

‘In a place like prison’:

voices from institutional
asylum accommodation

December 2021

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Action Foundation, Asylum Matters, Birmingham Community Hosting, Birmingham Refugee and Asylum Seekers Solidarity (BRASS), Life Seeker's Aid Charity and Stories of Hope and Home worked together in the latter part of 2021 to carry out in-depth interviews with fourteen people in the asylum system with recent experience of living in institutional asylum accommodation.

Although individuals' experiences were different, there were a number of common themes which surfaced again and again in the stories they told. This report follows those common themes as people first came into contact with institutional accommodation, and then tried to come to terms with the impact of living in these settings.

All names of the people we interviewed for this report have been changed to protect their identity.



asylum matters



Foreword

Institutional accommodation causes harm. It is unsuitable for people seeking refugee protection who desperately need safety, privacy and stability, in order to rebuild their lives in local communities.

The use of institutional accommodation for people seeking asylum in the UK is nothing new. The asylum accommodation system has been run by the Home Office through private contractors for the last twenty years, without investment in local communities or adequate consultation with them. The outsourcing of these contracts to profit-driven private providers with little oversight from or accountability to the Home Office, coupled with poor forecasting and planning and ever lengthier delays in decision-making, has meant the accommodation system has lurched from crisis to crisis.ⁱ As a result, on multiple occasions the Home Office has had to rely on the use of hotels, hostels, or other institutional settings on an emergency basis for the purpose of accommodating people seeking asylum. This type of accommodation is particularly unsuitable for long-term stays of anything more than a few weeks.ⁱⁱ

Most recently, during the COVID 19 pandemic, the use of hotels and hostels has grown substantially. Reasons for this included measures taken during the pandemic which meant that some people seeking asylum who would ordinarily not be eligible to access accommodation became able to access it. At the same time, however, the backlog of asylum cases has reached historic levels, with more than 80,000 people waiting for an outcome on their initial asylum claim. Of these, 56,520 had been waiting for more than 6 months.ⁱⁱⁱ As more and more people have been kept waiting in limbo for the outcome of their case, the reliance on institutional accommodation by the Home Office has increased.

Over time, the routine use of hotels and hostels has become a problem for political leaders. Sites have attracted the attention of far right groups and resulted in critical headlines. They have worsened relations between central government and local authorities, which have been concerned and surprised when the Home Office has set up sites in local communities without notice or local resourcing.

The Government has reacted by moving towards further use of ever more unsuitable sites. The dangerous use of the disused military barracks at Napier in Folkestone – and formerly at Penally in Pembrokeshire – to corral people seeking asylum is a national stain. In September 2021, the Government used secondary legislation, bypassing normal planning processes, to give itself permission to continue the use of the facility at Napier for a further five years.^{iv}

With its Nationality and Borders Bill – dubbed the anti-refugee Bill by campaigners – it is moving at speed towards constructing new types of facilities, which it euphemistically calls ‘accommodation centres’. We predict these facilities, if allowed to come into being, risk permanently instituting the concept of large prison-like refugee camps in the UK. They will further substantially blur the line between freedom and detention, and will further isolate, dehumanise and harm people seeking safety.

This direction of travel is deeply concerning. The Government must immediately scrap its proposals and ensure that people seeking safety in the UK are housed safely and with dignity, in the communities which many of them will become part of for years to come.





What Is Institutional Asylum Accommodation?

Institutional asylum accommodation is used in this report to refer to facilities where people seeking asylum are:

- **resident together** in a group setting, which is
- **staffed and managed**, with the use of
- **shared dining, bathroom or sleeping facilities.**

This encompasses the use of former army barracks, hotels, hostels and initial accommodation sites used to accommodate people seeking asylum.

The defining characteristic of institutional accommodation is that it has specific organisational features, such as set mealtimes or security restrictions, which mean that people accommodated there cannot exercise full control over their lives and their day-to-day activities. Placing people seeking asylum in such settings also results in those people being separated, to a greater or lesser degree, from the local communities around them.

Voices From Institutional Asylum Accommodation

"If there's anyone listening to my words I have to ask: go and rescue those people in hotels." Anwar

1: I Am Relieved

Many people seeking safety in the UK have been 'on the move' for many weeks and months before reaching the UK, crossing land and sea borders, experiencing huge dangers along the way. Fleeing from war, persecution or instability, many will have been forced to leave their homes with little more than the clothes on their backs. Arriving in the UK safely after these past experiences and a long, arduous journey, interviewees told us they felt relief and happiness, as they believed they had finally found a place that would treat them with dignity and respect.

"At the beginning, I was pleased because after a long journey, and a hard one – and dangerous – finally I arrived in the UK looking for human rights and safety." Ibra Gaza

"I'm in a place where I will find sanctuary. They just moved me to a hotel and I was, you know, so thankful. I was in a position to accept anything – anything little." Kareem

"I just need shelter and to have my own food until I will get my asylum claim granted." Kareem

2: I Am Anxious

After the initial relief of arrival, people came to realise that their stay in institutional accommodation was unlikely to be temporary. Contrary to what many had been told, they were going to be there for a significant amount of time.

"First months we don't know the future, we think it's temporary, we will stay one, two months and go." Fouad

"When I was moved to Napier, people were more hopeful because they were hearing that their asylum application will be processed quicker, and they're going to be there for approximately one month. But after some time, they just realised that is not true. And no one could tell them how long they're going to stay in Napier." Matin

"With time, and with feedback from the other asylum seekers in the Initial Accommodation, I came to understand that there are people in this situation since 2019. And we were in the middle of 2020." Kareem

The backlog in cases awaiting an initial decision has been rising at an alarming rate over recent years. Each case represents an individual or a family whose life has been put on hold, forced into poverty and unsuitable accommodation as they wait to learn their fate. The people we interviewed spoke about how their mental health began to deteriorate when they realised they were in a situation without any clear end in sight. This was compounded by a lack of information about what was going to happen to them and the status of their asylum claim.

"I feel hopeless because I don't know what will happen next – when I will get my interview or my decision. So I'm anxious, depressed, frustrated. Because of that situation." Ibra Gaza



"You live in darkness. No one gives you a piece of information, no one tells you. You just hear and hear and hear from other people in the same situation as you but nothing officially." Alomari

"I couldn't sleep most of the time because of my unknown future in the UK. I was anxious and worried about what would happen." Ibra Gaza

"I didn't know why all this secrecy, it's a normal standard procedure to do asylum, everyone knows it but we don't because no one tells us." Alomari

"We totally felt that we are ignored, we are neglected, neglected." Matin

3: I Am Not Free

Perhaps the single most pernicious effect of living in institutional accommodation is the impact on people's sense of autonomy and ability to exercise agency in their own lives. The use of this kind of accommodation has been characterised by restrictions on visitors, monitoring of residents' movements and de facto 'curfews'. While not officially a form of detention, the people we spoke to felt that they were being deprived of fundamental liberties while staying in the accommodation, and that their lives were being regulated. COVID restrictions meant that the population at large were living some of these same restrictions during 2020-21, but nonetheless the feeling of being deprived of liberty and choice was a defining feature of people's experiences.

"It's bad, mentally, it * you up, because they're basically treating you like a child. You're an adult but you can't come and go as you want. I understand it's not my house, but at the end of the day, I'm an adult, if I want to leave my things in my room and go and see my friend, I'm entitled to do that. I'm not in a prison cell."*** Sara

"Checking the fire exits and alarms – it's the regular check they do – they used to set the alarm for 7.30 in the morning, when everyone's sleeping, they have to vacate the place and stay in queues, check names and everything. I didn't feel it necessary to do that." Anwar

"You have no plan. You can't even plan for one hour, you can't even plan to go to other places where you can meet friends, because the only thing they say is when we transfer you to other accommodation you have to be there. They don't give you any other information. So if you're not there you miss your transportation so you never get it again. So you can't go anywhere, you just have to stay put there living in one room with 2 or 3 people or 1 person for a long time." Alomari

"The staff, they always tell us if you don't come back at night, you're going to lose your accommodation. We came here alone. I don't have family, I don't have relatives, I don't have friends. So, what am I going to do if I am homeless? Am I going to sleep on the streets?" Omar

"Let's say when you take choice from people they will start feeling they are not human any more. The basic choices like when I want to eat, what I want to eat, where I want to go, what I want to do. That's basic choices for a human being and when you take that choice from them mentally – it's the worst year I have had in my life. You always feel you're vulnerable, you always feel you're not there." Alomari

Importantly, the longer the stay in institutional accommodation, the worse the effects of these restrictions on liberty. People referred to being able to cope initially, but with the passage of time the effects on their mental wellbeing became more serious.

"When I was moved there, in the beginning, people were so hopeful, they were trying to conduct some English classes, playing football, reading books, playing board games. But you could see after two or three months that no one is active, and they're just sleeping on their bed, not talking to each other." Matin

"From the second month life starts to change. From white white white it starts to be grey, the last months it was black." Fouad

"You just wake up, eat, have lunch, have dinner, sleep, wake up, have breakfast, lunch, dinner, sleep, that's it, there's nothing else apart from that." Sara

"You're still waiting, that's all, just waiting waiting. During that time you lose hope it takes forever...I get emotional because I remember the feeling..." Alomari

"It affected my mental health. I feel depression more than I've ever felt in my life." Chansat

"It's like a prison, it's a prison." Farhan





4: I Am In The Barracks

Nowhere was the deprivation of liberty felt more keenly than in the ex-military barracks at Napier and Penally, which the Home Office opened in September 2020. Advocates have consistently argued that military sites are totally unsuitable as accommodation for people fleeing trauma and persecution, and the sites have been dogged by controversy around conditions. In June 2021, a High Court judgement in a case brought by six Napier residents found inadequate health and safety conditions, false imprisonment of residents and a failure to screen victims of trafficking at the site; with evidence showing that the Home Office continued to house people during the COVID pandemic against advice from Public Health England.⁶

While the facility at Napier remains open, the site at Penally was finally closed in March 2021, but not before serious harm had been caused. The people we spoke to who had spent time in Penally or Napier reported immediate feelings of being punished and criminalised on arrival. They were re-traumatised by the environment which explicitly reminded them of the atrocities from which they had fled.

“When I was moved to Napier in the first month, I was always asking questions to myself – what crime have I committed that I’m here?” **Matin**

“The floor is concrete, so it’s so cold – it’s like a fridge. The roof is made of that material that looks like a kind of fibre – it was so exposed to the wind, so noisy from outside. It’s too annoying during the night – the heating was not enough at all.” **Kareem**

“You’re surrounded with fences around you. And security guards are always watching you. And there are several blocks... And well, it’s an army camp. So people are sharing the area with each other. I mean, several people in the dining room and blocks, and you always feel that you are in a place like prison.” **Matin**

“Many guys arrived at the barracks without having any mental issues. But after being housed in a barracks for 3, 4, 5, 6 months, of course you’re going to face these issues.” **Omar**

“Putting vulnerable people – asylum seekers, refugees – even if they were fit and healthy, in such a position, if you put them in such a position, you will convert stable people to something else.” **Kareem**

5: I Can't Eat It Any More

In institutional accommodation of all kinds, people routinely do not have the ability to choose their meals, cook food for themselves or eat at a time of their choosing. People described a lack of nutritious or culturally appropriate food and variety, for weeks and months on end. The poor quality and frequent repetition of the same meals meant that at times they chose to go hungry instead. Fundamentally, the experience of being unable to choose how to feed yourself is emblematic of the indignities experienced by people in such accommodation who were stripped of this most basic human agency.

"The food was, I would say, unhygienic, totally unhygienic...I had to rush to hospital in an emergency once with a severe stomach ache and the same thing happened with my daughter as well." Zarah

"We make complaints about food Saturday, Sunday, Monday – nothing changed. Then the fourth month they start to make the cost low, they start to give you a small potato and one piece of cheese, daily daily daily." Fouad

"The choice of the food is different from what we're used to. It's not about eating the food itself, it's about something human beings need – the need to choose what they want to eat, and you don't have that choice." Alomari

"I still remember we had good food for just three meals, three lunches, because someone was visiting us from other charities. These were the only three times that we had good food for our whole duration." Omar

*"So you'll just be eating whatever they give you and sometimes what they give you is ****, it's not even edible. Many times we just leave the hotel food there and we go upstairs sleeping hungry and we don't care. After a while you want to fill your stomach with anything that can fill it just to stop being hungry. I didn't believe that situation would happen in the UK, that somebody can sleep hungry with a lot of food in front of him but cannot eat it because it doesn't taste like human food."* Alomari

"The employees they don't eat that food. They throw it away." Anwar



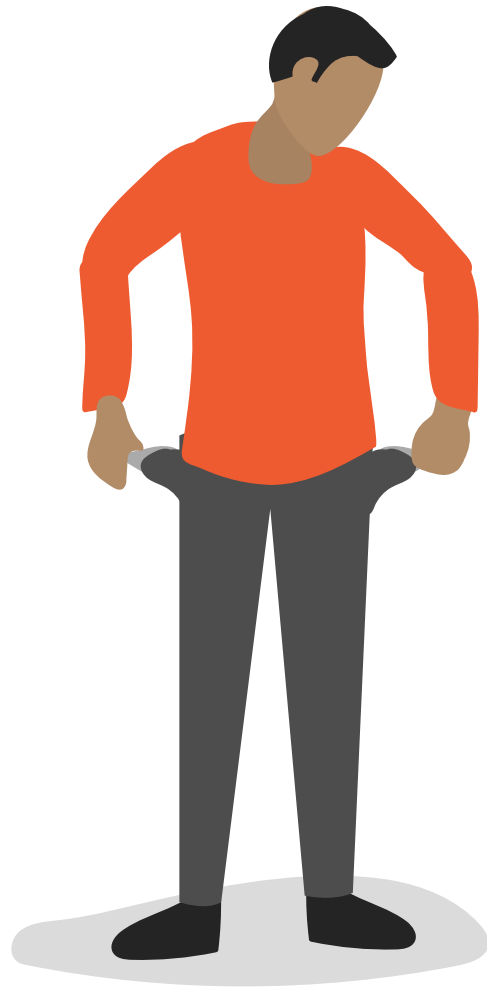
6: I Have No Money

For most of 2020, people in institutional accommodation, who are not permitted to work and provide for themselves, were not receiving support payments from the Home Office, later changed to £8 a week.^{vi} The lack of access to funds confined people to their accommodation setting, as they were unable to afford travel to attend medical appointments or visit places of worship, local support services or any other place not within walking distance. It also meant that people had little to no ability to satisfy any individual need or desire beyond the few basic things they were provided with; whether toiletries, medicine, food or clothing.

"They didn't give us cash. So we were broke. If someone has one or two pounds, we just keep them safe, because we don't know what's going to happen." Omar

"The next supermarket or grocery shop you need to walk for 45 minutes. And we didn't have money, the Home Office was not giving us a single penny." Kareem

"We don't have money to go to the [health] centre. It costs us four pounds...Some people they say 'oh you can go anywhere you want.' I said yes, but how? How can we go there? How can we go anywhere we want if we don't have the money?" Alomari



7: I Am Ignored

Although some acts of kindness by staff were reported by the people we interviewed, a common experience was that they felt ignored and invisible, not only to the Home Office, but also to accommodation staff. This included a mix of hotel staff, staff from accommodation providers, and sometimes people contracted in from security or other firms. People also spoke about their complaints being ignored, or worse being treated with disdain, hostility or threats. Of particular concern were the reports of staff telling residents that their asylum claims would be impacted if they complained about their accommodation.

"Two of the guards, security guards, were speaking loudly. They were speaking about our kind – Arabs, Muslims, whatever – swearing a lot, you know, accusing us a lot. They didn't realise that I can hear and understand everything. The guy who was next to me, he was unable to understand English but he said 'These two guards are talking about me right?' I said 'No, they were talking about somebody else.' You know, I had to lie to him." Kareem

"Every time we ask for something from the camp management, they always humiliate us and they always treat us in a lower position: 'You already take this one, why do you need this one?' If I need a shampoo to take a shower they will tell me: 'You already took one yesterday.'" Omar

"The employees there are so rude and if it was me I would ask them to be polite, so the behaviour of employees should be a lot better." Anwar

"[The staff] didn't talk to me at all. They didn't even say 'You know what? She's in her room, she's not eating, let me take something for her to eat.' Not once did they come to say, 'Oh, have you got any food to eat because I have not seen you in five days?' Not once did they check up on me to make sure I was OK." Sara

"We would hear from staff that if we complain or protest that can affect our asylum claim. And I think they were unaware of how the asylum system works. And yeah, that made some residents concerned." Matin

"I request, if there is anybody who will listen, I request someone that is responsible for this hotel to ask staff to be human because we are human ... We feel the same you feel. It's not our fault our country has war, it could be anywhere. I have feelings. That's what I need to say about the hotel." Fouad

8: I Am Pregnant

Two of the women we interviewed were pregnant while staying in institutional accommodation, in both instances for more than five months. The issues they highlighted, such as the lack of nutritious food, the heightened risk of contracting coronavirus, and the difficulties in accessing medical attention, were similar to those of other interviewees but the implications for them were greater given their pregnancies. Both detailed alarming incidents where they struggled to access emergency medical help, were not given food when they missed mealtimes in order to attend antenatal appointments, and were locked out of the hotel after arriving past 'curfew'. Their experiences highlight how unsuitable, and even dangerous, such facilities can be for pregnant women.

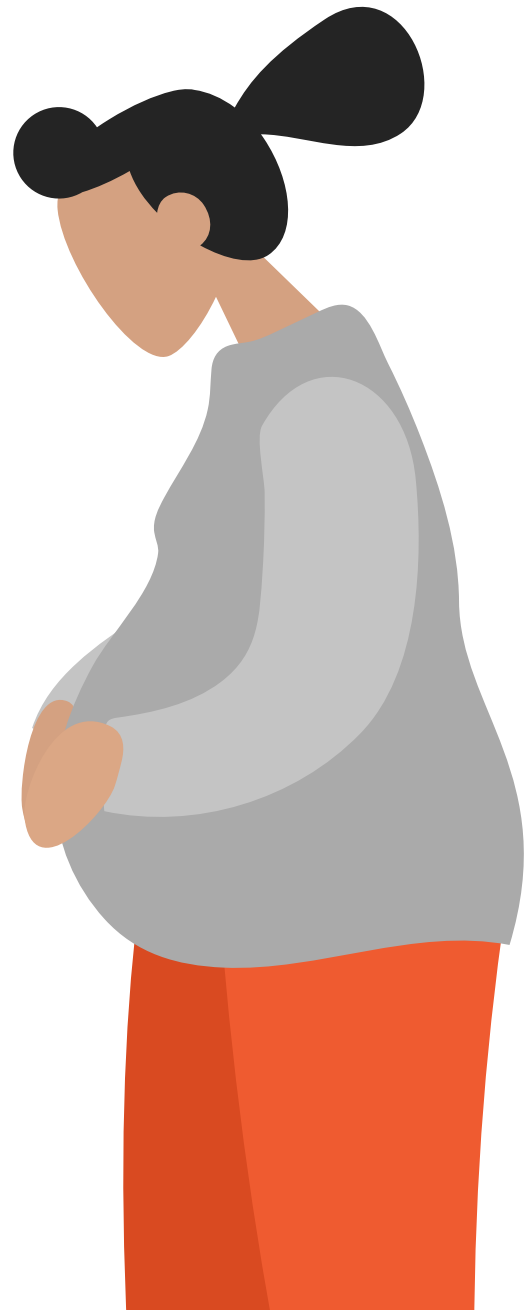
"There was one day, I was bleeding in the night, I had an emergency so I had to go to the emergency [room]. I had to go back [to the hotel]. It was after 10pm ... the manager didn't want to open the door for me. I arrived, I knocked the door, I called, there's a number at the door. I called the number and the manager says 'no, he's already late shift, he cannot wake up and come and open the door, he's already sleeping, I'm not allowed to come back after hours.' So I had to call [the housing management company], the lady who is in charge, then she called the manager. Then he opened the door for me." Jessie

"I was throwing up blood. I called the managers downstairs but nobody came upstairs to check on me. I was crying and telling them that I'm pregnant and I'm dying, I'm weak but they didn't come to check. They told me 'call the ambulance, they'll come pick you up'. Later I called it at 10.30. The ambulance came at 3. I'm on the floor. They had to use the master key to open the door because I couldn't get up. And when they saw me they said why didn't the manager call them and tell them this is very important, obviously someone would have come to get me. That's how careless they are – nobody really cares." Mary

"I gave birth [while I was accommodated] in a hotel. I didn't even have space to put the, what do you call it, baskets. I had a pram, I didn't have space to put that. They told me I had to go down to the basement and put some of my things there. And I had a C-section. I have to wake up, go downstairs and get my things, come back upstairs, go downstairs." Jessie

"The hotel was really, really big so the staircase was too much. So sometimes the lift doesn't work, you end up... climbing the staircase and going there three times a day because you need to go down to get your food." Mary

"Before I went to the first hotel, I did a scan, and they advised me to register with a GP and start doing check-ups as soon as possible because my pregnancy was high risk. I was about to register with a GP there but they just moved me [to another city]. There was a lady that was in charge with [the housing provider], I said 'I need to do check-ups, I'm pregnant.' She said, 'OK, the midwife is coming. She will do everything.' I waited one week, two weeks, the midwife didn't come. I asked her, 'I've been waiting, you said the midwife comes every Wednesday but the midwife hasn't come even once.'" Jessie



9: I Have Children

Two of the people we spoke to had been placed in institutional accommodation along with their children. They talked about a lack of space for living as a family, being confined to one room, difficulties in accessing educational provision and challenges in keeping their children stimulated given the lack of activities and space.

"You can't keep the children in the room all the time. They need space, they need to go out, you can't tell them that they can't go out... If they will be staying in the room obviously they need some activity." Zarah

"I have three children. They put us in one room. The size of the room is small. They call it enough to accommodate a family with three children, but my children are not like kids." Abubakr Sadeeq

"I got a place where the [male] singles were living in and there was only one washroom to be shared and with the daughters it was very difficult for me because at night-time when they used to use the toilet I had to go with them upstairs. So this was the problem 4-5 families were facing because there was a single toilet and we all had to share that. Single men were there." Zarah

"I received an email written by a senior leader of the education department, and they said, 'You are an asylum seeker and your children legally are not allowed to go to school.' I replied to them that before we came, I spent a couple of months [in a hotel in another area], and I registered my children there, and they got a place and were accepted. I know myself, via my knowledge, that children between the age of 5 and 16 in the UK must be in school." Abubakr Sadeeq

"I went to different schools. They used to say I don't have the right documentation for that. I did tell them I was an asylum seeker and I live in hotel, they would say, 'No you have to have a permanent address for that.'" Zarah

"My children... I tried to convince them that it's nice food, try to eat it, but they said, we cannot eat it. They were sometimes feeling very hungry, and they stayed without food." Abubakr Sadeeq

"The children continuously live in that place, they get frustrated, they cry for no reason. My son was very upset, let me tell you that, he was very upset and he didn't even know why he was crying....my daughter asked 'Mama. How did we become poor?' This was the question that... they don't understand." Zarah

"My children were really badly disappointed. They pointed their fingers towards me, they said you are responsible for bringing us to such bad circumstances; putting us like in a prison, the window cannot be opened, we cannot go to school, we cannot get the food we like, we cannot for example play, we cannot do any activities. We cannot go out... So, they kept blaming me, and I was in a very bad situation, how to answer, how to convince, how to reply...I couldn't say anything to them." Abubakr Sadeeq



10: I Am Scared

A number of the people we spoke to had experienced fear, either because of tensions arising between residents, because they faced harassment or discrimination, or because of threats from outside, notably from far-right extremists.

"[In the first institutional accommodation] I was sexually assaulted while staying there by men who were in there because I was always really feminine, and they could tell that I was different. I never reported any of these things to anybody because, not knowing about asylum, I didn't know if I could talk to anybody or tell anybody anything. It was very, very hard." Sara

"Then they placed me in all male accommodation...the resident housing manager, when he arrived, he sat me down and spoke to me, he's like, 'why are you here?'...and he said, 'they should not have put you here because you clearly said that you're a trans woman, you should be with women, not here'...I couldn't eat, I couldn't go to the toilet, I couldn't shower, because everything was shared. And it was very unsafe. The kind of comments and stuff I was getting in there, it was not a safe environment." Sara

"Unfortunately, my children and my wife have been actually physically attacked by other people in the [accommodation]." Abubakr Sadeeq

"They printed off a list of everybody's name, room number and country of origin. And all around the hotel, they stuck it on the walls. And in that poster, they dead named me, misgendered me, and listed my room number, and my country of origin. So I had everybody at the hotel come and knock on my door and say, 'who's this guy, is this you, are you a man?' So they outed me as trans in the hotel." Sara

Some people we spoke to had experienced harassment by far-right groups who targeted the facilities they were staying in. Institutional sites, as they are visible and segregated from communities, have increasingly become a focus of this type of activity. Hope Not Hate has reported 'widespread' far-right activity since summer 2020, with at least 64 incidents at hotels providing accommodation to people seeking asylum^{vii}, while Refugee Action found in a recent survey of refugee support organisations that 75% of respondents had received disclosures from their clients of verbal abuse or harassment by members of the public in the last six months. A quarter had received disclosures of physical violence from members of the public.^{viii}

"They don't call us asylum seekers even, they call us immigrants, illegal migrants, something like this. When somebody's accusing you that you are an invasion and you see that on their flag and then their signs and shouting, showing you unpleasant fingers, knocking on the door of the bus and the windows of the bus when we just entered, it was clear that somebody wanted to make us feel uncomfortable, unsafe. And yes, they did." Kareem

"I remember when we saw the racist drawings on the walls of the hostel. We were sad because of this message: 'send them home.' We are suffering here, you came to tell us 'go home', you don't know what's going on." Ibra Gaza

"They took me to a hotel, which was not safe, because they had a few racist groups who were posting videos of where asylum seekers are living. And they came into the hotel and wanted to fight with the people there. It was not a safe situation at all. They entered the hotel and they filmed where the hotel was, they said where it was located, so the people who were in the hotel were not safe." Sara

"Well most of the time the far-right activists were present around the camp. And if you wanted to go out, they would just come forward and ask you questions, where are you from? And why are you here? And they will take your pictures, shouting at you. I've seen so many residents that no longer wanted to go out because of that." Matin

"In the middle of the night they keep hitting the metal gates with sticks so that we can hear the sound. Whenever I hear such horrible sounds I never sleep. I'm always like what's going to happen, are they going to do more, more horrible stuff?" Omar



11: I Am Unwell

People seeking asylum often have poorer mental and physical health than the general population, due to their experiences of persecution in their country of origin and their perilous journeys to safety. The people we spoke to reported difficulty in accessing both physical and mental healthcare, and that the experience of institutional accommodation in and of itself exacerbated existing traumas and resulted in a deterioration of health conditions. Some of those we spoke to had not been assisted to register with a general practice, and a lack of access to dental care has been a recurring theme across institutional sites.

"I was in a dangerous situation because I have high blood pressure. The manager of the hotel was a very bad lady and she doesn't do nothing for me...So who helped me actually [was a charity worker], who registered me and sent me a taxi and they paid because the hotel refused to pay. They told me it's 2km and half, and I told her I cannot walk 100m – how can you ask me to walk 2km? My feet and my legs don't work." Fouad

"I think the main thing ignored from the healthcare system was that people had so many dental issues and mental issues. And this was not something that they could seek help for and the dentist couldn't assist them. So they would consume painkiller pills, like candies. And also their mental issues were neglected. They couldn't ask for someone's help for their mental issues." Matin

"People get sick because we don't know what to do. In the end after a few days we call the ambulance because we have no idea, we are not registered in the system." Alomari

"Because of the lack of sleep, I have a headache and migraine. Sometimes it comes to me twice a day. And when I asked the doctor for treatment they told me 'we are sorry, we can't give you any medicine, you should wait until you are transferred to dispersal accommodation to be registered with the GP. And after that the GP can prescribe medicine.'" Ibra Gaza

12: I Am Being Moved Again

Many of those we spoke to were moved from one institutional site to another, often at little to no notice, and without clarity on the purpose of the moves. This impacted on the relationships they had started to establish and their links to the local community. It contributed to a greater sense of uncertainty and feelings of loss of control and agency over their future.

"Nobody can tell you [about when you move]. In the morning I received a phone call, and they told me you have to prepare yourself because you have a transfer this morning. I said 'why didn't you tell me because I have been here for 14 months?' I just tried to collect my stuff." Chansat

"They just ordered me to get in the car – move me from one emergency hotel to another emergency hotel. On the way, the driver told us if there is no space for you, we will go back tonight." Ibra Gaza

"There were families with children, and ladies and men. I remember we stopped at three or four service stations and they told us you can buy the food on your own. When we were in the hotel, they just gave us food without money so the people don't have money. They didn't have food that day." Ibra Gaza

"After the second move, you can't start building relations all around. I started with a group of people, a football team, and we were trying to play two times during the week. So it was nice, but suddenly I get moved." Kareem

"The Monday they inform me you should move Wednesday. I prepare my luggage Wednesday and bring it down. Suddenly the security knocked my door in the morning, 'your transfer is cancelled.' I say 'how?' He says 'I don't know'. Thursday, the next day, there is a transfer. I came in in the morning – 'cancel, cancel, yes prepare, close, open your luggage, close your luggage' – this is not normal, it's not a game. And I ask 'where?', she says 'I don't know. When that bus driver comes you ask him'. Fouad



13: I Can Contribute

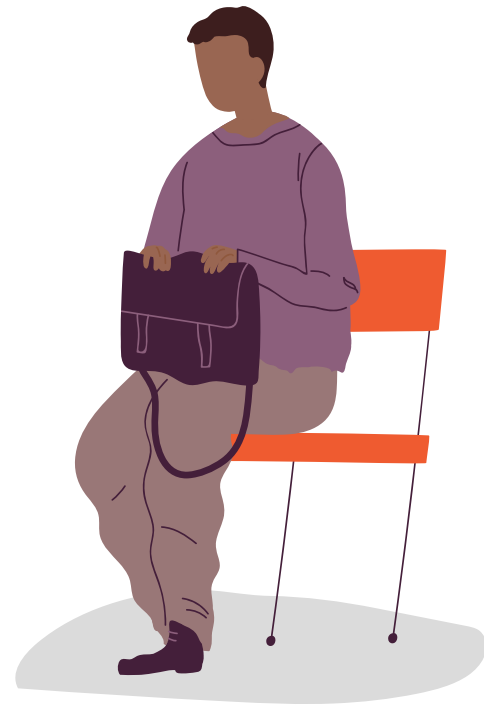
While waiting for a decision on their claim for asylum, people seeking asylum are unable to work, and are forced into inactivity for months and even years at a time. Some people we interviewed spoke about their frustration at being unable to contribute to their new communities, while recognising the cost of keeping them in hotels.

"Hotel was not required at all, I was finding that they are spending money in a not necessary way at all. It's not necessary. This money is not spent well." Kareem

"The period of the asylum, now, it's two years. So we are liability two years. It's not my fault. It's the fault of the Home Office and their way to manage our files. But the feeling that I'm liability? Yes, I feel I'm liability with society, unfortunately. It's a bad feeling by the way." Kareem

"I wasn't asking, I don't want money from anyone. I don't want clothes, I don't want anything I just want someone to say 'hey, it's ok.' That's what I think I needed at that time." Alomari

"I'm not incapable to help myself and pay my taxes as well and helping society. But the position the Home Office put me in – I'm not allowed to work." Kareem



14: I Am Unwanted

All the people we spoke to had been profoundly affected by their time in institutional accommodation. As a result of their experiences, some had formed the impression that they were unwanted in the UK, or considered less than human. Others believed that the experiences they were being put through were part of a deliberate strategy by the Home Office aimed at deterring people seeking safety from coming to the UK.

Most people who claim asylum in the UK are eventually granted protection and inevitably, these experiences are likely to have a negative impact on people's ability to rebuild their lives in the UK and play a full part in their new communities.

"I changed. I changed completely from the first time I reached the hotel until I departed. 100% I changed and I changed to bad because the beautiful photo in your mind it's broken. They make you feel you are down and they are up so this point is very important and sensitive for us. They make us feel we are * and they are flowers."*** Fouad

"Because many UK citizens, they think we don't feel. But we feel, we love, we cry at night. Almost all the time I miss my family." Omar

"Yeah it's so sad, I don't know why they create this kind of environment for us – is that paying us back because we ask to live in this country? Is that the revenge of the government for us because we came here? Do the Home Office or the government here try to take revenge because they have no other way to not let us stay? So ok if you want to stay we'll not make your life easy? So that question is always in my mind." Alomari

"That would be great to help these people because that place just feels like a place to isolate people, to make them decide to go back to their own countries maybe. I feel like that. There is no hospitality at all." Anwar

"To be honest, people like us who come from another country, Middle East or Africa, we always have this picture that the Western countries, European countries are really caring about human rights. So we didn't have this idea or concept that they are spreading misinformation about us and they are doing something unfair." Matin

"If I live even one day I should be treated as other people. I shouldn't be treated different because I'm applying for asylum, that shouldn't be the reason why people treat me different." Alomari

"If you offer me to come back to the hotel I'll stay in the street. That's my honest." Fouad

"We are like a football and they are pushing us from side to side." Kareem

15: I Am Moving On

Eventually, the people we spoke to received refugee status or were moved into dispersal accommodation in communities to continue the wait for a decision on their claim. Once outside the setting of institutional accommodation, they found comfort and support in local communities. They were learning to adjust to their new situation in the UK, and determined to help others who had gone through similar experiences.

"I feel that the first day I stayed outside...that's the first day that I joined the UK, I live in the UK. Before that I was not being, or feeling, or experiencing I was in the UK."

Abubakr Sadeeq

"The accommodation that I'm currently living in in comparison to Napier is decent, and I have my own privacy. That's the main thing. I have my freedom. I can go out wherever, whenever I want, and I'm not concerned about being harassed by far-right activists, so I really feel safer." **Matin**

"I'm being given my choices back. I can go out, go in, cook whenever I want, do whatever I want, interact with people, I don't feel like anyone is watching me. I've got my pride and my privacy back. You don't have privacy when you are being watched 24 hours. That's the main thing, privacy." **Alomari**

"I always thought that I'm not really welcome. But the city that I'm currently living in really gives me the impression that I'm really welcome and the city is really beautiful, calm. And the people there are really supporting asylum seekers and refugees. There are so many organisations there who are supporting asylum seekers, and I really love it." **Matin**

"I'm looking forward to contribute to the community. I'm 100% going to volunteer to help other asylum seekers because no one is helping them, no one is helping us, so I don't want to let them suffer, to let them face such a struggle, such troubles, such terrible experiences. I faced such things, I don't want to let them feel it. So I'm going to help them, support them, assist them with every single second I have in my life." **Omar**

"Not at all prison now." **Anwar**



The Future: ‘Accommodation Centres’ And The Anti-Refugee Bill

All types of institutional asylum accommodation cause harm. Every person we spoke to for this report told us of the hardship and suffering they personally encountered as a result of being placed in hotels, hostels, initial accommodation or military barracks.

Nonetheless, the Government seems determined to move towards a future where long stays in such harmful facilities become a routine, everyday part of the UK asylum system.

In April 2021 the Government brought forward its New Plan for Immigration, followed in June by its Nationality and Borders Bill, dubbed ‘the anti-refugee bill’ by campaigners. As well as widely condemned proposals to ‘offshore’ people seeking asylum abroad for processing, the Bill, which is currently going through Parliament, proposes building on previous legislation^x to introduce new ‘accommodation centres’, where it will place ‘particular cohorts’ of people ‘in order to resolve their immigration status more efficiently’,^x and to give the Home Secretary the power to lift time limits on how long people can be placed in them.^{xi}

The Government has already begun to put its plans into action. In August 2021 the Home Office published a tender, for a commercial partner or partners to work with it in the ‘provision of design, build or renovation of national accommodation centres’.^{xii}

We anticipate these facilities, if allowed to come into being, risk permanently instituting the concept of large prison-like refugee camps in the UK. They will further substantially blur the line between freedom and detention. They will harm people seeking safety, and they will do so at substantial financial cost.

People should not be warehoused in institutional sites. The Government should listen to the voices of people who have suffered the experience of living in this type of accommodation, immediately scrap these plans and commit to housing all people seeking asylum safely in our communities.

End Notes

- i. Asylum Matters and partners, [Wake Up Call](#), July 2020
- ii. Public Accounts Committee [Asylum Accommodation and Support Transformation Programme](#) (November 2020); Home Affairs Committee [Home Office Preparedness for COVID-19](#) (July 2020) ; National Audit Office [Asylum Accommodation and Support](#) (July 2020)
- iii. Refugee Council: [Top facts from the latest statistics relating to refugees and people seeking asylum](#), November 2021
- iv. [The Town and Country Planning \(Napier Barracks\) Special Development Order 2021 SI 2021/962](#) , laid on 27 August 2021 v R (NB & Ors)
- v. Secretary of State for the Home Department [2021] EWHC 1489 (Admin). The Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration and Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons have also published damning findings on the facility: ICIBI [An Inspection of the use of contingency asylum accommodation – key findings from site visits to Penally Camp and Napier Barracks March 2021](#); ICIBI [An Inspection of Contingency Asylum Accommodation: HMIP report on Penally camp and Napier Barracks](#) (July 2021)
- vi. This decision was made after a Ministerial review in October 2020 of asylum support rates.
- vii. [Parliamentary briefing: Nationality and Borders Bill Third Reading](#) – HOPE not hate 6.12.21
- viii. [Insights into Organisational Challenges, Concerns and Support Needs | Refugee Action Good Practice](#) (ragp.org.uk) accessed 9.12.21
- ix. [Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002, Part 2: accommodation centres](#)
- x. [Nationality and Borders Bill, explanatory notes](#), 6 July 2021
- xi. [Nationality and Borders Bill, explanatory notes](#), 6 July 2021, para 38
- xii. <https://www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk/notice/200ecd04-fc0d-4622-8aeb-ab8f9c126780> accessed 8.12.2021