukrainians/finding-a-host/homes-for-ukraine-with-reset/>

If you are interested in supporting asylum seekers accommodated in your local area, we strongly encourage you to contact your local Caritas agency/CSAN member to learn how to best do this.



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It is not encouraged for individuals to visit hotels and accommodation centres to provide individual support due to safeguarding concerns. To locate your local CSAN member, please see our site for our list of members:

CSAN has 52 member organisations and diocesan agencies, all of whom can be found on our website: <https://www.csan.org.uk/member/>

There is also a map of diocesan agencies, identifying the refugee support projects they are running: <https://www.csan.org.uk/resettlement-toolkit/diocese-resettlement-services-map/>