

Written evidence submitted by British Red Cross (COR0232)

Institutional Accommodation

[Note: This evidence has been redacted by the Committee. Text in square brackets has been inserted where text has been redacted.]

(I) About the British Red Cross

- The British Red Cross has over 19,600 volunteers in the UK and nearly 3,900 staff. We are part of the world's largest humanitarian network, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, which has 17 million volunteers across 191 countries. We are the UK's largest voluntary and community sector emergency response organization and largest independent provider of support to refugees and asylum seekers.
- Across the UK we respond to an emergency every four hours, whether it is a fire in a family home or a large-scale national emergency. We provide practical and emotional support when it is needed most, and support individuals and communities to prepare for, respond to, and recover from emergencies.
- We welcome the opportunity to provide written evidence to the Committee. Our evidence is based on our extensive experiences working with refugees and people seeking asylum in the UK. Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 we have supported over 32,000 people across 58 different cities and towns. This includes people who are being accommodated in hotels and military barracks.

Summary

1. The British Red Cross is deeply concerned about the ongoing failures of the asylum support system to meet people's basic needs in a safe and appropriate manner. This includes that, while waiting for a decision on their asylum application, too many men, women and children are **living in unsafe and insecure accommodation**.
2. **Our concerns for people housed in asylum support accommodation have intensified during the pandemic.** An increasing amount of accommodation is unsuitable for people who have fled war, violence and persecution and exacerbates existing and creates new mental health problems, reducing the ability for people to engage with their asylum claim. This includes the use of military barracks, which are inappropriate accommodation for people seeking asylum.
3. **There were issues with accommodation supply and quality in the asylum support system prior to the pandemic;** over 1,200 people were already being accommodated in hotels before March 2020. The use of multiple occupancy accommodation and shared **bedrooms** to house unrelated adults across the asylum support estate meant that much of the existing asylum accommodation estate did not allow for social distancing and public health measures to be easily introduced in response to Covid-19.
4. While emergency measures introduced in response to Covid-19 have led to **more people being accommodated in the asylum support system**, we believe there are steps that the Home Office could have taken to ensure people had access to safe, appropriate and dignified support during the pandemic and steps that would have reduced the number of people needing asylum accommodation.
5. For example, the longer people are waiting for a decision on their asylum claim, the longer they will need to be accommodated by the Home Office. The **backlog of asylum claims**

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had significantly increased prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and has grown in the ensuing months. The Home Office has reported that they have been working to prioritise “cases with acute vulnerability”¹, and the Home Office could have also chosen to expedite positive decisions on applications submitted by people from countries with very high grant rates. This would have allowed those people to move-on from the asylum system and reduce the demand for asylum accommodation.

6. The support provided by the Home Office through the asylum support system should be trauma informed, safe, appropriate and allow people to live with dignity. **Immediately ending the use of military sites as asylum accommodation, urgently improving support for people living in asylum accommodation and ensuring the sustainability of the dispersal system, enabling people to live in communities while their asylum claims are decided, should be urgent priorities for the Home Office.**

Recommendations

7. The Home Office should, as a matter of urgency, put in place a plan to reduce the number of people living in contingency accommodation, including military sites and hotels. This plan should include:
 - immediately ending the use of military sites as asylum accommodation, with all current residents moved into suitable alternative housing
 - putting in place procedures to accelerate asylum applications by people from countries with high overall grant rates. Given the impact that Covid-19 has had on the asylum system and the backlog of cases, these procedures shouldn't necessitate full consideration of claims. Once necessary security and identity checks have been carried out, the Home Office should quickly move to make positive decisions
 - working with Local Authorities, devolved governments, voluntary sector organisations and others to expand community dispersal accommodation across the UK, moving people out of emergency accommodation in hotels and other temporary sites
8. The Home Office and accommodation providers should also take urgent steps to improve the support available for people in asylum accommodation so that people can keep themselves, their families and communities safe during the Covid-19 pandemic:
 - the asylum support system should be trauma-informed and the needs of people seeking asylum should be anticipated
 - the Home Office should provide financial support to people supported in Initial Accommodation
 - people entering asylum accommodation should be provided with adequate clothing by the accommodation providers
 - the Home Office, accommodation providers and NHS services should ensure that everyone accommodated in the asylum support system is registered with a GP
 - the Home Office and accommodation providers should provide WIFI access throughout the asylum accommodation estate and provide access to mobile phones and/or computers to residents.
 - the Home Office should increase Asylum Support rates in line with the £20 per week increase to Universal Credit
 - the Home Office should ensure that people are able to use their ASPEN card online
 - accommodation providers should ensure that people do not have their movement unnecessarily restricted
 - people should only be moved on from asylum accommodation following a positive asylum decision once other financial support and accommodation is in place. In the

¹ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-01-15/138519>

longer term, the Home Office should extend the move-on period to at least 56 days

(ii) Context /pre COVID issues with the UK's Asylum Accommodation

9. The Home Office has a legal duty under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 to provide accommodation and/or financial support to anyone applying for asylum who would otherwise be destitute. If, when a person applies for asylum support, they are homeless they can be immediately accommodated in Initial Accommodation under section 98 of that Act before being dispersed on a no-choice basis to dispersal accommodation around the country. Initial Accommodation is usually provided on a full-board basis, and for a short-time frame, while the application for accommodation and financial support under section 95 of the Act is considered.
10. **When the right support is in place, the British Red Cross believes that giving people accommodation within communities, and financial support rather than in-kind support, allows for better social integration, access to education and healthcare, and creates an environment for people to engage fully with the asylum process.** However, this community dispersal model was already under-pressure prior to Covid-19, and the pandemic has further exacerbated existing issues.
11. In 2019 the Home Office awarded new contracts to provide asylum support to voluntary agencies and private sector companies through the Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility contract (AIRE) and the Asylum Accommodation and Support Services Contract (AASC). **The transition to these new contracts faced many issues, including accessibility, delays in asylum support application processing and payments and accommodation supply.** Before these issues were resolved, those services were required to step up provision for the current Covid-19 emergency.
12. As a result of these issues, there had been a sharp rise in the **use of hotels following the move to the new contracts** in the autumn of 2019. In early 2019 there were fewer than 200 people accommodated in contingency accommodation, such as hotels, and by February 2020 there were nearly 1,600 people in contingency accommodation. When lockdown measures were being introduced in the UK, there were already around 1,200 people in hotels.² Data provided to the National Audit Office shows that from the first few months of the new contracts in 2019, asylum accommodation providers were failing to meet their targets on proposing and moving people to dispersed accommodation within the timescales set by the Home Office.³

(iii) Increased use of contingency accommodation, including hotels and impact on individuals' wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic

13. Since the lockdown started, and the subsequent welcome suspension of evictions from asylum accommodation, the number of people in the asylum support system has increased significantly. At the end of March 2020 there were 48,042 people accommodated by the Home Office – by the end of September that year this had increased to 58,778. An increase in the number of people in Initial Accommodation (under section 98 of Immigration and Asylum Act 1999) accounted for nearly 8,000 of those extra places.⁴

² National Audit Office, Asylum Accommodation and Support, 3 July 2020 <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Asylum-accommodation-and-support.pdf>

³ See page 30, National Audit Office, Asylum Accommodation and Support, 3 July 2020 <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Asylum-accommodation-and-support.pdf>

⁴ Home Office Quarterly Immigration Statistics, year ending September 2020, table Asy_D09 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-statistics-year-ending-september-2020>

14. **The number of people accommodated in hotels has increased from 1,200 in March 2020 to around 10,000 people by September 2020, meaning one in every six people being accommodated by the Home Office is in a hotel.** The British Red Cross and other sector organisations have supported people being accommodated in hotels and other contingency accommodation. We have repeatedly raised concerns about the impact of the prolonged use of full-board contingency accommodation, the lack of access to financial support, healthcare support and psycho-social activities on people's mental health and wellbeing.
15. British Red Cross services across the UK are supporting people with additional vulnerabilities, including young people whose age is disputed, pregnant women, survivors of trafficking, families, people with disabilities and health conditions including complex mental health problems, who are being housed in hotel and other forms of contingency accommodation. We have been assured by the Home Office and providers that the most vulnerable people will be moved out of hotels into appropriate accommodation, but our services routinely see people staying in hotels for prolonged periods of time.
16. **There are safety concerns as people accommodated in hotels have been targeted in hate crime attacks** by far-right groups, with incidents of organised groups livestreaming videos of attacking and harassing people in their accommodation and posting videos online. We are not aware of support put in place by accommodation providers for people affected by these attacks and in many cases people at risk were only moved following repeated advocacy by voluntary sector agencies. This includes survivors of trafficking and domestic abuse who were at additional risk as details of these locations were circulated online. Several of the hotels targeted remain in use by accommodation providers. Not only is this extremely distressing for people, but given they are applying for international protection raises serious safety concerns.
17. **It is difficult to overstate the impact of being isolated in a small hotel room, sometimes with no natural light, for many months.** Our services have seen marked deterioration in the mental health of people we are supporting and a rise in complex safeguarding concerns, often connected to suicidal thoughts and attempts. There is extensive evidence of the far higher prevalence of complex mental health issues, including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, among people seeking asylum⁵. Safeguarding and support must be preventative and not reactive – waiting for 'evidence' of vulnerability, harm or risk. **The British Red Cross recommends that the Home Office and accommodation providers take action to ensure the asylum support system is trauma-informed and that the needs of people seeking asylum are anticipated.**
18. **These issues have been compounded by the lack of financial support provided to people.** Until recently, people being accommodated in hotels and other "full board" accommodation received no financial support. This left people with no freedom to meet their needs with dignity, unable to travel to essential appointments or buy essential items not provided by the hotels such as mobile phone data, clothes, face coverings, non-prescription medication etc.
19. On 27 October 2020, following a review of asylum support rates, it was announced that people being supported under section 95 or section 4(2) of the 1999 Act and living in full board accommodation would receive £8 a week to cover costs of clothing, non-prescription medicines and travel⁶. Some of this support was backdated, including £3 per week to reflect

⁵ Mental Health Statistics: Refugees and People Seeking Asylum, Mental Health Foundation, <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/statistics/mental-health-statistics-refugees-and-asylum-seekers#:~:text=Research%20suggests%20that%20asylum%20seekers,will%20experience%20serious%20mental%20distress.&text=However%2C%20data%20shows%20that%20they,support%20than%20the%20general%20population>

clothing needs, either to 27 March 2020 or the actual date the person was granted section 95 or 4(2) support if after 27 March.

20. However, financial support is still not available for people being supported in Initial Accommodation and contingency accommodation under section 98. According to the latest statistics published by the Home Office, 10,315 people were being supported under section 98 - around 18% of all people accommodated in asylum support.⁷ As the Committee found in its report 'Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 (Coronavirus): Institutional Accommodation', people are currently being kept on section 98 support for substantially longer periods than normal. In that report, the Committee recommended that the Home Office should urgently reconsider support for people in Initial Accommodation. We are very concerned that that recommendation has not been acted on. **The British Red Cross recommends that the Home Office should provide financial support to people supported in Initial Accommodation and all contingency accommodation.**
21. People living in hotels frequently raise concerns about the quality of food and availability of food for people with specific dietary needs. There are widespread reports of lack of access to clothing and to laundry facilities with people remaining in the clothes they arrived wearing. Voluntary sector organisations continue to provide clothing and other forms of essential provisions to people in full board accommodation, which was increasingly important with the need for warm clothing in the winter. **The British Red Cross recommends that people entering asylum accommodation are provided with adequate clothing by the accommodation providers.**
22. **There are also significant concerns about the ability for people to keep themselves safe during the Covid-19 pandemic while living in contingency accommodation.** British Red Cross teams continue to receive reports of lack of access to soap, hand sanitizer and other basic hygiene products within the hotels. People also tell us that there are insufficient social distancing measures in place.
23. **Significantly, access to healthcare continues to be a problem.** In their previous report, the Committee recommended that urgent action was needed to ensure access to primary and secondary healthcare for people in initial and contingency accommodation. The British Red Cross continues to have concerns about lack of health-care screening in hotels as well as issues with accessing HC2 certificates and GP registration. In one example in Bristol the local British Red Cross service was required to intervene with an emergency £150 donation to purchase urgent medication needed by hotel residents who did not have access to HC2 certificates.
24. **GP registration** is becoming increasingly important as the Covid-19 vaccine programme is rolled out. GP registration is currently required in order to receive the vaccine, and vulnerable groups are identified through registration. **The British Red Cross recommends that the Home Office, accommodation providers and NHS services ensure that everyone accommodated in the asylum support system is registered with a GP.**
25. Since the most recent lockdown started on 4 January 2021, British Red Cross Refugee Support teams have increasingly reported hearing of people living in hotels having their movements restricted. This includes people being stopped from spending more than 1 hour outside of a hotel and being required to answer questions on, and in some cases even

⁶ As set out in letter from Chris Philp, Minister for Immigration Compliance and the Courts, to Civil Society Chief Executives dated 27 October 2020 <https://www.freemovement.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Asylum-support-letter.pdf>

⁷ Figure from the number of people in receipt of section 98 support as of 30 September 2020. Home Office Quarterly Immigration Statistics, year ending September 2020, table Asy_D09 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-statistics-year-ending-september-2020>

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prove, where they are going. While it is important that everyone, including people living in asylum accommodation, are aware of the legislation and guidance that will help to tackle Covid-19, the restrictions being put in place in some hotels goes beyond that. Furthermore, it is not the place for the regulations to be enforced by hotel security. **The British Red Cross recommends that accommodation providers should ensure that people have access to the public health and other information they need to make informed decisions, and do not have their movement unnecessarily restricted.**

(iv) The use of military sites

26. **Part of the Home Office's response to the increase in the use of hotels has been to utilise other sites to provide accommodation.** These include the Ministry of Defence barracks in Penally in Pembrokeshire, Napier in Kent, and RAF Coltishall in North Norfolk. We have supported people in all three of those sites. In the view of the British Red Cross such sites are not suitable places to house people who have fled war, persecution, imprisonment and other traumatic situations. Many people living at these sites have made truly harrowing journeys in search of protection. Many have spent time behind wire fences in camps in Europe or other parts of the world, queuing up for food, support and to speak to people who can help them get information.
27. In Autumn 2020, the British Red Cross started to provide emergency support at Penally Camp in recognition of the immediate humanitarian concerns for people housed at the camp, and to ensure individuals could speak with and access support from an independent organisation. Since November 2020, the Red Cross has attended the site on six occasions to provide essential items to residents and promote our offer to speak to an independent trusted agency. Following on from these site visits 134 residents in Penally have asked to speak to the Red Cross. As of 26 January, we have spoken to 101 people and left messages for remainder of people. The data below is based on conversations with 88 people:
- Over 70% of residents we spoke to had **been in hotels or barracks for over 90 days**, with some people reporting up to 8 months stays in hotels prior to arrival.
 - Two thirds (69%) reported **not getting an advance notice of their move**. Some residents reported moving in the early hours of the morning or arriving late at night, with little or no understanding about what was happening. Some people reported to us that they had thought they were being removed from the UK.
 - Half of those we spoke to stated that they had **not received an induction on arrival**.
 - A significant majority (81%) said that they had **not received translated information** on arrival about what is happening on site.
 - People reported a range of mechanisms that were on site around COVID-19 however half (49%) of people reported that they had **not seen translated COVID-19 guidance**.
 - Only 36% of people reported **having a health screening**, with majority of people stating that they did not have a health screening before or after arrival.
28. Additionally, we were told that:
- **People did not feel safe on the site.** The reasons for this included site facilities, sleeping arrangements, privacy, public protests, personal circumstances, camp dynamics, and covid-19 concerns.

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- **People were experiencing depression and anxiety.** Some people reported receiving medication and sleeping tablets, which in some cases meant people slept through breakfast impacting access to food.
- **There were long delays between requests for medical assistance and receiving treatment.** At times this resulted in people reporting being in pain for prolonged periods. One person reported having been in pain for 20 days. Another informed us that they had made seven attempts to get support for dental pain, and this delay had caused his ears to swell.
- **People did not feel their complaints were being listened to** and had not seen improvements as a result of raising issues.
- **People were concerned over access to the toilets**, cleanliness and location of the toilets being outside. Some people reported coughs and chest complaints due to walking to the toilet from their cabin in the freezing cold and wet weather.
- Due to **closed toilets**, some residents were walking to the other side of camp to use the toilet. One person reported walking off site to use facilities in a service station.
- The sinks needed for drinking water and hygiene are located within the toilets, **impacting access to drinking water** and water required to complete daily religious practices is limited.
- Where **residents had requested water**, it was provided in small 0.5 litre bottles.

29. As mentioned in paragraphs 18-20, the Home Office does not provide people within the asylum system start-up financial support on arrival to the UK or additional support in preparation for the winter months. Additionally, residents on site had been subject to a prolonged period of living without access to financial support in hotels, and therefore unable to effectively clothe themselves or buy essential supplies.

30. The British Red Cross has provided over 1,200 items of clothing, some of which are detailed in the table below. Some people were placed on site with no warm clothing or coats, walking around the sodden ground of the site in flip flops and summer shoes. People were moved to Penally in the Autumn and Winter, toilet blocks are located outside, accommodation blocks have limited heating, making access to warm, winter clothing an immediate and urgent need. Clothing is not provided to residents on site and, as they have no financial support, people have no means of purchasing clothing.

Items	Sets of hats, scarfs, gloves	Sets of underwear and socks	Back-packs	Coat and raincoat	Jean Trousers	Jogging Bottoms	Hoodies	T-shirts	Pairs of Shoes	Jumpers	Towels
Quantity supplied	54	166	51	109	62	94	58	110	149	76	130

31. The lack of cash also impacted people's ability to stay in touch with family, friends, or contact services. A significant proportion did not have a mobile phone at the time we spoke to them. The Red Cross provided 49 mobile phones on site and received enquiries for our International Family Tracing services to reconnect people with their families.

32. Military sites are not suitable places for people seeking asylum to be accommodated. While there were serious issues with the process of how the sites were set up and continuing operational problems, even with mitigating actions the sites would continue to be unsuitable.

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We are extremely concerned that these sites could become a permanent fixture. **The British Red Cross recommends that the Home Office stops using military sites as asylum accommodation immediately, and all current residents should be moved into suitable alternative housing.**

(v) Procurement of new forms of accommodation

33. The British Red Cross is aware that the Home Office and its providers have been considering and developing new sites and forms of accommodation that it intends to use to house people seeking asylum. This includes plans to **house people in portacabins** on the grounds next to Yarls Wood Immigration Removal Centre⁸.
34. The British Red Cross has recently been informed that the AASC provider Mears has procured a [multiple] bed "Mother and Baby Unit" at [location] for use from [date]. We understand that the accommodation is a single unit with shared communal spaces and accommodation in self-contained bedrooms comprising of bed space, kitchen facilities and connected bathroom. Women can be moved there six weeks before their due date and may be housed at the 'unit' up until their child is two years old.
35. The British Red Cross runs a specialist project supporting over 50 pregnant women, and new mothers in the asylum and refugee community in [location]. Women using our service are fearful about being moved to the unit and the implications about their ability to raise their children independently. It is unclear what assessments are being undertaken to assess suitability before women and children are moved into the unit and there is little information provided to women about the unit before they move. There are concerns about conditions in the unit and whether the rooms, especially with cooking facilities inside the bedroom, are safe for young children and people have expressed concerns about raising their children there long-term. **The British Red Cross encourages the Committee to ask the Home Office to provide additional information about the use of this unit.**

(vi) The continued need to widen dispersal accommodation

36. This Committee and its predecessors have highlighted the impact that the shortfall in dispersal accommodation and the concentration of accommodation in certain areas of the UK has had on people seeking asylum, communities and the asylum system. While Covid-19 has exacerbated existing issues and has slowed the usual flow through the system, a lack of accommodation is not a new issue, and it should not be expected that all of the problems outlined above will no longer exist once the pandemic is over.
37. Overcoming this problem should be achievable. Prior to the pandemic there were just under 51,000 people being accommodated by the Home Office. This is equivalent to 78 people per UK Parliamentary constituency, or 0.08% of the average population of each constituency.
38. Ensuring the sustainability of the dispersal system, allowing people to live in communities while their asylum claims are decided, should be a priority for the Home Office. **To achieve this, the British Red Cross recommends that the Home Office should work with Local Authorities, devolved governments, voluntary sector organisations and others to expand community dispersal accommodation across the UK, moving people out of emergency accommodation in hotels and other temporary sites.** This should include the creation of a joint plan, led by the Home Office.

⁸ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/yarls-wood-camp-asylum-seekers-legal-action-home-office-b1785889.html>

(vii) Delays in asylum decision making and the impact on accommodation.

39. **The issues set out above in relation to the use of hotels and military sites have been compounded, if not caused, by increasing delays within the asylum system, both before and during the Covid-19 pandemic.** For the year ending September 2020 asylum applications in the UK fell by 8% with the top five counties of origin being Iran, Albania, Iraq, Eritrea and Sudan. On 30 September 2020 60,548 asylum cases had been waiting for an initial decision, with three quarters (46,108) waiting more than 6 months (up 194% from two years previously).⁹ The increase cannot be solely put down to the impact of Covid-19. Between March 2018 and March 2020 there had been a 134% increase cases more than six months old.
40. The longer people are in the asylum system, the longer they will be in need of asylum accommodation. If the Home Office addressed the increasing delays in asylum-decision-making it would not only benefit the individuals themselves but would also reduce the pressure on the accommodation estate.
41. **There are immediate steps the Home Office could take to reduce the number of people waiting for decisions.** In response to a written question on 20 January 2020, Chris Philp, Minister for Immigration Compliance and the Courts, said that the Home Office were “working to streamline cases and have already made significant progress in prioritising cases with acute vulnerability those in receipt of the greatest level of support including Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children, and those that require a reconsideration.”¹⁰
42. This is a good start, but more could be done. For example, at the end of September, there were 3,621 Sudanese, Syrian and Eritrean nationals who had been waiting longer than six months for a decision on their asylum application.¹¹ The grant rate across those three countries at initial decision was 94% in the year to March 2020.¹² Not everyone in that cohort will be accommodated by the Home Office, but if only half of those people were that would be **1,800 people** in the asylum support system who are almost certainly going to be granted asylum but who have been waiting for more than six months for a decision.
43. Expediting those cases in response to the current pressures on the system would allow people to have their cases progressed and then move-on from asylum accommodation with the right support in place. This would in turn create additional capacity within the asylum accommodate estate. By comparison, on 21 January there were **381** people accommodated in the Napier Barracks¹³ and **118** people in the barracks at Penally on 26 January.¹⁴
44. **The British Red Cross recommends that the Home Office puts in place procedures to accelerate asylum applications from countries with high overall grant rates. Given the impact that Covid-19 has had on the asylum system and the backlog of cases,**

⁹ Home Office Quarterly Immigration Statistics, year ending September 2020, table Asy_D03
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-statistics-year-ending-september-2020>

¹⁰ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-01-15/138519>

¹¹ Home Office Quarterly Immigration Statistics, year ending September 2020, table Asy_D03
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-statistics-year-ending-september-2020>

¹² Home Office Quarterly Immigration Statistics, year ending September 2020, table Asy_D02
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-statistics-year-ending-september-2020>

¹³ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-01-18/139155>

¹⁴ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-01-21/141562>

these procedures shouldn't necessitate full consideration of claims. Once necessary security and identity checks have been carried out, the Home Office should quickly move to make positive decisions.

(viii) Digital exclusion for those in asylum accommodation and the need for improved asylum support rates

45. With national lockdowns across the UK and schools closing, digital access is vital for staying connected, continuing education and accessing basic services. However, people seeking asylum are not allowed to work or access mainstream welfare or housing support. Many rely on support provided by the Home Office for a place to live and basic financial support whilst they wait for the outcome of their asylum application. Internet access is not provided as part of asylum support¹⁵. People we support describe facing impossible choices between buying food or a phone top up in order to speak to the Home Office, their GP or family and friends.
46. People often relied on access to free WiFi and computers available in libraries, community centres and charities and many have been closed or offering very limited access to physical services due to public health restrictions in response to Covid-19. For families with school age children, access to digital equipment is vital to enable children to continue to engage with their learning. **The British Red Cross recommends that the Home Office and accommodation providers should provide WIFI access throughout the asylum accommodation estate and provide access to mobile phones and/or computers to residents.**
47. People's experiences of asylum accommodation are directly linked to the financial support they also receive and how they can use it. People struggle to meet their basic living needs on financial support of £39.63 per person per week. Financial support is loaded onto an 'ASPEN card' which can be used to withdraw cash or purchase basic items in shops but cannot be used online. **The British Red Cross recommends that the Home Office should ensure that people are able to use their ASPEN card online.**
48. In response to the pandemic the UK government introduced an uplift to asylum support payments in June 2020 of £1.75 per week, this contrasts to the £20 per week increase to Universal Credit introduced in March 2020. The British Red Cross and partners wrote to the Home Secretary to request a reconsideration of this decision in July 2020¹⁶ but since then the only change has been a further 3 pence per week increase, bringing the total weekly payment to £39.63. Asylum Support rates do not allow people to meet their basic living needs in normal times let alone during this pandemic. **The British Red Cross recommends that asylum support rates should be increased by £20, in line with the increase to Universal Credit.**

(ix) Refugee 'move-on' from asylum accommodation after their asylum decision

49. Since 2014, the British Red Cross has been raising concerns and producing evidence about the impact of the 28 day move-on period for people granted leave to remain and the lack of support for refugees moving on from asylum support. After waiting for an asylum decision for many months if not years, people granted refugee status are given just 28 days to open a bank account, find a job or access Universal Credit and find a place to live.
50. Following the stay on evictions from asylum support accommodation introduced in late March 2020, the Home Office started to **resume evictions from asylum support** for

¹⁵ During the pandemic free WiFi was installed in some full-board asylum support initial accommodation centres.

¹⁶ See letter here <https://asylummatters.org/2020/06/10/over-220-organisations-write-to-the-home-secretary-demanding-an-increase-asylum-support-rates/>

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people granted refugee status in summer 2020. This process was described as **'phased approach'** where evictions would only take place once someone had alternative financial support such as Universal Credit in place and working closely with Local Authorities to allow for smooth transition to mainstream accommodation.

51. The process of ensuring people had support in place before being asked to move on from asylum support was extremely encouraging, particularly given the risks of homelessness and destitution during the pandemic. However, we have been informed that the Home Office has returned to 'business as usual' and are issuing people with **four weeks' notice to leave their accommodation** at present despite the positive feedback from Local Authorities, AIRE and AASC providers and voluntary sector agencies about the phased process. As far as we are aware, the Home Office have not conducted any monitoring or evaluation of the impact of the 'phased' approach.
52. There are strong economic as well as social and practical reasons to retain the measures put in place during Covid-19, including better data sharing and ensuring people were in receipt of Universal Credit before moving them on from asylum accommodation. Published in February 2020, our report *The Costs of Destitution*¹⁷ evidenced the high costs this poses for local authorities, health services, and found that extending the move-on period to 56 days could have annual financial benefits of between £4 million and £7 million.
53. People granted refugee status should be supported to move on and rebuild their lives, but for too many being granted protection is swiftly followed by destitution and homelessness. If the measures are reversed and the system does move back to how it worked before Covid-19, that would be a retrograde step.
54. **The British Red Cross recommends that during the Covid-19 pandemic people should only be moved on from asylum accommodation following a positive asylum decision once other financial support and accommodation is in place. In the longer term, the Home Office should extend the move-on period to at least 56 days.**

(x) Conclusion

55. As the UK continues to respond to Covid-19, it is vital that people seeking asylum have the support they need to keep themselves, their families and their communities safe. While the Home Office made a number of welcome decisions to protect people early on in their response, subsequent decisions regarding how people are being accommodated are increasingly concerning to the British Red Cross. However, we believe that by implementing the recommendations made in this submission, many of these issues can be addressed as well as moving towards a more sustainable longer-term position.

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¹⁷ <https://www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/we-speak-up-for-change/improving-the-lives-of-refugees/refugee-move-on-period>