

## **Written evidence submitted by Professor Peter Hopkins (Newcastle University); Dr Matthew Benwell (Newcastle University); Dr Robin Finlay (University of Sunderland)**

**Background to submission** - this submission is from a research team comprising Professor [Peter Hopkins](#) and Dr [Matthew Benwell](#) of Newcastle University and Dr [Robin Finlay](#) of the University of Sunderland. The submission is drawn from evidence collected from two research projects:

1. The first study focused on the everyday experiences of young refugees in North East England (funded by the Humanities in the European Research Area). We worked closely with young people who are refugees or who are seeking asylum<sup>1</sup>, as well as the organisations and groups who provide services for them. We engaged 49 people who are refugees or asylum-seekers in different forms of data collection including interviews, focus groups, walking interviews and creative map making sessions (Huizinga et al., 2022), and supported our data collection through forty hours of researcher volunteering at third sector organisations both in-person and online (see Williams, 2016). In addition to this, we interviewed 29 service providers working in the arts, cultural and voluntary sector. A short report from this project is available [here](#) and a longer paper [here](#).
2. The second study was an exploration of the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on refugees and asylum-seekers in Scotland and England (funded by Economic and Social Research Council). We conducted interviews with 50 refugees and asylum seekers (30 in Glasgow and 20 in Newcastle-Gateshead) and with 20 service providers, 10 in each city. The sample included 19 men and 31 women (34 asylum seekers and 16 refugees). Their ages ranged from 19 to 50, and countries of birth comprised Pakistan, Sudan, Turkey, Nigeria, Iran, Iraq, Eritrea, Jordan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sri Lanka, Syria, Western Sahara, Indonesia, Libya, and the Kurdistan territory. The final report of this study is available [here](#).

Overall, then, this submission is based on qualitative data collection with 99 refugees or asylum seekers and 49 service providers who work with or for refugee and migrant communities in the UK. Housing and accommodation issues were discussed in most interviews. In this submission, we respond to the request for evidence about asylum accommodation.

In our research, opinions about housing were varied, ranging from those who were satisfied with where they were living to those who were extremely worried about their housing conditions. For those who were experiencing housing difficulties, lockdown and the legal requirement to stay at home had exacerbated the challenges posed by their accommodation.

The most acute asylum accommodation challenges we found were as follows:

- Having to spend extended periods in housing during the COVID-19 lockdowns highlighted the poor state of accommodation for many people seeking asylum. Housing provision was of poor quality and regularly included broken appliances and damaged furniture that made life extremely difficult for many of the participants in

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<sup>1</sup> We refer to refugees as those who have been awarded refugee status and asylum-seekers as those who have applied for refugee status and are awaiting the outcome.

our research. Repairs and maintenance that were requested during lockdowns were often not carried out, or there was a long period of waiting before any issues were addressed. This left asylum seekers in accommodation with unresolved repair issues for several months.

- In multiple-occupancy dispersal housing, the sharing of communal spaces and concerns about other occupants not following social distancing guidelines created anxiety about the possible transmission of the virus.
- Some participants were housed in buildings within hostile communities and had experienced racism, harassment, and discrimination, including challenges such as verbal abuse and physical assault. Lockdown meant that people had to spend more time at home, so living in environments with hostile neighbours added further to the challenges of the pandemic.
- Staying in hotels posed several difficulties for asylum seekers. Everyday issues included no access to a kitchen to prepare food, the poor quality and suitability of food provided by hotels, and no access to money, as those staying in hotels were initially provided with no financial support; this was heightened by experiences of social isolation and concerns about the transmission of the virus while staying in a hotel. Moreover, many of these hotels were located in isolated parts of cities far away from local services, shops, or community groups. We agree with the Home Office plans to move away from utilising hotel accommodation but do not agree that sites such as barges or disused military bases offer an appropriate alternative as they continue to leave asylum seekers isolated from local services and from their host communities.
- For those granted refugee status, moving out of their asylum housing and finding new accommodation, such as social housing or private rental accommodation, and finding furniture and appliances, was often very challenging, and this was exacerbated during the pandemic. This resulted in some people living without various essential items, while others were homeless for several months.

Experiences of accommodation interconnect with various other factors. It is important to take a holistic approach to consider the knock-on challenges that inappropriate accommodation led to for our participants:

### **Digital exclusion**

- Limited or intermittent Wi-Fi and data access and insufficient access to smartphones, personal computers, or televisions, meant that many asylum seekers and refugees were struggling to access the online spaces that have become especially important for their connectivity and well-being. This peaked during the pandemic and during periods of national lockdown but remains a challenge for many.
- Digital exclusion is indicative of limited resources and income, but it is also reflective of the restrictive policies that the Home Office places on asylum seekers. At the time of our research, housing for asylum seekers was not provided with Wi-Fi, and asylum seekers were typically unable to sign up for broadband contracts because they were unable to open a bank account.

### **Mental health and wellbeing**

- Poor quality accommodation with restricted access to local services due to the isolated location of the housing provided meant that many asylum seekers experienced medical and health problems. Very often they had limited information about local medical facilities and were unable to fund the costs of public transport to access them.

- The mental health and wellbeing of those who found themselves in hotel accommodation often suffered as they were unable to cook their own food, were forced to comply with a strict timetable of when they could eat and had limited or no internet access. These factors compounded to damage their mental health with many complaining of feelings of depression and hopelessness.

#### **Local neighbourhoods and barriers to integration**

- In dispersal housing, many asylum seekers were not provided with any detailed information about the local facilities, shops, community groups or other relevant details about the local neighbourhood. This resulted in issues that limited their initial integration, such as difficulties in navigating the local area, difficulties in accessing and using public transport and complications with finding out about and accessing local services.
- The remote location of some asylum accommodation – including hotels – meant that key opportunities to integrate into their local communities were cut off for many asylum seekers and refugees, yet many were eager to learn more about the new place in which they found themselves and to join local groups and to contribute to society.

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