COMMUNITY COHESION AND ASYLUM ACCOMMODATION

UNDERSTANDING LOCAL PERSPECTIVES

Lucy Mort and
Marley Morris

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IPPR
8 Storey's Gate
London
SW1P 3AY
E: info@ippr.org
www.ippr.org
Registered charity no: 800065 (England and Wales),
SC046557 (Scotland)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lucy Mort is a principal research fellow and head of qualitative research at IPPR.

Marley Morris is associate director for migration, trade and communities at IPPR.

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SUMMARY

Asylum accommodation has become one of the most visible and politically charged elements of the UK's immigration system. Throughout 2024 and 2025, hotels housing people seeking asylum became flashpoints for protest and, in some cases, violent unrest. Yet national headlines obscure a more complex local picture.

This report examines how asylum accommodation is experienced and interpreted within communities themselves. Drawing on focus groups with residents across six English case study areas – Liverpool, Plymouth, Hillingdon, Derby, Tamworth and Wakefield – alongside a dedicated focus group with people seeking asylum in Plymouth, the research explores why asylum hotels have generated different responses across the country, and what conditions support cohesion where asylum accommodation is present.

FINDINGS

We identify the following five key findings.

1. Perceived unfairness in housing and cost-of-living pressures is shaping attitudes to asylum accommodation

Residents rarely discussed asylum accommodation in isolation. Instead, it was folded into wider experiences of housing scarcity, overcrowding, homelessness and rising living costs.

Concerns were often framed less as opposition to people seeking asylum and more as a belief that the system was failing those already struggling locally. Confusion between asylum accommodation, temporary accommodation and social housing reinforced perceptions of parallel systems. Stories about housing allocation and what people seeking asylum receive – whether verified or rumoured – shaped local understanding.

Hotels were often viewed as highly visible symbols of unfairness. Where hotels had previously served as community assets or local employers, their conversion to asylum use was sometimes experienced as a loss without a clear local benefit.

2. Weak communication and low trust create space for misinformation

Across sites, participants described limited clear communication from official sources and heavy reliance on social media. During moments of crisis, unverified claims spread quickly online.

Focus group discussion both repeated and challenged misinformation. Yet even when refuted, the online spread of information was seen to raise fear and anxiety locally and catalyse some people's anger into offline mobilisation.

Participants also described frustration with political communication. Some felt leaders were not clearly acknowledging concerns nor setting out verified facts. For those for whom trust was already low, even corrective statements by authorities were met with suspicion.

Taken together, these findings suggest that where trusted communication is weak, online claims can influence the tone of debate and increase the risk of escalation.

3. Safety concerns reflect wider crime and disorder, with hotels sometimes becoming focal points

Concerns about crime, antisocial behaviour and public disorder were widespread in most areas; however, asylum accommodation was not seen as the primary cause of declining safety. Instead, hotels became focal points within broader anxieties about crime, under-resourced policing and visible disorder.

Tamworth was distinctive in this regard. There, discussions were more emotionally charged, shaped by the concentration of hotel accommodation in the town centre, a high-profile criminal case involving a hotel resident and social media amplification. Some participants described avoiding certain routes near the hotel and feeling less safe in certain areas. Even so, many distinguished between concerns about how accommodation had been organised and managed, and blanket hostility towards people seeking asylum.

For people seeking asylum themselves, safety was also a live concern. Participants in Plymouth described fear of protests, stigma attached to the label 'asylum seeker', and anxiety shaped by hostile rhetoric and policy uncertainty.

4. National border anxieties coexist with local pragmatism

Participants often expressed strong views about borders and national political leadership. Some supported deterrence policies or criticised perceived failures of enforcement. Trust in national politicians was frequently low.

Many described themselves as 'in the middle' – critical of how the national system was operating, yet not opposed in principle to people living locally. Across groups, confidence that the system was under control appeared to shape willingness to accommodate change at a local level.

When discussions turned to neighbours and day-to-day life, the tone was more pragmatic. Learning English, working where permitted and participating in community life were seen as reasonable expectations. Participants also recognised that integration depends on stable accommodation, functioning local institutions and opportunities for contact.

National frustration did not automatically translate into local hostility. Instead, concerns about borders coexisted with a conditional desire for integration – shaped in part by confidence in national competence and fairness.

5. Decline and community strength coexist

Discussions of asylum accommodation unfolded against a broader backdrop of perceived local decline, including hollowed-out high streets, lost civic infrastructure, deteriorating public spaces and reduced shared gathering points. These physical changes shaped how further change was interpreted, often intensifying feelings of neglect.

At the same time, residents across all six sites described strong traditions of neighbourliness, volunteering and mutual aid. From park clean-ups to WhatsApp support groups and community meals, people demonstrated an abundance of care for their local areas.

These currents of community energy provide a foundation for rebuilding cohesion – but require institutional support and visible fairness to be sustained.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

The research indicates that asylum accommodation must be embedded within wider housing and regeneration strategy, accompanied by proactive and transparent local engagement.

Five broad conclusions follow.

1. **Make fairness tangible.**
   Use capital funding – including the £500 million announced by MHCLG – to reduce reliance on hotels and ease pressure across asylum and temporary accommodation systems. Housing acquisition and allocation must avoid reinforcing perceptions of parallel provision and should be designed to benefit existing residents as well as new arrivals.
2. **Provide a visible local dividend.**
   Reintroduce a Migration Impacts Fund to help areas experiencing rapid change manage pressures on local services and support integration and cohesion. Alongside this, establish a targeted 'community dividend' for areas that have hosted asylum hotels to ensure visible reinvestment in local infrastructure and regeneration.
3. **Strengthen local leadership and engagement.**
   Place consultation with councils on a more formal footing and notify local authorities early about accommodation decisions. Designated community cohesion leads, supported through renewed funding, would strengthen coordination and sustained engagement.
4. **Reduce the risk of online escalation.**
   Establish clear crisis protocols between government, Ofcom and platforms for moments of heightened risk, including rapid visibility for verified public information and oversight of amplification systems. Invest in digital resilience and media literacy to strengthen public confidence in navigating online information.
5. **Embed cohesion in national strategy.**
   Align cohesion with policing reform, civil society investment and national leadership. A renewed expert working group and clearer cross-government coordination would provide structure and accountability.

1. INTRODUCTION

ASYLUM ACCOMMODATION IN THE PUBLIC SPOTLIGHT

Throughout 2024 and 2025, hotels accommodating people seeking asylum repeatedly hit the headlines, becoming flashpoints for protest and, in some cases, violent unrest. In late July and early August 2024, riots erupted across multiple towns and cities, with asylum hotels explicitly targeted in some places (Patel and Morris 2024). In Rotherham and Tamworth, hotels were set alight, marking some of the most serious incidents of disorder seen in recent years.

These events were not isolated. While the most serious violence was concentrated in the summer of 2024, protests continued in 2025 outside asylum hotels across the country, gaining momentum after early demonstrations in places such as Epping in Essex and spreading to a wide range of locations, including Canary Wharf, Leeds, Portsmouth, Bristol, Falkirk, Blackpool and Stockport, among others. In Epping, tensions extended beyond protest, with the district council mounting an unsuccessful legal challenge to the use of a local hotel for asylum accommodation. This strikingly diverse set of places – spanning different regions, political contexts and local histories – illustrates how asylum accommodation has become a totemic and contested symbol within wider debates about immigration and what it means for communities, and highlights mounting friction between local and central government over its management.

Beyond protests, polling suggests a somewhat more ambivalent public picture on asylum accommodation and the acceptability of demonstrations outside hotels. For example, Ipsos (2025) found that fewer than a third of respondents (31 per cent) felt their local area housed more than its fair share of people seeking asylum, compared with 29 per cent who thought it was about right and 32 per cent who said they did not know. Views on the acceptability of protests were similarly split, with 36 per cent considering them acceptable and 39 per cent finding them unacceptable (ibid).

POLITICAL SALIENCE AND GOVERNMENT POSITIONING

Amid sustained media attention, legal and political challenge from some local areas, and sharply rising accommodation costs (Mort and Morris 2024; NAO 2024), asylum accommodation has become a live test of government credibility. Under the current system,[1] asylum accommodation is centrally commissioned by the Home Office and delivered through private contractors, with local authorities having limited formal control over placement decisions in their areas. This centralised model has contributed to tensions in some places, particularly where local leaders argue they have insufficient influence over decisions affecting their communities.

The Labour government has committed to ending the use of hotels for asylum seekers within this parliament – effectively by 2029 – framing this as an issue both of value for money and community wellbeing. At the same time, ministers have repeatedly linked immigration to cohesion in public messaging. In May 2025

1 The current system is described in detail in our previous report *Transforming asylum accommodation* (Mort and Morris 2024).

the prime minister warned the UK risked becoming an "island of strangers", a phrase he later said he deeply regretted (Mason 2025). By the time of the Labour party conference in September 2025, the emphasis had shifted towards improving the material conditions of communities as "the antidote to division", with violent unrest, racism and xenophobia framed as the "enemy of national renewal" (Starmer 2025).

Place-based policy announcements

Alongside the shifting political narrative, there has been a flurry of policy activity aimed at supporting communities and place-based renewal. In the government's first 18 months, this has included the launch of the £15 million Community Recovery Fund to support areas affected by rioting, a £1.7 million Common Ground Fund to back voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations working to bring people together, and the Community Cohesion and Resilience Programme, which distributed £3.6 million to 44 areas before being discontinued in 2025. More recently, longer-term investment has been signalled through the Plan for Neighbourhoods – announced in March 2025 as a £1.5 billion, 10-year programme for 75 places – which has since been folded into the wider Pride in Place programme. Pride in Place – worth up to £5 billion over 10 years – aims to extend neighbourhood-based funding to more than 300 'doubly disadvantaged' areas, with resources overseen by local neighbourhood boards bringing together residents, civic actors and MPs. In February 2026, a further £800 million was announced to allow another 40 places to benefit from Pride in Place funding (MHCLG 2026a). One of three core objectives of the funding is:

> **"To build stronger communities –** ***All places should have strong relationships and a collective sense of belonging to their community. This helps bring people together to build community cohesion and resilience, helping people to feel proud of their area and safe in their neighbourhood."***
> **(MHCLG 2025a)**

This place-based agenda was significantly expanded in March 2026, with the government's publication of a broad social cohesion action plan, which brings together commitments on neighbourhood renewal, integration and asylum reform, and tackling hate and extremism in order to build "more confident, cohesive and resilient" communities (MHCLG 2026b). The action plan reiterates the government's commitments to ending the use of asylum hotels, describing them as a "lightning rod for community tensions", and states it will work proactively with local authorities to identify more appropriate accommodation and build community consent. It also commits the government to setting national integration expectations, developing a cross-government integration strategy, reviewing English language provision, continuing the Common Ground Resilience Fund with up to £5million in 2026/27, establishing a new Cohesion Support and Interventions Function and Advisory Board to support places facing tensions or unrest, and embedding new guidance on social cohesion from Belong and the Local Government Association (Inskip and Rutter 2026).

Alongside these neighbourhood and cohesion initiatives, the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) has also announced a £500 million funding pot to support the development of a more sustainable asylum accommodation model. The Home Office has outlined a range of potential pilots, including bringing empty housing stock back into use, repurposing 'medium-sized' accommodation such as student halls, and developing a capital funding model to purchase and refurbish properties (Hymas 2025; Symonds 2025; Jessel 2025). However, the current status and delivery timetable of these proposals remains unclear. At the same time – and despite the cost and risk concerns identified by the

National Audit Office (NAO 2024) – the government has continued to rely on large-scale contingency accommodation, including the renewed use of military sites such as in Crowborough in East Sussex and plans to bring Cameron Barracks in Inverness into use.

These initiatives reflect a welcome and increasingly ambitious focus on communities and place. The recent social cohesion action plan suggests a more joined-up approach across government, bringing asylum accommodation, integration, cohesion and local resilience into closer alignment. This marks an important shift, and one that moves government thinking closer to many of the concerns raised in this report. The key challenge now will be how far this direction is translated into delivery, particularly in terms of whether local authorities are given meaningful influence over asylum accommodation decisions in practice, how 'community consent' is defined and operationalised, and how far cohesion and integration considerations are woven into the governance of asylum accommodation on the ground. While the additional investment in Pride in Place is important, and stronger communities and cohesion form a part of the programme's wider aims, dedicated cohesion funding remains limited relative to the scale of the challenge.

RENEWED FOCUS ON COHESION AND INTEGRATION

There has also been renewed interest in community cohesion across government, academia and civil society, reflected in a growing number of commissions and research programmes. This includes the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods, which has emphasised the importance of shared spaces that support connection and democratic engagement (Coutts and Diaz Velásquez 2025), and the Independent Commission on Community and Cohesion, co-chaired by Sajid Javid and Jon Cruddas.[2] A foundational report for the latter by British Future and Belong (Puddle et al 2025) has highlighted how asylum accommodation – particularly the use of hotels – can become a source of local tension where communities feel excluded from decision-making, misinformation circulates and asylum seekers are left isolated. *This Place Matters*, led by UCL, Citizens UK and More in Common (2025), has underlined the central role of integration in sustaining cohesion. New social cohesion guidance authored by the Local Government Association and Belong (Inskip and Rutter 2026) outlines practical tools and shares examples of how councils can strengthen cohesion and respond to emerging tensions. While this body of work makes important contributions to debates on cohesion – including recognition of the role that asylum accommodation, alongside limited social infrastructure and insufficient integration support, can play in shaping local tensions – there remains a need to understand how asylum accommodation is experienced and interpreted by local communities themselves, an evidence gap this research seeks to address.

This research builds directly on earlier IPPR work that assessed the asylum accommodation system through the trifocal lenses of value for money for the taxpayer, effective delivery for government, and the lived experience of people seeking asylum. That research documented deep-seated systemic problems, including the use of inappropriate and undignified accommodation and a reliance on private providers operating with limited accountability or incentives to improve standards. However, it left an explicit gap in understanding how asylum accommodation is experienced and interpreted by local communities themselves, and what meaningful community consent for asylum accommodation would look like in practice. Addressing this gap is critical to developing accommodation

2 See: https://www.livingwelltogether.org.uk/

models that are not only humane and cost-effective but also sustainable within the communities in which they operate.

INSIGHTS FROM SECTOR ENGAGEMENT

This project sits within the Migration Policy Unit's wider programme of work on cohesion, which is grounded in an ethos of working in partnership with frontline organisations to ensure research is relevant, grounded and useful to those closest to the issues. As part of this approach, we undertook an early, light-touch consultation with migration and community organisations to sense-check the focus and framing of this research and ensure we were asking the right questions.

Respondents were working in a range of local contexts, including areas experiencing entrenched deprivation, stretched public services and heightened political tension around asylum accommodation. Across these conversations, organisations repeatedly pointed to the importance of material conditions, pressures on housing and public services, and how decisions about asylum accommodation are made and communicated locally in shaping local responses. Many described working in places where existing pressures were already acute, and where the arrival of asylum accommodation was experienced as an additional, and often poorly explained, change layered onto long-standing challenges. Several highlighted the frustration felt among local residents about a lack of consultation or advance notice, which in turn contributed to feelings of unfairness and loss of control.

Responses also drew attention to the role of misinformation and hostile narratives, particularly in contexts where trust in institutions was already low and official communication was limited or unclear. Some noted that local organisations were frequently left to respond to community concerns or correct misinformation without access to accurate or timely information themselves. Others emphasised the isolating effects of hotel-based accommodation, both for people seeking asylum and for surrounding communities, where opportunities for contact and interaction were limited.

AIMS OF THE STUDY

Against this backdrop, this research set out to examine how asylum accommodation is understood and experienced at a local level, and why it has become a flashpoint for protest and unrest in some places but not others. In particular, it sought to explore the following.

- How people in different places make sense of asylum accommodation in the context of their daily lives, local pressures and wider narratives.
- Why similar forms of asylum accommodation have generated very different local responses, including protests and, in some cases, violent unrest.
- What local conditions, practices and forms of support help to sustain cohesion and enable integration where asylum accommodation is present.

METHODS

This research draws on case studies from six areas in England – Liverpool, Plymouth, Hillingdon, Derby, Tamworth and Wakefield – that host people seeking asylum and have experienced different forms of protest, tension and unrest in recent years (see appendix for further details).

It is based on qualitative fieldwork conducted across these six case study areas. We held seven focus groups with 65 local residents, alongside one additional focus group with people seeking asylum in Plymouth. The resident focus groups were

designed to capture a range of local perspectives on asylum accommodation, community change and cohesion in different contexts.

Participants were recruited through a professional recruitment agency and reflected a mix of ages, genders and backgrounds. Most groups included participants with a range of views on immigration, determined through a screening question at the recruitment stage. This approach was intended to ensure discussion included differing perspectives, rather than drawing only on those with strong or pre-existing views.

Focus group discussions were structured to begin with broader questions about the local area, how it had changed over time, and perceptions of community relations. Only later in the session did discussions turn explicitly to asylum accommodation and experiences of protest or unrest. This sequencing was designed to reduce priming effects and to avoid prematurely framing asylum accommodation as the cause of local tensions.

In one location (Plymouth), we convened an additional focus group to ensure that a full range of perspectives was captured. While the first group included thoughtful discussion and broadly positive attitudes towards immigration, several invited participants who had indicated more sceptical positions did not attend. During facilitation, it was also apparent that some dissenting perspectives were less fully explored in a setting where strongly expressed positive views shaped the tone of discussion. An additional group therefore enabled deeper exploration of concerns and narratives that had featured prominently in local protests and unrest.

The focus groups were supplemented by conversations with a small number of local stakeholders in each site, including local authority officers, councillors, police and voluntary and community sector organisations. These discussions provided contextual insight into local conditions, recent events and the approaches taken by local government and civil society to respond to unrest and support cohesion.

2. KEY FINDINGS

This section outlines five key findings from focus groups with residents of the six case study areas.

PERCEIVED UNFAIRNESS IN HOUSING AND COST-OF-LIVING PRESSURES IS SHAPING ATTITUDES TO ASYLUM ACCOMMODATION

Across our conversations, asylum accommodation was raised organically in all but one case study area (Liverpool).

People discussed it as part of wider experiences of housing scarcity, poor-quality accommodation, overcrowding, visible homelessness and cost of living pressures. For many participants, fairness was at the root of their assessments – concerns were rooted less in opposition to people seeking asylum, and more in a sense that the system was failing to look after those already struggling locally – whether themselves, their family and friends, an acquaintance, or indeed fellow focus group participants.

This dynamic was particularly clear in our first focus group in Hillingdon, where a striking – and telling – exchange unfolded between participants. In the context of a discussion about housing insecurity and the high number of local hotels housing people seeking asylum, one young man shared that he was living in a severely overcrowded two-bedroom property with eight other people. Another woman explained that she had been forced to move back in with her parents due to the unaffordability of housing locally. Against this backdrop, a third participant disclosed that he himself was homeless, and reflected on the lack of appeal of hotel accommodation:

> ***"I'm gonna say something now you might not expect. I'm homeless at the moment. I live in a hostel … and I wouldn't like sitting living in one of those hotels. I wouldn't want, I wouldn't like it at all, because it's not, it's not like you're living in a luxury hotel."***
> **(Man, Hillingdon)**

However, there was disagreement in the group about what this signified. For others, this disclosure became a stark illustration of unfairness. The fact that a British man in the room was homeless – living in a hostel and on low priority for social housing – was contrasted directly with the use of hotels to accommodate people seeking asylum. As one participant put it:

> ***"When I see the money that's put into housing and the life of asylum seekers – when [the government] don't even take care of their own people, like the people who already live here, who were born here … [John]'s[3] homeless … Why doesn't he have a home?! And yet, somebody who's just got on a boat and come over and gone 'Oh, I'm an asylum seeker, house me', and they suddenly get everything."***
> **(Woman, Hillingdon)**

3 Name changed to protect anonymity.

This perception of people seeking asylum being prioritised for housing carried through to other places too, with Plymouth a particularly revealing example. In one focus group there, a participant described a conversation with a council worker that had shaped her understanding of local housing allocation:

> ***"[A council worker] said to me that people seeking asylum got priority housing over … the British people. And that used to really frustrate me, because I knew some family locally … they ended up being in a hotel … for ages, whereas they were told someone that had immigrated would [be given] the priority housing."***
> **(Woman, Plymouth)**

Across discussions, distinctions between asylum accommodation and social housing were often unclear. These systems, alongside temporary and emergency accommodation, were frequently perceived as part of a single local allocation system, reinforcing a sense that people seeking asylum were being prioritised over longer-standing residents.

In a second Plymouth focus group, where participants expressed more sceptical views about immigration overall, the visibility of homelessness in the city was contrasted with the relative invisibility of asylum seekers locally. Media reporting about small boat arrivals was juxtaposed with what people felt they could see locally, giving rise to speculation about where people were being housed and how decisions were being made:

> ***"We read the news on a regular basis that … small boats and dinghies [are] coming in via Devon … If all the boats … have come, where are all those people? You don't see any refugees, homeless people in tents or anything. It is really the British people. So definitely something has been happening here … So it's either the council that's shielding them, or just, you know, trying to avoid any sort of political statement."***
> **(Man, Plymouth)**

Another participant built on this, suggesting that people sleeping rough in Central Park must be doing so despite the availability of accommodation elsewhere – accommodation that, in their view, was already "full up of other people".

Similar themes surfaced in Wakefield, though they were often expressed indirectly. One participant spoke less about her own views and more about the anger she anticipated would arise if people believed asylum seekers were being placed ahead of long-standing residents on housing waiting lists:

> ***"It's so hard to get a council house at the moment for anybody, there's so many people on a waiting list that are here legally, that's just going to cause even more anger … if these people start going above them on the list for housing. So what's the answer? Where do they go?"***
> **(Woman, Wakefield)**

Cost-of-living pressures further sharpened these perceptions of unfairness. In Plymouth, one participant described the strain they were under in their day-to-day life, and how they could see how resentments could spring from this:

> ***"We're all just regular people and life is really hard … me and my husband have always worked really hard and we're second guessing ourselves, [asking] 'should we put the dryer on?', so you can see why people feel angry, why people are looking for someone to blame."***
> **(Woman, Plymouth)**

And similarly in Liverpool – where although asylum accommodation appeared less salient, similar logic nonetheless surfaced once the topic was introduced:

"I think the cost-of-living crisis hit everyone hard and like rent went up. So I felt people [were] looking at it like, are these asylum seekers getting free this, free that? Because these families are struggling even to put food on the table."
(Woman, Liverpool)

Viewed as a whole, these accounts point to a prominent and pervasive sense of unfairness – shaped by a combination of everyday experience and, at times, misperceptions about how housing and asylum accommodation are allocated. For some participants, this was framed in terms of contribution and entitlement – a belief that those who had "paid into the system" were now being overlooked:

"Those people who have paid into the system, worked all their life, and then at the end of it, when they need the system to be helping them … they're not being helped. And that then creates animosity, and that then creates division … between those that aren't getting it and those who are perceived to be just coming in and … getting put to the top of the list."
(Man, Hillingdon)

Others expressed this more explicitly through the language of national fairness:

"Really, for me, it's a sense of fairness. Britain's built on fairness. We queue because it's fair … We work hard and we help people … but then it seems unfair that somebody can come to this country illegally … we don't know who they are; they get given an accommodation, they get given clothes, they get given a mobile, they get given money. Yet we're not helping the people that have been here for however long, paid into the systems as such, and need the help."
(Man, Wakefield)

Perceptions of what people seeking asylum receive – and how this compared to participants' own circumstances – played an important role in shaping understandings of fairness. In Derby, one participant drew on her experience working in accommodation housing people seeking asylum to describe what she interpreted as visible signs of preferential treatment:

"None of them were wanting to learn to speak English. Yet outside their flats, escooters, gold chain, yeah, mobile phones, dressed to the nines … I was disgusted … They had better stuff than me."
(Woman, Derby)

At the same time, many participants recognised that such claims were difficult to verify, and often distanced themselves from them. Instead, they described these stories as circulating locally – repeated by friends, neighbours or online – and shaping the wider atmosphere in which asylum accommodation was discussed:

"You'll hear people saying … they all get taken shopping, and they're all given this … they're given a cigarette allowance, they're given a phone … when there's people in our country that can't afford to put clothes on their back … it does rile some people up."
(Woman, Plymouth)

Beyond perceptions about allocation and entitlement, some participants described hotels as visible symbols of local loss – particularly where sites had previously served as employers or community assets. In Liverpool, one participant linked unrest at a local hotel not to the present of people seeking asylum, but to job losses when the site changed use:

"I remember at the [name] hotel in Kirby, and it kicked off there … it wasn't actually to do with the asylum seekers. It's because they sacked everybody … That's what made there [be] a lot of unrest. There was fires, because a lot of people in the community were hired in that hotel."
(Woman, Liverpool)

Similar concerns about lost employment surfaced in Wakefield.

CASE STUDY 1

Wakefield: A hotel as a lost community asset

One participant in Wakefield described how the use of a local hotel for asylum accommodation was experienced as a loss to the surrounding community, both economically and socially. The hotel had previously functioned as a shared local asset – a place of employment, a venue for events, and somewhere residents used facilities such as the pool, gym and café. Its change in use was therefore felt not just as a routine policy decision, but as the removal of something tangible and meaningful from the local community.

In their view, there was an imbalance between what the community had lost and what it gained in return. As they put it, "what is the community getting back from the hotel?" They explained that the hotel no longer brought visitors who would spend money locally, and residents staying there were largely unable to participate in the local economy in the same way. Over time, this was understood as having a "cumulative effect" on nearby shops, services and livelihoods.

The participant also described changes to employment at the site. They understood the hotel now operated with fewer staff and weaker links to the local workforce, meaning jobs that once supported local households had disappeared. This, in turn, was seen as reducing spending power in the area and putting further pressure on already fragile local businesses such as "the butcher's or off-licence".

Beyond economics, the loss of shared space was also keenly felt. Facilities that had once hosted social events and opportunities for community gatherings were now closed off to local people. For this participant, the issue was not opposition to people seeking asylum per se, but a sense that the community had given up something valued, without any return or reinvestment – a feeling that fed into wider concerns about fairness and neglect.

LOW TRUST AND POOR INFORMATION CREATE SPACE FOR MISINFORMATION AND FAR RIGHT MOBILISATION

When asked where they had got their information about the riots, protests or asylum accommodation more broadly, participants across the case study areas described a notable absence of clear or trusted official communication. In this context, social media played a prominent role in how information circulated and how events were understood locally.

Participants spoke about how quickly unverified claims could spread online during moments of crisis. While some repeated false claims, many recognised misinformation when they encountered it, and several described consciously

distancing themselves from rumours. However, even when claims were not widely believed, their volume and visibility were seen to raise fear and unease locally.

Several linked this directly to the unrest of summer 2024. In Liverpool, one participant noted that "misinformation" had helped drive unrest following Southport. Similarly, in Hillingdon, someone reflected on how a false claim about the background of the attacker in Southport circulated online:

> ***"That's the problem, isn't it, when things get put on social media because it was a complete lie, wasn't it? They said that this person was an asylum seeker, and he wasn't, he was born in this country."***
> **(Man, Hillingdon)**

In Derby, it was likewise observed that false claims had played a role in fuelling anger and mobilisation:

> ***"I remember it stemmed from fake news about the person being from a certain background … and then because of that, that's what got people angry and causing the riots in the first place."***
> **(Woman, Derby)**

For some, a sense of polarisation was compounded by the perceived absence of political voices willing to acknowledge local concerns while also setting out clear facts. One participant argued that MPs in particular should be playing a more active role in naming anxieties and correcting misinformation:

> ***"Local MPs should do more like, you know … what are they putting out there? Like you say, 'there's a feeling of "x, y, z" in my community'. Why aren't they saying 'actually, this is what's happening, this is the truth of it'. Do you know what I mean? … [Explain] what they get given and what they get free?"***
> **(Woman, Plymouth)**

In some places, misinformation was described as being actively harnessed by organised far-right groups to mobilise protest. In Tamworth, where both violent unrest and ongoing demonstrations had taken place, participants spoke about how social media networks were used to coordinate activity linked to Operation Raise the Colours:[4]

> ***"They've been told to do it by Tommy Robinson. They've been told to do it. It's filtered down through social media and all of the Facebook groups, and then they've just taken off."***
> **(Man, Tamworth)**

Social media was also described as amplifying and promoting protest activity. In Liverpool, one participant referred to videos posted outside a local hotel:

> ***"I've seen at the [name] hotel, where people post like TikTok's and they're stood outside protesting."***
> **(Woman, Liverpool)**

While most groups noted an absence of trusted information from official sources, in a more sceptical focus group in Plymouth, participants expressed such deep

4 Operation Raise the Colours is a campaign that describes itself as 'a grassroots movement for unity and patriotism'. Originating in Birmingham and spreading across the UK, the campaign has involved both organised supporters and loosely affiliated or spontaneous actions, including the installation of Union Jack and St George's Cross flags on lampposts and the painting of red crosses on roundabouts. According to Hope Not Hate (2025), the formal Operation Raise the Colours campaign is organised by far-right extremists.

mistrust towards local government that even when the council issued public statements, these were often met with suspicion:

> ***"[the] council put out a statement saying there were no asylum seekers staying in hotels … the trouble is, you can't believe half of what the council says anyway."***
> **(Man, Plymouth)**

Taken together, these accounts point to a fragile local information environment. Even where misinformation was recognised or contested, it was described as shaping the tone of debate, heightening anxiety and mobilising some individuals. In contexts where trusted communication was limited or mistrust already high, this environment allowed tensions to escalate online and spill into tangible local consequences.

CASE STUDY 2

Tamworth: Asylum hotels as a visible symbol of system failure

In Tamworth, discussion about asylum accommodation was striking for its systemic focus. Many participants were clear that their concerns were not about the presence of people seeking asylum per se, but more about how accommodation had been organised and managed. Under the current system, placement decisions are made centrally, with limited formal control for local authorities. Participants repeatedly returned to questions of system design, placement and resourcing.

A central concern was the concentration of large numbers of mostly young men in a single hotel, located in the town centre. This was widely seen as a poor planning decision that heightened visibility and vulnerability in a context of existing tensions:

> ***"If you've got a group of asylum seekers, why put them in the centre of the community, which is already a tinderbox of disgruntled young lads? … You might as well just put a big target on it."***
> **(Man, Tamworth)**

Participants also pointed to under-resourced asylum processing, arguing that long delays were leaving people stuck in temporary accommodation and contributing to frustration on all sides:

> ***"The processing system isn't funded, so the backlog is getting bigger and bigger and bigger … all these people have got to go somewhere."***
> **(Woman, Tamworth)**

Alongside this, participants expressed a strong sense that the population increase associated with the hotel had not been matched by additional policing, infrastructure or support. Several noted that there was no perceived benefit to the local community from hosting the accommodation, with one person commenting that "the only person making money is the person who [owns] it". They were critical of the fact that the council did not receive additional funding for schools, housing or local services as a result, reinforcing the sense that pressures were being absorbed locally without corresponding investment.

CONCERNS ABOUT SAFETY ARE SHAPED BY WIDER CRIME AND DISORDER, WITH ASYLUM HOTELS A FOCAL POINT IN SOME PLACES

Across the case study areas, concerns about safety were widespread, but they were rarely attributed solely – or even primarily – to asylum accommodation. Instead, participants consistently situated their fears within a broader sense of rising crime, antisocial behaviour and declining safety in public spaces.

Concerns about gangs, knife crime and serious violence surfaced repeatedly. One woman who had been close to the scene of a fatal stabbing in the city centre said:

> ***"We were only 200 feet away from when that actually happened … It puts everything in perspective. [Knife crime] needs to be a priority."***
> **(Woman, Derby)**

Parents spoke about worries for their children's safety when out and about and avoiding certain neighbourhoods due to drugs, violence or persistent police presences. The riots themselves were described as frightening and chaotic. In Plymouth, participants recalled how events escalated quickly after dark:

> ***"As soon as the sun went down, it was just riot … rocks were flying, fireworks aimed at the police."***
> **(Man, Plymouth)**

In Liverpool, one mother described urgently bringing her son home as unrest unfolded nearby:

> ***"My teenage son said, 'Oh, I'm going out with some friends from work,' and then everything was kicking off … they were setting fires on County Road. I was like, 'You're not going out … you've got to come home now, leave your friends, get in a cab and get home.'"***
> **(Woman, Liverpool)**

Across most sites, there was little evidence that people seeking asylum were seen as the primary source of danger. Where concerns were raised, they tended to blur into broader complaints about antisocial behaviour or pressure on public space rather than being explicitly about asylum seekers themselves.

Tamworth stood out as different. There, discussions were more emotionally charged and shaped by a high-profile criminal case involving a hotel resident, in which a man was later found guilty of rape.

More broadly, some women described a general deterioration in their sense of safety and changes to their everyday behaviour:

> ***"I definitely don't feel as safe as I would 20 years ago … Now, I won't go under the underpass. I'll go the other way."***
> **(Woman, Tamworth)**

Others connected these concerns more directly to the hotel and its surroundings, observing that women were avoiding routes nearby:

> ***"You'll very rarely see a female walking on their own through that way … they're taking different routes because they've heard of these things that have happened."***
> **(Man, Tamworth)**

Participants linked such responses to a combination of reported incidents, social media rumours and broader fears associated with groups of men

congregating in public spaces.[5] At the same time, some acknowledged the tensions between individual cases and collective judgment:

> *"It's very, very few people doing that … but it doesn't really shine them in the best of lights whatsoever."*
> **(Woman, Tamworth)**

Alongside these fears, however, some women who regularly passed the hotel described their own encounters as uneventful:

> *"You do see groups of them outside the [hotel] … but I've never felt anything to be worried about there … I just thought, well, the weather's warm, they're just all mingling and chatting … they don't seem to be causing any trouble. They're just being together and minding their own business."*
> **(Woman, Tamworth)**

> *"I've walked past them outside of the hotel and I've never had anybody make any comments or anything as I walk past."*
> **(Woman, Tamworth)**

These discussions were not framed as blanket hostility towards people seeking asylum. Rather, they reflected fear layered onto wider anxieties about harassment, sexual violence and public safety, and coexisted with more neutral day-to-day encounters.

Alongside these concerns, racially minoritised people described feeling more exposed during periods of unrest and heightened anti-immigrant rhetoric. People of colour and Muslim residents, in particular, described feeling more exposed during these moments, concerned about being misidentified or targeted in public spaces. One man recalled being verbally abused in a pub:

> *"Someone called me an illegal immigrant … I'm not. I'm actually a soldier fighting for this country."*
> **(Plymouth)**

These accounts show that while Tamworth experienced a sharper concentration of safety concerns linked to a specific case, anxieties about safety more broadly were shaped by wider crime, disorder and social tension. In most places, asylum accommodation was a secondary factor, becoming entangled in broader fears rather than driving them in isolation.

NATIONAL ANXIETIES ABOUT BORDERS COEXIST WITH A LARGELY PRAGMATIC DESIRE FOR INTEGRATION AT A LOCAL LEVEL

Across the focus groups, participants rarely spoke in absolutes. Views on asylum and immigration were often qualified and internally conflicted. People expressed unease about borders and political leadership at a national level, while also articulating a desire for things to 'work' locally once people were living in their area.

Many voiced strong critiques of the national asylum system, particularly around borders and enforcement. In Derby, one participant – describing Channel crossings – argued:

> *"I don't know why anybody should be able to come off the beaches … there should be enough security … You can patrol the whole area.*

5 Local representatives indicated that police data did not show a corresponding rise in violent crime during this period, highlighting a gap between perception and recorded statistics.

There's people who say that there's no jobs available. There's a whole lot of jobs that could be made there, securing the beach, then dealing with the people there."
(Woman, Derby)

Such concerns were frequently paired with scepticism about political leadership and honesty:

"It doesn't feel that when ministers are asked these questions, they give a straight answer – they can't answer anything."
(Woman, Wakefield)

"I think every vote since Brexit has been a protest vote, because nothing has really changed despite numerous governments promising what will make it better."
(Man, Wakefield)

Several participants describing feeling pushed out of a polarised debate, positioning themselves as somewhere "in the middle":

"There's a load of people like us with similar reasonable opinions that are in the middle somewhere, but it's not reflected in wider media or society."
(Woman, Wakefield)

Others spoke about the difficulty of criticising government policy without being assumed to hold hostile views towards people seeking asylum:

"You can be angry at the amount of money the government is spending on these hotels and not hate anybody that travels, but that seems to have been lost now … you're either a racist or you support everything the government does."
(Woman, Wakefield)

Taken together, these accounts suggest that local consent for asylum accommodation is closely linked to confidence that the national system is functioning and under control. Participants were frustrated by perceived drift, delay or political evasion. For some, national competence appeared to be a precondition for local accommodation.

Yet when discussion shifted from national politics to people living locally, a more pragmatic tone often emerged. Across sites, participants expressed a practical – if conditional – desire for integration: learning English, contributing economically and being part of day-to-day community life were seen as common-sense expectations.

"If they could integrate into society, learn English, work to contribute … it'll make their life better, and they'll make more friends and feel more welcome here."
(Man, Derby)

Others emphasised that integration depends on stability, acceptance and welcome locally.

"Sometimes I feel that some migrants … some feel that they are not accepted … some feel kind of isolated … I think those are some of the reasons why you kind of find it difficult integrating."

"If tensions are so high, you're gonna sit in your house and not integrate … you're on the back foot straight away … If we were more accommodating, tensions are going to ease."
(Exchange between two participants, Wakefield)

In Derby, one woman, talking about an asylum-seeking family that she knew, pointed to systemic barriers that prevented integration even where goodwill existed:

> ***"They were genuinely fleeing … but they couldn't get access to the things they needed to establish a life, and pay into the systems they want to be part of."***
>
> **(Woman, Derby)**

Several participants linked hostility to a lack of contact. In Plymouth, one woman reflected:

> ***"The media feeds in so much hatred … when you're not mixing with people – some people have never spoken to somebody from another country – it's that fear that's fed."***
>
> **(Woman, Plymouth)**

In Tamworth, one participant described the power of direct encounter:

> ***"I think bringing people together makes you realise that the other group that you're hating are people … It's easy to look through social media … and have a hatred towards all this stuff, but if you're sitting across from someone and they're telling you what they've been through, that's hard not to make them a person just like you are, because the only difference between me and them is where they were born. And so I think if you can somehow … bring people actually together in person [it would help a lot]."***
>
> **(Woman, Tamworth)**

Overall, national debates about borders and political failure generated frustration and anxiety. But these did not translate automatically into local hostility. Instead, many participants expressed a conditional pragmatism: where they believed the system was credible and fair, integration locally felt possible; where confidence in national control was weak, local tensions became more fragile.

CASE STUDY 3

Stigma and fear: The experiences of people seeking asylum in Plymouth

A focus group with people seeking asylum in Plymouth provided insight into life in asylum accommodation – participants had all lived in hotels in differing parts of the country before being moved to Plymouth.

Participants spoke first about the conditions of the accommodation itself. Poor-quality food, a lack of privacy and difficulties accessing vital healthcare were recurring themes, with many describing the cumulative impact on their mental health. Many also spoke about a loss of autonomy, feeling trapped in hotels and unable to live independently. Anxiety and depression were widely discussed, shaped not only by living conditions but by the sense of being stuck in a system over which they had little control. When asked what they would most like to change, participants spoke about dignity: better food, a fairer process, greater independence and being treated with respect.

The wider political climate featured prominently in these conversations. Several participants described how rhetoric around people seeking asylum – by politicians, in the media and at protests – were experienced as hurtful. One man spoke about being told to "go back home":

"When people are protesting against asylum seekers [saying] 'they should go back home', sometimes I cry. Where I had come from, I had everything … but because we can't talk about politics … and because of our government [I can't go back to my country]."

He explained that he had fled after taking part in political protests, leaving his partner and children behind. Some of those he protested alongside had been arrested and remained in prison. Hearing people in the UK tell him to return was, he said, "very painful".

Social media was frequently described as a source of fear and anxiety. Participants spoke about how posts naming specific hotels as protest targets heightened anxiety and made going about their day-to-day lives feel unsafe:

"When you read on social media … they were mentioning these hotels, and the hotel where I am at at the moment was on the list. I stepped out with the children just to have an evening walk. I just told them, 'Let's go back' … I don't know what the person next to me is thinking of doing. It is kind of scary … You don't know if it's going to escalate into action or it's just going to be clickbait on [social] media."

Others spoke about the stigma attached to the label 'asylum seekers' and how it shaped their interactions in daily life:

"It seems like seeking asylum, it's more like being criminalised … Everywhere you go you are criminalised. 'You look like a criminal.'"

This was particularly evident in workplaces or college settings, where participants expressed feeling stigmatised when their peers discovered that they were in the asylum system. Employers, for example, were described as questioning job applicants closely, even where they had proof of their right to work.

Another shared their experience of being a college student:

"From the time they find out you are an asylum seeker, they start to bash you … and I hear them talking, and I am like, 'Oh so that's how they feel against us' … They don't have proper knowledge about what this whole thing [seeking asylum] is about, they just go by word of mouth."

For some, however, fear of protesters was secondary to fear of government policy. One participant dismissed protesters as "ignorant", but said their greater fear was the power of the government to remove them:

"The Rwanda news spread much more anxiety than people [protesting] … because that is something that can be implemented, and they send us back … I'm following the news all the time, just to see if … they say [the government will do] something bad … Yeah, so I think it's the government that scares us."

DECLINE AND CIVIC STRENGTH COEXIST, SHAPING LOCAL RESPONSES

Across the case study areas, discussions about asylum accommodation unfolded against a broader backdrop of perceived local decline. Participants frequently referred to struggling town centres, closed facilities and deteriorating public spaces as evidence that their areas had been neglected.

In Derby, one participant reflected:

> *"The old market is gone … the city centre library as well … the swimming pool closed down … it doesn't work."*
> (Man, Derby)

In Hillingdon, poorly maintained streets were described as "demoralising", while in Plymouth and Wakefield some spoke about town centres they increasingly avoided:

> *"The town centre, I don't even go in now … it feels like there's nothing there."*
> (Woman, Plymouth)

Participants linked the erosion of shared civic spaces to a weakening sense of connection:

> *"When I was younger, there seemed to be more community … I think we've lost that sense of connection."*
> (Woman, Plymouth)

> *"As soon as you go into the Ridings it just feels like it's ready to be shut down."*
> (Woman, Wakefield)

These perceptions did not point to a single cause. However, they formed an important backdrop to conversations about fairness, safety and change. In places where decline felt visible, further change – including asylum accommodation – was more easily interpreted through a lens of neglect.

At the same time, participants across all six areas described strong traditions of neighbourliness, volunteering and mutual aid. Streets in Derby where "there's always someone you can call if you need help", park clean-ups in Hillingdon, WhatsApp support networks in Plymouth and community meals organised by faith groups all illustrated ongoing civic commitment.

One participant in Plymouth described how members of a local Sikh community came together to support a family who had lost their home in a fire:

> *"Everyone just chipped in … People who didn't even know each other cooked food, brought clothes … I'll never forget it."*
> (Woman, Plymouth)

Moments of crisis were also described as revealing solidarity. Reflecting on unrest following Southport, one Liverpool participant said:

> *"Everyone was scared … [but] it brought out the good in all of us … the majority of people stuck together and were like, 'No, this isn't us.'"*
> (Woman, Liverpool)

In Tamworth, residents similarly highlighted how people stepped in after unrest around the local hotel:

> *"You saw on social media days after, some people coming together to help … there was a big tidy up afterwards … I don't think as many people attended that as they did the riots, but there was still quite a nice big group that did go out to that tidy-up. So that was nice to see."*
> (Woman, Tamworth)

Together, these accounts suggest that visible decline and strong civic energy coexist within the same places. While perceptions of neglect can heighten sensitivity to change, there remains significant local capacity for connection and collective action. This civic infrastructure provides a crucial foundation for strengthening cohesion, provided it is supported rather than strained.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

As set out in our previous report, *Transforming asylum accommodation*, responsibility for the delivery of asylum accommodation should be decentralised from the Home Office and private providers to regional and local bodies. Such a model would enable accommodation planning to be aligned with wider housing strategy, foreground cohesion considerations, and bring decision-making closer to communities for whom decisions about asylum accommodation have visible local impacts.

The perspectives of people seeking asylum in this research also reinforce an important point from our previous report – if cohesion is to be understood and supported properly, people living in asylum accommodation must be listened to alongside local residents. As we argued in *Transforming asylum accommodation*, this requires meaningful routes for lived experience to inform governance and accountability at both central and local or regional level, including through collective forums that bring together residents, service providers and public bodies. This should complement wider community engagement, including the community-centred approach taken through Pride in Place neighbourhood boards.

The recommendations below are intended to improve the system in its current form and to act as practical steps towards this longer-term shift in governance. They build on the government's recent commitments on ending asylum hotels, strengthening cohesion and integration policy, and improving local resilience, while setting out what would be needed to translate that direction into delivery on the ground.

INVEST IN HOUSING AND REGENERATION TO RESTORE FAIRNESS AND BUILD TRUST

Recommendation: Use capital investment to reduce pressure and improve perceptions of fairness

Recent and upcoming changes to housing regulation and enforcement are expected to increase the number of substandard properties coming onto the market over this parliamentary term. Stronger requirements around safety, damp and mould, and energy efficiency – against a backdrop of higher interest rates – are incentivising some social and private landlords to sell poorer-quality stock rather than invest in upgrades. This creates a potential window to acquire existing homes more quickly than through new builds.

There is an opportunity to use capital funding – including the £500 million announced by MHCLG to support the development of a more sustainable asylum accommodation model – to purchase a proportion of this existing stock, bring it up to a decent and safe standard, and use it to reduce pressure in the most overstretched parts of the housing system – including asylum accommodation and temporary accommodation. Properties would be required to meet minimum standards – including the provision of self-catering facilities, laundry access and storage options, which are often unavailable in temporary accommodation – and over time would be expected to be improved to meet the regulatory standards for social rented homes.

The model proposed here would provide a practical delivery route for the government's commitment to end the use of asylum hotels and move towards more appropriate, community-based accommodation. This approach would prioritise moving away from high-cost and high-visibility accommodation models, such as hotels and former military barracks, towards more dispersed, community-based housing.

To address concerns about fairness and avoid perceptions of 'queue jumping', this would need to be carefully designed. Homes should not be designated or publicly framed as 'for asylum seekers'. Instead, acquisitions should be managed as part of a wider housing response, with local housing needs addressed alongside asylum accommodation rather than appearing to be displaced by it.

In practice, this would mean a new scheme bringing together the £500 million MHCLG funding for asylum accommodation with part of the Local Authority Housing Fund, which for its fourth round has a major focus on temporary accommodation. Under this scheme, local authorities and housing associations would be granted capital funding which they could combine with borrowing to purchase the substandard properties described above. Local areas would not need to specifically designate some or all of these properties for asylum use; instead, the funding would come with an agreement that a corresponding fixed number of properties would accommodate asylum seekers, not necessarily those which have been newly purchased.

This would allow for property swapping between different parts of the local housing system. Newly acquired properties could, for example, be used to rehouse existing residents currently in temporary accommodation, which is inappropriate for them (eg due to overcrowding or accessibility issues). In turn, this would free up these previously occupied homes to be used for a mix of temporary and asylum accommodation.

In the context of the current asylum backlog – and the government's stated aim to reduce hotel use and determine cases more quickly – the expectations are that overall demand for asylum accommodation should decline over time. Where properties are brought into local authority or housing association ownership and then improved to meet regulatory requirements, this would allow stock to be transferred into general social housing use as asylum numbers fall.

Where as a result of the scheme properties are used for asylum accommodation, local authorities and housing associations would rent them directly to the Home Office. This would obviate the need to involve the three national asylum contractors, helping to manage any legal or reputational concerns from local authorities and housing associations about leasing properties to the private providers. The maintenance of the properties and wrap-around support would be overseen and coordinated at the local or regional level, depending on institutional capacity or existing governance arrangements.

We recognise this may require a modification to the existing contracts, which should be possible through the contract break clause (which is available to use from March 2026 onwards). Beyond this scheme, we envisage that the current contractual arrangements would continue to operate until the end of the contract period in 2029, so this should not be a major change for the current providers.

Importantly, this is not about creating a parallel or lower-standard housing system. Any homes used for asylum accommodation should meet clear minimum standards of safety and decency, with appropriate oversight and accountability. The aim is to make better use of existing housing stock to reduce wasteful spending, ease pressure across the system, and manage housing need in a way that feels more coherent and fairer locally.

Alongside this proposal, there is also an immediate need to strengthen local consultation and joint planning with the national system. This should include more meaningful engagement with local authorities through regional asylum plans and private provider procurement strategies, particularly to avoid over-concentration in particular neighbourhoods and respond to specific cohesion risks, so that cohesion and integration considerations are built into accommodation decisions from the outset.

This approach could also act as a transitional step towards longer-term decentralisation of asylum accommodation at the end of the current asylum accommodation and support contracts, by strengthening local involvement in planning, procurement and oversight while national funding arrangements remain in place.

Recommendation: Reintroduce the migration impacts fund and establish a 'community dividend' for areas previously hosting asylum hotels

A new 'migration impacts fund' should be targeted at areas that have experienced the largest increases in migration over the past decade. In the short term, this could be based on census data comparing changes between 2011 and 2021, as well as DWP data on national insurance numbers. In the longer run, there should be scope to use granular and up-to-date administrative data to build a better picture of local demographic changes.

The fund should be flexible, allowing local authorities to address local pressures and invest in service capacity, as well as cohesion and integration priorities. This would complement the government's wider investment in place-based renewal and cohesion by ensuring that areas experiencing rapid migration-related change, or that have hosted asylum hotels, receive visible and flexible support linked to local pressures and integration needs. This should include targeted support for English language provision, given the prominence of English-language acquisition in focus group discussions as both a practical enabler of integration and a visible sign of contribution. Current restrictions that prevent people seeking asylum from accessing publicly funded ESOL within their first six months in the UK can delay and compound isolation; reforming this rule should be considered as part of the government's review of English language provisions, alongside new funding.

A renewed migration impacts fund should be set at £75 million over two years, broadly in line with the scale of the original fund (around £70 million over two years). A proportion of the fund (for example, 10–15 per cent) should be earmarked for strengthening local cohesion capacity, including through designated community cohesion leads (see final recommendation for more detail).

Funding for the migration impacts fund could be raised through a modest levy on employer and university visa sponsorship.

Alongside the migration impacts fund, there should be an additional one-off 'community dividend' for local authorities which have at some point hosted asylum hotels since the start of the current asylum accommodation and support contracts in September 2019. This would involve additional capital funding for local areas to align with mission 3 of the local regeneration fund, which is focussed on supporting public safety and community cohesion through local regeneration and infrastructure improvements. A fixed amount of additional funding would be offered for any area which has hosted an asylum hotel within the past 24 months. (We have suggested a fixed amount rather than a figure proportionate to the total number of bedspaces, in order to avoid concentrations of capital funding in areas with high levels of asylum accommodation, such as Hillingdon and Hounslow).

The total fund would be determined as a proportion (eg 10 per cent) of the savings made from closing asylum hotels at the end of the next financial year,

compared with the financial year 2023/24 (ie the year immediately preceding this government's period in office). To give an indication of expected scale, there have already been savings of £0.9bn in asylum hotel spending in the financial year 2024/25 compared with the year before (Home Office 2025a).

STRENGTHEN LOCAL LEADERSHIP, TRANSPARENCY AND EARLY ENGAGEMENT

Recommendation: Place consultation on a formal footing to reduce reactive decision-making

A more managed and less reactive asylum accommodation system requires stronger inter-governmental design. While relationships between the Home Office, MHCLG and councils have reportedly improved in recent years – including through monthly regional meetings (Public Accounts Committee 2026) – there is more that could be done to place local knowledge and insight on a more formal footing in order to reduce flashpoints and restore confidence between key stakeholders. This is particularly important in light of the government's recent commitment to work proactively with local authorities and build "community consent" around accommodation decisions.

Government should introduce a clear duty to notify and consult local and regional authorities within defined timeframes before new accommodation is brought into use. In other areas of public decision-making – from planning to school closures and premises licence applications – statutory consultation periods are standard practice where changes materially affect local communities. A comparable approach should apply to significant asylum accommodation decisions. We therefore recommend that there should be a formal notification and engagement period of 12 weeks prior to residents being placed in accommodation, helping to give practical meaning to community consent as a process of meaningful local engagement and risk identification, rather than leaving it open to broad interpretation.

Consultation should extend beyond simple notification to meaningful joint planning on site suitability, concentration levels and local infrastructure capacity. Local authorities are often best placed to identify factors that are not visible in national datasets – including whether a proposed hotel functions as a valued community asset, a significant local employer or important civic venue. Where councils identify clear cohesion, safeguarding or service risks, there should be a structured mechanism to review and, where necessary, revise placement decisions. This should not amount to a general power to block accommodation, but a defined route for local authorities to raise evidenced concerns about the suitability of a site and the pressures its use may place on local communities and services. Without this, engagement risks becoming procedural – and frustrating – rather than consequential and meaningful.

Recommendation: Strengthen trusted public communication to reduce misinformation and mistrust

Focus group participants repeatedly described a lack of clear, trusted information about how asylum accommodation operated – who makes decisions, what support is provided, how long accommodation lasts, and how this relates to local housing pressures. In this vacuum, rumours circulate easily and mistrust can deepen.

Improved systems coordination must therefore be matched by more proactive and credible public communication. While local authorities are not directly responsible for asylum accommodation, they are often the institutions residents turn to when new sites are announced or tensions emerge. Councils therefore effectively bear the reputational and cohesion risks of decisions they do not control. Clearer

coordination between central and local government on public communications is therefore essential, alongside support for councils to play a proactive role.

Local authorities should be equipped to communicate clearly and early about what is happening and why. This includes providing accessible explanations of how the asylum accommodation system works, what support people seeking asylum receive and for how long, and how local accommodation decisions relate to wider housing and homelessness pressures. In neighbourhoods selected for new sites, targeted engagement – including public briefings and ongoing channels for feedback – should be standard practice rather than reactive crisis management.

There are examples of councils adopting a more confident approach on this issue. In Liverpool, for instance, the council leader has published clear, publicly accessible information addressing common misconceptions about refugees and people seeking asylum (Liverpool City Council 2025). While communications alone cannot resolve underlying pressures, visible and consistent leadership can help provide residents with reliable information and reduce the space in which misinformation takes hold.

MPs and national government also have a responsibility to model balanced, non-sensational communication: acknowledging pressures, correcting inaccuracies and setting out verified facts without amplifying false claims. Clearer coordination and timely, locally delivered information would help reduce speculation and rebuild confidence in how accommodation decisions are made.

TACKLE ONLINE MISINFORMATION AND CRISIS PREPAREDNESS

Our findings, alongside wider evidence on the unrest following the murders in Southport, show how rapidly false claims can circulate online and shape the tone of local debate during moments of shock and uncertainty. Focus group participants often recognised misinformation when they saw it, and several described deliberately distancing themselves from online rumours. However, even where claims were not widely believed, their volume, repetition and visibility on social media sites continued to heighten anxiety, while hardening the positions of some and leading to offline mobilisation.

An immediate policy priority therefore should be the management of social media with regard to information crises where misinformation, incitement and hate risk escalating into disorder. The government's March 2026 action plan rightly places greater emphasis on harmful online content, media literacy and crisis preparedness; the recommendations below set out what a more operational response should involve during moments of heightened tension.

Recommendation: Establish clear and enforceable crisis protocols

Recent research has highlighted the need for clearer and more robust arrangements for managing online risks during moments of crisis.

As Demos and the Centre for Emerging Technology and Security (Seger et al 2026) have recommended, government, Ofcom and major platforms should develop and publish clear 'crisis protocols' for periods of heightened risk – for example following a major violent incident. Ofcom should have oversight of these protocols, including the power to review, stress-test and require improvements where platforms' systems contribute to foreseeable public harm.

These should set out:

- how platforms will identify and respond to rapidly spreading false claims that could affect public safety

- when and how platforms will adjust the way their feeds and algorithms work – for example by reducing the visibility of posts that have been independently verified as false
- how platforms will work with public authorities during such periods, while continuing to protect freedom of expression.

Similarly, the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee (2025) concluded that social media algorithms played a significant role in amplifying misleading and harmful content during the 2024 unrest. Its recommendations include requiring platforms to embed tools within their systems to identify and reduce the spread of misleading content where it could cause significant harm; ensuring that AI-generated content be visibly labelled; improving transparency about how algorithms operate; and holding platforms accountable where their systems contribute to harm.

Recommendation: Strengthen digital resilience and media literacy

Focus group participants often demonstrated thoughtful engagement with how information spreads and how narratives take shape online. As the government's recent action plan noted, policy should build on this existing curiosity and capability by investing in digital resilience and media literacy across schools and adult education. This should focus on:

- equipping people to understand how feeds and algorithms shape what people see
- supporting people to recognise manipulated or AI-generated content
- strengthening confidence in checking and verifying sources before sharing information, particularly during high-profile or fast-moving events.

Equipping people with the confidence and skills to navigate online spaces can contribute to healthier digital environments, where individuals are better able to draw value from online communities.

Recommendation: Make verified information visible during crisis moments

Platforms should ensure that verified national and local public authority communications are clearly visible and easy to access during moments of crisis. This could include, for instance, clear links to official statements attached to widely shared claims.

SUPPORT PRACTICAL COHESION AND SAFETY AT A NEIGHBOURHOOD LEVEL

Recommendation: Strengthen local civil society capacity to support contact and cohesion

Alongside capital investment in physical infrastructure, there is a need to reinforce the organisational capacity of the local institutions that sustain cohesion in practice – community centres, faith groups, libraries, youth provision and other trusted spaces where people meet and build relationships.

Rather than creating a new standalone fund, government should ensure that a clear proportion of existing place-based funding is directed towards strengthening local capacity for integration and community cohesion in areas experiencing rapid change. One practical route would be to use, or extend, the Know Your Neighbourhood Fund to support this work, embedding cohesion objectives within established community infrastructure streams. This could include small, flexible grants (for example up to £15,000) for community spaces located near asylum accommodation to run regular activities that bring people seeking asylum and longer-standing residents together.

This objective should also be reflected in wider place-based funding and regeneration initiatives. As government develops its approach to place-based philanthropy and local growth, it should make social cohesion and community infrastructure explicit funding priorities. In practice, this could mean encouraging local and combined authorities to co-design cohesion-focussed funding calls with local foundations; providing match-funding arrangements where philanthropic investment supports community-led integration initiatives; and ensuring that cohesion metrics are built into funding criteria and evaluation frameworks.

Recommendation: Devolve the Common Ground Resilience Fund to metro mayors

The government's March 2026 commitment to continue the Common Ground Resilience Fund is welcome. One strand of this is the Common Ground Award administered by MHCLG, which provides capital funding to support VCSE organisations working on community cohesion with the costs of construction, renovation or purchasing of equipment. It is focussed particularly on organisations that support bridge- between different communities (MHCLG 2025b).

The Common Ground Award provides a valuable opportunity for strengthening local community institutions which can serve as hubs for social connection. But it should be designed with local control and accountability in mind. Rather than hold the fund centrally, the funding could be devolved to strategic authorities where possible, enabling regions to develop their own criteria and make assessments to select successful projects. This would help to ensure that local funding decisions are made closer to communities and that funding priorities more closely reflect the priorities for different regions.

Recommendation: Align community cohesion with policing and crime prevention reform

Our research has found a close link between community cohesion and local perceptions of crime and antisocial behaviour, particularly (but not only) in relation to asylum accommodation. As the government rolls out the reforms in its policing white paper, there is an opportunity to ensure this dovetails with its plans on community cohesion.

In particular, the newly proposed National Strategic Policing Priorities (NSPP) should explicitly identify community cohesion as a priority, recognising the role of fostering positive community relations and addressing tensions early in the crime prevention agenda. The NSPP should highlight sites where tensions have previously emerged as a risk factor for local tensions and recommend that police forces establish early warning systems to monitor the potential for public disorder surrounding these sites. The government should also set up a crime prevention partnership at the national level focussed on community cohesion, bringing together key stakeholders from MHCLG, the Home Office, and voluntary and community sector partners.

Reflecting the Home Office's wider commitment to community policing, the NSPP should encourage local areas to establish neighbourhood action groups to respond to community tensions over crime and antisocial behaviour. Neighbourhood action groups are multiagency forums which bring together neighbourhood police, housing officers, councillors, other relevant statutory agencies and local residents to discuss specific community challenges and develop action plans for their resolution. They could be used in areas where there are growing tensions over the local impacts of asylum accommodation, as well as in a range of other contexts. Moreover, the Home Office should convene local police forces and agencies to help discuss and disseminate best practice on approaches to community cohesion across England and Wales.

PROVIDE NATIONAL LEADERSHIP ON COHESION

Recommendation: Establish a new expert working group on community cohesion

Alongside the government's new Social Cohesion Taskforce, ministerial steering group and planned measurement framework, there remains a strong case for an independent expert working group to provide external challenge, broaden participation and support the development of a renewed England-wide community cohesion strategy. This independent group should bring together stakeholders from MHCLG, the Home Office, local government, VCSE organisations, faith groups and academia. In developing its work, it should also draw on the perspective of people with lived experience of the asylum system and asylum accommodation, alongside wider community perspectives in affected areas. The working group should meet on a bimonthly basis and oversee the development of a renewed England-wide community cohesion strategy, based on a clear set of metrics for measuring cohesion robustly. These could include relevant indicators such as civic engagement and volunteering, neighbourliness, absence of hate crime and discrimination, and social trust. The community cohesion strategy should include a co-designed element based on deliberative engagement with the public across each English region. The working group should be chaired by a prominent public figure who has the authority – independent of government – to make regular public interventions on matters relating to social and community cohesion.

Recommendation: Support all English councils to designate a named community cohesion lead

Each council should identify a senior officer responsible for coordinating local cohesion and integration activity, including work related to asylum accommodation. This role should ideally be supported through the renewed migration impacts fund – a proportion of which should be earmarked for coordination capacity.

This approach would build on the Welsh model, where the Welsh government leads and funds a national Community Cohesion Programme delivered through regional teams across Wales. Each team includes a coordinator and at least two officers, ensuring dedicated capacity in every region. Coordinators provide strategic leadership and support partnership working on cohesion (Equality and Social Justice Committee 2025). Where a full-time post is not feasible at council level, a similar regional model could support clusters of councils while ensuring a minimum level of capacity is maintained.

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APPENDIX

CASE STUDY LOCATIONS

Liverpool

Liverpool is a large and diverse city in the North West with a long-standing role as an asylum dispersal area. As of September 2025, it was accommodating around 2,290 people seeking asylum (46 per 10,000 residents) (Home Office 2025b), close to the threshold commonly used to indicate high accommodation density (one asylum seeker per 200 residents). The city also faces deep-rooted socioeconomic challenges, ranking among the most deprived local authorities in England.

Liverpool experienced significant unrest in 2024 following the murders of three young girls in nearby Southport. During the riots, Spellow Library in Walton was targeted before later becoming a focal point for community recovery and solidarity. While the unrest was not directly triggered by asylum accommodation, migration featured prominently within the wider context of grievance and mobilisation.

Liverpool City Council has invested in integration and cohesion initiatives and is developing a new cohesion strategy through its Safer and Stronger Communities service. This builds on existing infrastructure, including the long-established One Liverpool refugee and migration team, which provides coordinated support and signposting for refugees and migrants.

Liverpool was selected as a case study to explore how asylum accommodation is experienced in a city with long-standing dispersal, high deprivation, recent unrest, and an active local authority response.

Plymouth

Plymouth is a coastal city in the South West with a population of around 265,000. The city remains predominantly White, though diversity has increased gradually over the past decade. As of September 2025, Plymouth was accommodating around 454 people seeking asylum (17 per 10,000 residents) in dispersal accommodation (Home Office 2025b), well below the level typically associated with high accommodation density.

Despite this, Plymouth experienced violent unrest in 2024, with clashes between anti-immigration protesters and counter-demonstrators in the city centre. Community groups mobilised to protect local institutions, including the Islamic Education Trust, reflecting both heightened fear and strong local solidarity. Protests and counter-protests linked to wider anti-government and anti-immigration sentiment continued into 2025.

Plymouth is also the most deprived local authority in Devon, with significant inequalities across the city. Following the unrest, the council received central government funding to support cohesion activities and developed a broad local response, combining rapid partnership working during the disorder with longer-term investment in community grants, youth and school-based activity, neighbourhood conversations and anti-racism initiatives.

Plymouth was selected to examine how asylum accommodation can become a focal point for tension even in areas with relatively low numbers, and how local responses seek to rebuild cohesion after periods of unrest.

Hillingdon

Hillingdon is a large outer London borough that has experienced rapid population growth and increasing diversity over the past decade. It is one of the least densely populated London boroughs, but as of September 2025 it was accommodating around 2,274 people seeking asylum (74 per 10,000 residents) (Home Office 2025b), well above the commonly used 1-in-200 threshold. This concentration is driven in part by the use of hotels near Heathrow Airport.

While there have been reports of local concern and pressure linked to asylum accommodation, Hillingdon has not experienced significant organised protests or extremist-related incidents. Deprivation is unevenly distributed across the borough, with particular pressures in specific neighbourhoods.

The council's Stronger Communities team coordinates work on cohesion, hate crime prevention and integration, alongside close engagement with voluntary and faith organisations. At the same time, the council has been vocal about the financial and service pressures associated with asylum accommodation.

Hillingdon was selected to explore how cohesion is managed in a context of very high asylum accommodation density, ongoing institutional strain, and limited visible unrest in 2024. However, during the course of this research, protests did take place in 2025.

Derby

Derby is a medium-sized city in the East Midlands with a population of around 261,000. Diversity has increased steadily over the past decade, though the city remains predominantly UK-born. As of September 2025, Derby was accommodating approximately 1,323 people seeking asylum (51 per 10,000 residents) (Home Office 2025b), meeting the threshold often used to indicate relatively high accommodation density.

Derby faces persistent socioeconomic challenges, with around one-third of neighbourhoods falling within the most deprived 20 per cent nationally. Despite this, there have been relatively few reports of overt community tensions linked directly to asylum accommodation within the city itself. Local media coverage has focussed more on service pressures and rumours than on protest or unrest.

Derby City Council is currently developing a revised social cohesion strategy, and a range of voluntary and community sector organisations play an active role in supporting new arrivals and fostering integration.

Derby was selected to explore a context where significant asylum accommodation exists alongside deprivation, but where responses to cohesion challenges are largely community-led and less visibly politicised.

Tamworth

Tamworth is a borough and market town in Staffordshire in the West Midlands with a population of around 78,600. The area remains relatively less diverse than some other case study sites, with 91.6 per cent of residents born in England (ONS 2023a). As of September 2025, Tamworth was accommodating 261 people seeking asylum, the majority in contingency hotel accommodation (Home Office 2025b), representing approximately 33 per 10,000 residents.

Tamworth experienced significant unrest in August 2024, when an asylum hotel in the town centre was targeted during rioting and a fire was set. Protests and demonstrations continued intermittently into 2025, shaped in part by a high-profile sexual assault case involving a hotel resident. The visibility and central location of the accommodation contributed to its prominence in local debate.

Tamworth contains pockets of significant deprivation, with nine out of 51 neighbourhoods falling within the most deprived 20 per cent nationally. Following the unrest, the council received central government funding to support cohesion activity and worked proactively to rebuild community trust, including partnering with Belong to facilitate structured 'honest conversations' with residents and to develop a refreshed five-year community cohesion strategy (Belong 2025).

Tamworth was selected as a case study of repeated unrest, alongside a proactive local response to address tensions.

Wakefield

Wakefield is a medium-sized city and metropolitan district in West Yorkshire with a population of around 353,400. The area remains less diverse than some other case study sites, with 89.9 per cent of residents born in England (ONS 2023b). As of September 2025, Wakefield was accommodating 817 people seeking asylum across initial, dispersal and contingency accommodation (Home Office 2025b), equivalent to approximately 23 per 10,000 residents.

Wakefield includes areas of significant deprivation and is ranked among the 20 per cent most deprived local authorities in England. The district has hosted an initial accommodation site for several years, providing short-term hostel-style accommodation for up to 300 residents at a time without major incident. However, in 2025 a series of protests took place outside an asylum hotel in the area, signalling a shift in local visibility and contestation.

Cohesion work in the district is coordinated through the 'Wakefield Together' strategic partnership, a multiagency group bringing together the council, public services, housing associations and local businesses. This partnership provides oversight for a recently renewed community cohesion plan.

Wakefield was selected to examine how perceptions of fairness, housing pressure and national political debate intersect in a district with long-standing asylum accommodation but more recent visible protest activity.

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