

Institute for Public Policy Research



# **TRANSFORMING ASYLUM ACCOMMODATION**

**Lucy Mort and  
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October 2024

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Registered charity no: 800065 (England and Wales),  
SC046557 (Scotland)  
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# CONTENTS

<b>Summary</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	<b>9</b>
1.1 Methodology .....	10
<b>2. How did we arrive at the current asylum accommodation system?</b> .....	<b>12</b>
2.1 The emergence of dispersal .....	12
2.2. What is included in the current contracts? .....	14
2.3 How is asylum accommodation and support funded? .....	16
2.4 Why do we need contingency accommodation? .....	17
2.5 What is dispersal? .....	18
2.6 What are the key blockages in the system? .....	19
2.7 Who are the key actors in delivering asylum accommodation? .....	22
<b>3. What are the key challenges in asylum accommodation?</b> .....	<b>24</b>
3.1 Poor living conditions .....	24
3.2 Lack of facilities and access to essentials .....	25
3.3 Inadequate support and services .....	27
3.4 Safeguarding concerns .....	28
3.5 Impact on health and wellbeing .....	29
3.6 Insufficient oversight and compliance .....	31
<b>4. What are the support experiences of accommodated people seeking asylum?</b> .....	<b>34</b>
4.1 How support is currently offered.....	34
4.2 Problems with the current model.....	35
<b>5. Recommendations for transforming asylum accommodation</b> .....	<b>37</b>
5.1 Decentralisation of asylum accommodation and support .....	39
5.2 Close failing large sites and review their use .....	45
5.3 Strengthen accountability, oversight and compliance .....	46
5.4 Include people with lived experience .....	46
5.5 Address system bottlenecks.....	47
5.6 Enhance safeguarding measures .....	47
5.7 Improve support and services .....	48
5.8 Ensure access to facilities and essentials .....	49
5.9 Promote health and wellbeing .....	49
5.10 Involve communities to foster cohesion and integration .....	50
<b>References</b> .....	<b>51</b>

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Mort L and Morris M (2024) *Transforming asylum accommodation*, IPPR.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report would not have been possible without the dedication, insights, and support of a wide range of individuals and organisations.

First, we extend our deepest gratitude to the peer researchers from the VOICES Network: Alvina Chibhamu, Annie Karuimbo, Azza Abumandeeel, Acha Joseph Munde, Judith Nkwopara and Muhammad Khan. Their lived experience and expertise were instrumental in facilitating listening sessions and ensuring that the voices of those directly affected by asylum accommodation were heard. We also thank their officers, Jessica Mosser, Asia Hart-Eason, Shah Mahmood Nasiri and Doaa Abu Amer, as well as project manager, Daisy Vaughan Liñero, for their invaluable support throughout this process.

We are deeply appreciative of the members of the VOICES Network who participated in our listening sessions in England, Scotland and Wales. Their candid insights and experiences have shaped the heart of this report and our recommendations. In addition, we're grateful to members of Bloody Good Period's experts-by-experience forum for sharing their experiences, and to Rachel Grocott and Hannah Underwood for facilitating this conversation.

We are fortunate to have worked alongside a number of partners whose contributions were critical to this project's success. In particular, we thank Kat Lorenz and Marie-Anne Fishwick at Asylum Support Appeals Project, Morgan Mead, Alice Lucas and Athina Bilgic at British Red Cross, Anna Miller at Doctors of the World, Sophie McCann at Médecins Sans Frontières and Asli Tatliadim, Colin Parker and Elena Krsmanovic at Refugee Action for their huge generosity in collaborating on this research.

Conversations with a large number of people have contributed to this report, and we are grateful to all those who participated in policy workshops. For in-depth conversations and feedback we are especially grateful to Julia Savage from Asylum Matters, Bella Sankey from Brighton Council, Jacqui Broadhead from COMPAS at University of Oxford, Jonathan Darling from Durham University, David Barclay from Good Faith Partnership, Hannah Boylan from the GLA, Joe Donohue and Jennie Corbett from GMCA, Amanda Shah and Will Wheeler from GMIAU, Kamena Dorling from the Helen Bamber Foundation, Phil Brown from the University of Huddersfield, David Neal, former ICIBI, Chris Naylor and Katherine Wynne from Inner Circle Consulting, Clive Grimshaw from London Councils, Melissa Weihmayer from LSE, Joanna Dobbin from Medact, Migrant Help, Vicky Mulhern and Dave Brown from Migration Yorkshire, Jon Featonby from the Refugee Council, Graham O'Neill, formerly of the Scottish Refugee Council, Kate Wareing from SOHA Housing, Madeleine Kelleher from Southwark Law Centre, Andrea Cleaver from the Welsh Refugee Council, Jon Lord and Sue Lukes. Further thanks to all those who participated in a roundtable discussion on this topic in October.

We have been expertly steered through this project by the advisory group for the Migration Policy Unit, who have provided thoughtful advice and constructive challenge throughout. Thanks to Alexandra Bulat, Anita Hurrell, Annie Karuimbo, Beth Gardiner-Smith, Christopher Lawrence Desira, Clare Tudor, Iman Rajeh Saad Al-Harithi, Jack Liuta, Mariña Fernández-Reino, Tesfalem Yemane and Zarlisht Halaimzai for your guidance.

Thank you to Jim Caunter for copyediting the report, and to the team at IPPR for their support throughout the development of this project. In particular, we thank Amreen Qureshi, Marcus Johns, Richard Maclean, Sarah Mulley and Zoë Billingham for their invaluable contributions.

Finally, we would like to thank those that have generously funded the Migration Policy Unit at IPPR and who have made this work possible: Paul Hamlyn Foundation, This Day and Unbound Philanthropy.

# SUMMARY

Asylum accommodation costs have soared in recent years, with billions of pounds being spent on housing people in inadequate conditions, which is both a waste of public funds and a failure to meet policy objectives.

The cost of asylum accommodation has grown disproportionately compared to the number of asylum seekers receiving support, with the average annual cost per person rising from around £17,000 in 2019/20 (in 2023/24 prices) to approximately £41,000 in 2023/24. By 2023, £8 million per day was being spent on hotels (Home Office 2023); meanwhile, the large sites programme is set to cost £46 million more than hotels over its lifespan, despite serving far fewer people (NAO 2024).

Instead of providing safety, current policies have trapped people seeking asylum in grim, undignified conditions. The August riots, which included violent attacks on asylum hotels, highlight the urgent need to shift away from a system that fuels racism and hostility, towards one that supports integration.

This report calls for an end to the ineffective use of resources on unsuitable accommodation and proposes a reimagined approach to asylum housing. Building on initial moves by the new government to address the asylum backlog and close problematic sites, this vision focuses on providing safe, suitable housing that supports mental health, enhances community cohesion, and offers better value for money.

Over the past decade, the management of asylum accommodation has been characterised by poorly conceived policies that compromise the wellbeing of people seeking asylum and do not adequately consider the impact on local communities. Systemic failures, mismanagement and a lack of accountability have perpetuated unacceptable living conditions, driven by decisions prioritising short-term political gains over sensible, humane and cost-effective solutions. The break clause in 2026 offers a critical opportunity for decisive reform to avoid further costly missteps.<sup>1</sup>

This report traces the evolution of the current asylum accommodation system, identifying key blockages such as the growing number of people stuck in initial or contingency accommodation instead of being moved to more stable dispersal homes, and the rising levels of homelessness among new refugees. Based on research with policy experts including drawing on listening sessions co-delivered with the VOICES Network – a collective of experts by experience – and Bloody Good Period – a charity advocating for menstrual equity – our findings echo concerns raised by frontline organisations and immigration inspectors in recent years. Key issues include poor living conditions, lack of basic facilities and essentials, inadequate support services, and serious safeguarding failures. These conditions have severe impacts on mental health, including increased reports of suicidal thoughts. The persistence of substandard conditions is further compounded by a lack of effective oversight, monitoring and enforcement of penalties.

The existing support system also faces significant challenges, including long wait times on the helpline, poor communication between Migrant Help, the Home Office and accommodation providers, and inadequate legal advice that undermines the

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1 The Home Office's current contracts with accommodation providers run until August 2029 with a potential break clause in 2026.

asylum system and contributes to destitution and homelessness (Asylum Support Appeals Project 2024a).

The nettle must be grasped on this issue. The break clause in 2026 and the end of current contracts in 2029 provide critical opportunities to bring about an asylum accommodation system that is rational, humane and effective. This report sets out a clear roadmap for both immediate and long-term reforms to enable the Home Office to enforce existing contracts rigorously while planning strategically for the future.

Our central recommendation is to **decentralise the asylum accommodation and support system from the Home Office to regional bodies, beginning with a small number of pathfinder regions**. Decentralisation would be based on regional asylum deals between the Home Office and Strategic Migration Partnerships (SMPs), who would determine which regional body – whether a combined authority, consortium of local authorities, devolved administration, or the SMP itself – should be responsible for delivery of asylum accommodation and support. Regional bodies would be responsible for the commissioning and oversight of asylum accommodation, as well as financial support, advice and guidance, with the flexibility to subcontract to individual local authorities or other providers where appropriate.

Decentralisation would facilitate greater and more constructive engagement between local government and the Home Office compared to the current model. Regional bodies would be well placed to leverage their expertise and relationships at the local level to coordinate the procurement of suitable and value for money accommodation across their regions.

By introducing this model in select ‘pathfinder’ regions in 2026 – or earlier if feasible within existing contracts – with the goal of expanding it nationwide, we aim to reduce costs, improve the quality of accommodation, and ensure that those in the asylum system receive the comprehensive support necessary to rebuild their lives.

We also recommend several measures to address immediate issues while laying the groundwork for long-term improvements in asylum accommodation and support.

- **Close failing large sites and review their use:** The Home Office should close large sites that consistently fail to meet acceptable living standards, ensuring residents are relocated to more appropriate settings. Pending further clarity resulting from the forthcoming Judicial Review on the suitability of military bases for asylum accommodation, any retained large sites must undergo a comprehensive review. If they are to be used, they should be strictly short-term and for emergency or induction purposes.
- **Strengthen accountability, oversight and compliance:** The Home Office should establish clear accountability measures in current contracts, including consistently applying penalties for non-compliance. Communication channels and feedback loops between people seeking asylum, civil society groups, accommodation providers and the Home Office must be improved. Additionally, the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI) should be empowered with greater authority to ensure transparency in the system.
- **Involve people with lived experience:** The Home Office and regional bodies should establish collective forums for people with lived experience to ensure they inform service design, decision-making and enhance accountability.
- **Address system bottlenecks:** The government should extend the move-on period for newly recognised refugees from 28 to 56 days to reduce the risk of homelessness and bring policy in line with statutory homelessness relief duties for other populations. Additionally, a capital subsidy programme should be

piloted to enable local authorities and housing associations to increase the availability of temporary housing stock.

- **Enhance safeguarding measures:** All contracts should include specific safeguarding KPIs, and enhanced vulnerability assessments should be conducted for all people seeking asylum upon arrival. Providers must prioritise comprehensive safeguarding training for staff and establish robust protocols to protect age-disputed young people.
- **Improve support and services:** The government should ensure nationwide access to legal advice, especially in underserved areas, with joint efforts by the Ministry of Justice and Home Office to ensure legal aid provision meets the demands of full dispersal. This legal advice is crucial for navigating the asylum process, and reducing costly appeals. In addition, travel passes should be provided for people seeking asylum in remote or isolated locations to access essential services.
- **Ensure access to facilities and essentials:** Accommodation providers should ensure suitable family housing with communal spaces and guarantee access to essential services for those in remote locations. The Home Office should review asylum support payments with the aim of restoring them to 70 per cent of mainstream welfare benefits.
- **Promote health and wellbeing:** A health-first approach should be adopted, with comprehensive health screenings upon arrival and ongoing access to healthcare services. The process for requesting private rooms for people with specific needs should be simplified to reduce safeguarding risks.
- **Involve communities to foster cohesion and integration:** The government should develop community cohesion strategies and a national integration strategy to support positive community relationships and integration from day one.



# 1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of asylum accommodation has reached a critical point, with costs soaring over recent years. In 2023/24, asylum support – including accommodation and financial subsistence – was estimated to cost £4.7 billion. Of this, an estimated £3.1 billion was spent on hotels alone, up from just under £2.3 billion in 2022/23 (NAO 2024). Efforts to cut costs through using large accommodation sites have proved unsuccessful, with the Home Office’s own analysis predicting that the large sites programme is set to cost £46 million more than hotels over their lifespan, despite serving far fewer people (ibid).

The Asylum Accommodation Support Contracts (AASC) and the Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility contract (AIRE) are delivered nationally by four contractors. The initial total value of AASC contracts, running for 10 years from 2019–29, was just over £4.5 billion, while the AIRE contract has a total value of £235 million. As costs have spiralled, the government’s failure to adequately budget for them has contributed significantly to the reported £22 billion black hole in the public finances (McKiernan 2024). This financial strain has been partly mitigated by the designation of large amounts of Home Office spending on asylum accommodation and support as Overseas Development Assistance (ODA), effectively diverting resources that would otherwise support international development and humanitarian aid.

A key driver of these astronomical costs has been the growing caseload of unprocessed asylum claims. This includes the ‘legacy’ backlog, driven by a slowdown in Home Office decision-making, and the ‘perma-backlog’ of those who arrived after March 2023 and whose claims were placed on hold following the introduction of the Illegal Migration Act (Morris 2024). Those stuck in the backlog are nevertheless entitled to accommodation if they are destitute, resulting in the Home Office housing people for indefinite periods.

While the number of people stuck in the asylum system has grown, targets to increase the number of available dispersal spaces have progressed slowly, with 65,000 beds available in December 2023, well short of the target of 100,000 (NAO 2024). Although the goal was to expand dispersal accommodation fairly across all local authority areas, progress has been limited, with private providers securing accommodation in 70 per cent of local authority areas by December 2023, up from 47 per cent in April 2022 (ibid; House of Commons Library 2023).

Despite the enormous costs, the quality of accommodation and support for people seeking asylum is poor. Substandard accommodation – in bad repair, lacking privacy, and often unsanitary – harms both adults and children, with reports of serious mental health crises commonplace, especially in hotels and large-scale accommodation sites (Brown et al 2024a). A barebones approach to support, primarily through a centralised, tele-support service, leaves many – especially those housed in out-of-the-way locations – isolated and at greater risk of poor mental health outcomes and exploitation.

Since contracting out asylum accommodation to private providers, there has been a glaring lack of effective oversight. While stringent key performance indicators (KPIs) are theoretically in place, which contractors must report on to the Home

Office, these tend to enforce a culture of ‘quick fixes’ rather than driving up standards. A small compliance team in the Home Office means that inspections of contractors are infrequent. The near-oligopoly position of these contractors over asylum accommodation and the lack of viable alternatives severely limit the Home Office’s ability to address underperformance.

Problems also persist at the end of the asylum process. Receiving a positive decision, which would normally be a moment of relief, too often leads to homelessness. The pace at which decisions have been made while clearing the legacy backlog, combined with the short 28-day move-on period, has left thousands of newly granted refugees effectively on the streets (Brown et al 2024b).

There is clearly an urgent need to transform asylum accommodation into a well-functioning, cost-effective and humane system. For too long, the system has been in crisis response mode. In 2026, there is an opportunity to press reset through a break clause in the accommodation and support contracts, with potential for earlier implementation if ‘pathfinders’ are feasible within the current contracts. As such, the government must prepare now for what will come next.

This report outlines how we arrived at the current system (chapter 2), then – drawing on discussions with policy experts and listening sessions with people living in asylum accommodation – highlights the key challenges of the existing model of asylum accommodation (chapter 3) and support services (chapter 4). It then provides a roadmap for reform (chapter 5), presenting a crucial opportunity to end reckless spending and significantly improve conditions, enabling people seeking asylum to begin rebuilding their lives.

## **1.1 METHODOLOGY**

This research sought to explore realistic policy options for transforming the asylum accommodation and support system. Collaborating closely with several organisations throughout the research has been invaluable in refining our analysis and recommendations. Partner organisations include the Asylum Support Appeals Project, Médecins Sans Frontières, Doctors of the World, Refugee Action, the British Red Cross and Bloody Good Period.

Two policy workshops were facilitated to discuss policy ideas with experts from various sectors, including refugee and migrant charities, housing associations, combined authorities, strategic migration partnerships and academia. The discussion focused on policy responses to three key issues: the quality and standards of accommodation; the health and wellbeing of accommodated people seeking asylum; and their support and integration needs. A third workshop was held with staff at the British Red Cross working in institutional accommodation settings across the UK.

Additionally, researchers held more than 20 conversations with experts from the aforementioned sectors, as well as with local authorities, civil servants and existing accommodation and support contractors. A visit to asylum accommodation was also organised with a private provider. Ongoing engagement with stakeholders, including a roundtable event in September, helped to refine our recommendations.

Including the voice of people with experience living in asylum accommodation was crucial to our research. We partnered with the VOICES Network to conduct listening sessions in England, Scotland and Wales. Two VOICES ambassadors from each of the three nations were appointed as peer researchers, collaborating with IPPR to co-design and facilitate the sessions.

Seventeen participants with lived experience of asylum accommodation took part in the sessions. They had experience living in initial, contingency and dispersal

accommodation, with lengths of stay ranging from six months to eight years. Participants came from diverse backgrounds, representing a range of ages, nationalities, genders, educational backgrounds and sexual orientations. This diversity enriched the data collected, allowing researchers to capture a variety of experiences and unique challenges faced by individuals in asylum accommodation.

The listening sessions were conducted in person at British Red Cross offices or via Zoom. Peer researchers facilitated guided conversations, focusing on the quality of accommodation, its impact on health and wellbeing, the support received while accommodated, and ideas for policy and practice changes. The sessions were recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed. Researchers shared initial findings with peer researchers, allowing further discussion and adding depth.

Additionally, a further listening session was held with Bloody Good Period's experts-by-experience group. Ten members reflected on findings from the previous listening sessions, shared their own experiences, and discussed policy recommendations.

## 2.

# HOW DID WE ARRIVE AT THE CURRENT ASYLUM ACCOMMODATION SYSTEM?

The evolution of the asylum accommodation system has been marked by a series of policy decisions aimed at managing costs and responding to increasing numbers of people seeking asylum. This chapter traces the historical context and policy decisions that have shaped its current state.

### 2.1 THE EMERGENCE OF DISPERSAL

To understand the reasons for dispersal, it is necessary to look back to the late nineties. During this time, the geography of asylum was uneven, with many asylum seekers arriving and choosing to settle in London and the South East, where established diaspora communities and family connections were often located. Local authorities were responsible for the housing and welfare of people seeking asylum, and, in response to the high costs of support, an ad hoc dispersal process began. This saw London and South East councils start to house people seeking asylum in other parts of the country with low-cost housing (Darling 2022).

Amid pressures from local authorities – both those sending and receiving people seeking asylum – and negative media portrayals of people seeking asylum as burdens, the New Labour government introduced the Immigration and Asylum Act (IAA) in 1999. This legislation aimed to systematise the previously ad hoc dispersal process. The IAA separated asylum housing and support from mainstream welfare provision and introduced the concept of no-choice dispersal. The responsibility to support and accommodate destitute people seeking asylum was transferred from local authorities to the secretary of state through the newly established National Asylum Support Service (NASS), in an attempt to “make sure the provision of accommodation and support was more closely linked to the asylum application process to improve efficiency” (NAO 2005). Financial support was set at 70 per cent of income support levels.

In the early years of dispersal, a mixed economy of provision existed, with NASS contracting asylum accommodation through regional consortia, private landlords and housing associations. The regional consortia model brought together local authorities within some regions, including the North West, North East, West Midlands, and Yorkshire and Humber, to pool resources and collaboratively manage the allocation of people seeking asylum across their areas (Garvie 2001). Although Darling (2022) reports that some councils were reluctant to participate, there were also financial incentives. Many councils found they could benefit from NASS funding, which allowed them to repurpose previously hard-to-let properties, improving the standards of these vacant homes. As a result, dispersal became more prominent in areas with available empty housing stock, as some councils seized the opportunity to bring these properties back into use.

However, the implementation of dispersal policies led to a range of experiences across different areas. In some cases, the use of low-cost homes at short notice posed integration challenges and community tensions. These issues

were exacerbated by a lack of consultation and information provided to local communities about the arrival of people seeking asylum, which led to misconceptions that asylum seekers were taking scarce resources. Local authorities had to quickly adapt to these new demands, often relying on the voluntary and community sector (VCS) for support (ibid).

The mixed economy of provision meant that the quality of accommodation varied significantly. While some private providers, such as the Angel Group, gained notoriety for substandard provision and were investigated for fraud (Pallister and Bowcott 2005), there were also positive examples of effective collaboration between local authorities, housing associations and other partners. One stakeholder who had chaired a regional consortium, for instance, described investing profits in the development of emerging refugee community organisations. Similarly, Darling (2022) describes the development of ‘one-stop shop’ advice centres. These initiatives helped lay the groundwork for an infrastructure of support for people seeking asylum across the country.

### **Outsourcing asylum accommodation**

After just over a decade of NASS and local authority-led dispersal (with some subcontracting to private providers), in 2011 the Home Office initiated a competitive tender process for asylum accommodation through the COMPASS contract.<sup>2</sup> Local authority consortia and private companies were invited to bid, with private companies placing much lower bids and promising to deliver accommodation at reduced costs.

The shift towards outsourcing to private companies was driven by two main factors. First, austerity measures. Following the election of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government, there was significant pressure to reduce state spending. Privatising state services was seen as a way to cut costs, with the Home Office aiming to save £140 million over seven years through the COMPASS contracts (NAO 2014). Second, there was a promise of efficiencies through centralising the approach to asylum accommodation and working with trusted providers. Companies already heavily involved in other areas of the asylum and immigration system (such as detention centres) were awarded contracts, as were Clearel (later Clearsprings) from whom asylum accommodation was already leased in Cardiff. As Darling (2022) notes, these providers became “central pillars in the UK asylum system from start to finish, providing everything from transportation and meals on arrival to detention and removal if asylum applications were unsuccessful”.

This outsourcing model significantly reduced the number of contractors involved in providing asylum accommodation, with the intention of simplifying and standardising the system and giving the Home Office tighter control over its delivery.

The COMPASS contract was awarded in 2012 for a period of five years, with the possibility of a two-year extension. It covered six UK regions and was delivered by three providers: Serco, G4S and Clearel. Providers were contracted to provide residential accommodation, provide transportation between initial and dispersal accommodation, and fulfil contract management and reporting requirements, including providing a complaints procedure for residents, reporting on performance, meeting safeguarding requirements, and managing antisocial and violent behaviour (NAO 2014).

The National Audit Office (NAO), the Home Affairs Select Committee (HASC) and the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI) each reported on

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2 Commercial and Operational Managers Procuring Asylum Support Services (COMPASS).

numerous issues and concerns with the COMPASS contracts, including failures in meeting performance standards, substandard accommodation, and inconsistent oversight and inspection processes (NAO 2020).

Due to end in 2017, the Home Office started considering alternatives to replace COMPASS in 2016. However, by that time it was too late to redesign the contracts, leading to the decision to extend the contracts for two years despite their underperformance (ibid). The negotiated extensions included significant financial uplifts for providers, which were reported to offset losses incurred in previous years. The Home Office subsequently undertook consultations to redesign the contracts for 2019. While the NAO reported that the Home Office considered making “radical changes” and identified several alternative models, such as building new houses or allowing people seeking asylum access to mainstream benefits, these options were ultimately disregarded without detailed evaluation (ibid), in favour of the AASC and AIRE contracts.

## 2.2. WHAT IS INCLUDED IN THE CURRENT CONTRACTS?

In response to growing concerns about the equitability of the asylum dispersal system and the quality of services provided under the COMPASS contracts, the Home Office introduced the Asylum Accommodation and Support Services Contracts (AASC) and the Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility Assistance (AIRE) contracts in 2019. Accommodation contracts were awarded to three private providers: Clearsprings, Mears and Serco, while the AIRE contract is delivered nationally by Migrant Help.

These next generation contracts aimed to address previous shortcomings and improve the overall service provision for people seeking asylum. Although the AASC contracts were intended to address issues of dispersal equitability, they continued with established regional allocations, effectively maintaining existing patterns of distribution until 2029. Despite calls from local authorities, particularly in the north of England, for a fairer system (Hill 2018), the contracts continued with the same percentages in the ‘routing’ system<sup>3</sup> – such as 24 per cent allocated to the North West – perpetuating the uneven distribution of asylum claimants across the country.

While the contracts included measures to enhance the quality of accommodation, such as additional household goods, improved information for asylum seekers, a stronger focus on supporting vulnerable people, and single-gender washing facilities in initial accommodation (NAO 2020), concerns remain that the issue of equitability has not been sufficiently addressed.

Details about the requirements for the contract are set out in the *Statement of Requirements* (Home Office 2018a). These outline that providers are primarily responsible for the provision of accommodation, transportation and subsistence payments for people seeking asylum while their claims are being processed. The requirements stipulate performance standards for a wide range of service requirements, including:

- timescales for move-in and maintenance
- full board provision
- cash payments to service users
- liaison with local authorities
- initial accommodation provision
- induction briefings

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3 The ‘routing’ system is the mechanism by which asylum seekers are dispersed to a region other than the one in which they arrived.

- transport services
- feedback and complaints processes
- ensuring safety and wellbeing of service users
- managing antisocial and violent behaviour
- support to register with a GP.

However, the key performance indicators (KPIs), which providers must report on monthly and where failure to meet them can result in ‘service credits’<sup>4</sup> or penalties, are limited to just nine. These are as follows.

- **KPI 1** – Propose initial or dispersal accommodation within nine calendar days of a request
- **KPI 2** – Undertake dispersal within five calendar days
- **KPI 3** – Provide ‘move-in’ services to dispersal accommodation with an induction within one day of arrival
- **KPI 4** – Transport of service users to accommodation or any destination requested by the Home Office
- **KPI 5** – Where a category 1 (high risk) issue is raised, accommodation to be made ‘safe’ within 4 hours
- **KPI 6** – Where a category 2 (medium risk) issue is raised, accommodation to be made ‘habitable’ with an interim solution in 24 hours and permanent solution in five working days
- **KPI 7** – Where a category 3 (low risk) issue is raised, accommodation is made ‘fit for purpose’ in 21 working days
- **KPI 8** – Complaints raised by service users must be acknowledged within one working day and appropriate action taken within five working days for 98 per cent of complaints
- **KPI 9** – Submission of information when requested by the Home Office within required timescale.

Unlike the COMPASS contracts, which resulted in unsustainably low bids through a reverse auction process, the AASC contracts were structured with the aim of ensuring higher standards and cost sustainability. It was determined that the new contracts should cost at least 20 per cent more than COMPASS to prevent the underperformance and quality issues previously experienced (Home Office 2018a ).

The AIRE contract, on the other hand, was established to provide a single point of contact for advice and assistance. The aim was to improve the accessibility and quality of information available to people seeking asylum, with an emphasis on their independence from accommodation providers and the Home Office. The AIRE provider is tasked with:

- **Advice and Guidance:** Offering clear, accurate and accessible information on the asylum process and available services. Targeted face-to-face support is available for vulnerable people or those with complex needs.
- **Issue Reporting:** Providing a dedicated customer contact centre for people seeking asylum to report issues and concerns related to their accommodation and support.
- **Eligibility Assistance:** Helping people seeking asylum to understand and navigate asylum support, including through assisting the submission of the ASF1 form (for destitute people seeking asylum to apply for support).

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<sup>4</sup> Service credits are a financial penalty mechanism where providers accrue points if they fail to meet their required performance standards. These points translate into deductions (or fines) which the provider must pay to the Home Office, based on the number of points accumulated each month.

- **Move-on:** Supporting newly granted refugees through advice and guidance, including accessing mainstream welfare and housing, and providing general advice on appeals and returns for refused claims.

Under the AIRE contract, Migrant Help is restricted from providing legal advocacy or direct legal advice regarding asylum claims, appeals or support applications. They can inform service users about their rights and options and signpost them to other organisations that offer legal advice but cannot represent individuals or offer specific legal guidance.

### 2.3 HOW IS ASYLUM ACCOMMODATION AND SUPPORT FUNDED?

Funding for asylum accommodation and support primarily comes from the Home Office budget. In recent consecutive years, the Home Office has significantly overspent its planned budget for asylum, border, visa and passport operations, largely due to the increasing number of people arriving and becoming stuck in the asylum system. This has resulted in the budget being topped up with funding from the Treasury reserve, driven in large part by the escalating costs of asylum accommodation (Warner and Zaranko 2024).

A portion of the expenditure on asylum accommodation is also classified as Overseas Development Assistance (ODA), which is typically aimed at supporting economic development in lower-income countries. However ODA can be used domestically for specific expenditures, such as the initial support of people seeking asylum in their first year after arrival. This classification counts towards the UK’s overall ODA commitment, which has an annual target of around 0.5 per cent of gross national income (GNI), but it also reduces the funds available for traditional overseas aid (ICAI 2024).

Over recent years, the costs associated with asylum accommodation have escalated significantly (see table 2.1), driven by a growing backlog due to higher numbers of arrivals and processing delays, rising market prices for accommodation, and extensive hotel usage. In 2023-24, the Asylum Support, Resettlement and Accommodation expenditure accounted for one quarter of the Home Office’s total expenditure, amounting to £5.6 billion (House of Commons Library 2024).

**TABLE 2.1**

**Costs of asylum accommodation in the UK between 2019 and 2024**

Financial year	Total spending on asylum support and accommodation	Spending on hotel accommodation	Asylum seekers in receipt of support
2019/20	£739 million	–	51,000
2020/21	£1.1 billion	£209 million	59,000
2021/22	£1.9 billion	£922 million	72,000
2022/23	£3.6 billion	£2.3 billion	100,000
2023/24*	£4.7 billion	£3.1 billion	114,000

Sources: NAO 2023, Home Office 2024.

\*Note that figures for 2023/24 are based on expected costs and are not finalised. Spending on hotel accommodation is a subset of total spending on asylum support and accommodation. Number of asylum seekers in receipt of support is based on average calculated over course of the financial year.



An analysis of the past four years reveals that the cost of asylum accommodation has grown disproportionately compared to the number of asylum seekers receiving support. Between 2019/20 and 2023/24, the accommodation and support costs rose around six times, while the number of supported asylum seekers roughly doubled in the same period. This has resulted in a sharp rise in the average annual cost per person, from around £17,000 per asylum seeker in 2019/20 (in 2023/24 prices) to approximately £41,000 in 2023/24. The escalating costs are driven in large part by the lack of available dispersal accommodation, resulting in the extensive use of hotels: according to the National Audit Office, the Home Office estimated in February 2023 that hotel accommodation cost around £145 per night per person, compared to only around £14 per night per person for dispersal accommodation (NAO 2023).

Although ODA funding has been utilised to meet some of these rising costs, it has done so at the expense of overseas aid. As costs have increased and the Home Office has taken a maximalist approach to classifying spending on asylum accommodation as ODA, it has impacted the overall ODA budget (ICAI 2024). In 2022, around 30 per cent of ODA funding was used to support people within the UK, compared to around 9 per cent in 2021 (NAO 2023). By 2022, the government minister for development himself described domestic ODA spending as “out of control” (Cohrs 2024).

The AASC contracts, originally valued at just over £4.5 billion over their 10-year lifetime, have already seen the Home Office spend double this amount on asylum accommodation in just under five years. Meanwhile, the AIRE contract was valued at £235 million over the same period, although it is unclear whether the actual spending has exceeded the planned budget.

## 2.4 WHY DO WE NEED CONTINGENCY ACCOMMODATION?

Since 2020 there has been an increasing reliance on ‘contingency’ asylum accommodation, with large numbers of people seeking asylum staying in hotels for lengthy periods. However, the use of hotels as asylum accommodation began before the Covid-19 pandemic and emerged as an issue from the outset of the AASC contracts in 2019. Providers were unable to secure sufficient dispersed accommodation, leading to the immediate use of hotels, despite there being no hotel use in the months leading up to the contracts. This initial failure to provide adequate accommodation went largely unpenalised under the terms of the contracts, allowing hotel use to proliferate. At the end of 2019, 24 hotels were in use, but this number grew massively over the pandemic and beyond, reaching more than 400 hotels by mid-2023 (Kerr 2023). By the end of December 2023, 46,000 people were housed in hotels (PAC 2024).

This reliance on contingency accommodation has come about for several reasons:

- **Covid-19 lockdowns:** The lockdowns increased demand as evictions were paused, and people seeking asylum could not be processed or moved quickly due to restrictions and social distancing measures. The significant slowdown in processing asylum applications led to longer stays in initial accommodation, exacerbating the demand for temporary housing solutions.
- **Increased asylum applications and insufficient decision-making:** Following a pandemic dip, there has been a significant rise in the number of arrivals claiming asylum. In 2022, there were 81,130 asylum applications, the highest figure since the early 2000s (Sturge 2024). Despite this rise, Home Office decision-making did not keep pace, leading to backlogs.
- **Illegal Migration Act:** Further pressure came from the ‘perma-backlog’ created by the previous government’s decision not to process asylum claims of people

arriving irregularly, leaving many thousands of people to be accommodated indefinitely (Morris 2024).

- **Inadequate response to demand:** Although the contracts are demand-led, accommodation providers have struggled to adapt to fluctuating numbers of asylum arrivals. This issue was exacerbated during the pandemic, but providers had already been falling short of their commitments, relying on hotels rather than scaling up dispersed accommodation.

To address the overreliance on hotels, the Home Office has implemented several measures.

- **Speeding up decision-making:** Efforts have been made to accelerate the processing of asylum claims to reduce the backlog and number of people in accommodation. However, this has also led to a significant build-up of asylum appeals, with many individuals awaiting appeal outcomes still stuck in hotels. Additionally, the faster pace has placed significant pressure on local authorities and increased homelessness, as many individuals are left without adequate support upon receiving their refugee status and leaving accommodation.
- **Opening large sites:** Former barracks and barges, including RAF Wethersfield in Essex and the Bibby Stockholm in Dorset, have been repurposed to house people seeking asylum. However, as well as being criticised for being inappropriate and their harmful impact on resident's health, they have not provided the required capacity to house people moving out of hotels and are predicted to cost £46 million more than hotels over their lifespan (NAO 2024). Additionally, there is no evidence to suggest that these sites have had the intended deterrent effect, as proposed by the previous government (House of Commons Library 2023).
- **Room sharing:** Some people seeking asylum in hotels are required to share rooms to maximise capacity. This has caused significant concerns about the impact on people's wellbeing. Between June 2023 and January 2024, the Home Office recorded room sharing as a potential factor in 857 safeguarding incidents, with 283 involving suicide or self-harm (NAO 2024).
- **Full dispersal plans:** These plans (see below) set targets to increase dispersed bed spaces and reduce the use of hotels by December 2023. Despite these efforts, the Home Office fell far short of its targets, with only 56,500 occupied beds and 65,000 dispersal bed capacity by December 2023, compared to a 100,000 dispersal bed target, highlighting ongoing challenges in expanding dispersal accommodation (NAO 2024).
- **Additional funding to local authorities:** To support the expansion of dispersed accommodation, additional funding has been provided to local authorities to help create more bed spaces (see section 2.5), though the direct role of local authorities in the full dispersal process remains limited.

## 2.5 WHAT IS DISPERSAL?

### *Dispersal*

The dispersal estate refers to the standard accommodation model for people seeking asylum in the UK, distinct from temporary or contingency options like hotels. Dispersal accommodation, often a flat, family home or shared house, is longer-term temporary accommodation managed by private providers on behalf of the Home Office, where people seeking asylum who receive section 95 support (see table 2.2 below) normally stay until their asylum claim has been fully determined. It is offered on a 'no-choice' basis.

Dispersal accommodation is located in areas where the local authority has agreed to take asylum seekers up to a defined limit; that is, no more than one asylum seeker per 200 residents. However, in some wards, particularly in the north of England, this ratio is far exceeded (Bulman 2021).

When considering a property for use as dispersal accommodation, contract providers are required to consult with local authorities to ensure that the property does not negatively impact community plans or local developments (Home Office 2018a). Providers must assess the suitability of accommodation in consultation with local authorities, considering risks to both people seeking asylum and local communities.

Local authorities have raised concerns about the consultation process, particularly the lack of independent adjudication when disputes arise. In cases where agreement cannot be reached, the matter is referred to the Home Office, which makes the final decision. However, we heard that this often occurs without a clear rationale, a named deciding officer, or a formal route for appeal.

The consultation process varies in how it is applied across regions. For example, in the North West, local authorities can object to procurement within specific postal areas (North West RSMP 2024), while other regions may have more flexibility to object to specific properties. This inconsistency, along with the absence of a nationally agreed protocol, has led to frustration among local authorities. Although a draft protocol was shared in the past, it was never finalised, leaving disparities in how objections are managed.

### **Full dispersal**

Full dispersal aims to secure more bed spaces and achieve a more equitable distribution of people seeking asylum across the UK. By mandating participation from all local authorities, the policy seeks to alleviate the pressure on specific areas that have had a disproportionate share of asylum accommodation.

In 2023/24, to support local authority participation and address concerns about pressures on local services, the Home Office provided £3,500 for each new and occupied dispersal bed space, as well as a one-off payment of £750 for every asylum seeker accommodated in their area at the beginning of April 2023, up from £250 the previous year (House of Commons Library 2023).

Progress under full dispersal has been mixed. Participation increased, with figures rising from 47 per cent of local authorities accommodating people seeking asylum in 2022 to 59 per cent in June 2023 and 70 per cent in December 2023, but even then 30 per cent of local authorities still had no people seeking asylum living in dispersal accommodation (House of Commons Library 2023; Walker 2023; NAO 2024). Identifying suitable accommodation, particularly in areas with expensive private rental markets, is a key concern. An ongoing challenge for delivering equitable dispersal plans will be the need to manage the likely increased costs that this will bring. In addition, concerns have been raised that some locations lack the necessary formal and informal support infrastructure to appropriately accommodate people seeking asylum.

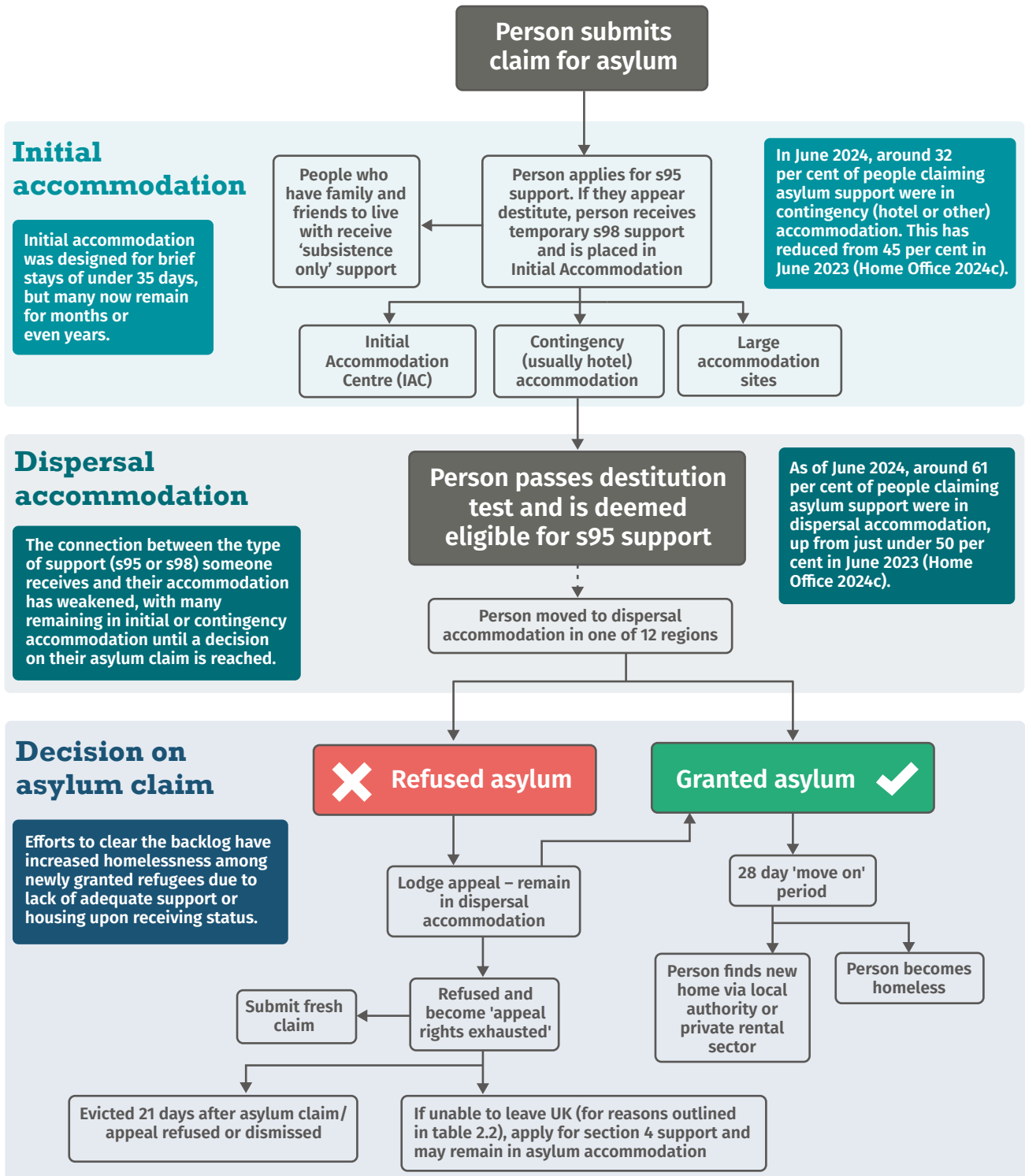
## **2.6 WHAT ARE THE KEY BLOCKAGES IN THE SYSTEM?**

The journey of an asylum seeker through the asylum accommodation system reveals several critical bottlenecks and inefficiencies that hinder the effectiveness of service delivery. Figure 2.1 illustrates this journey, highlighting key points where delays and issues commonly arise, such as initial processing, allocation to dispersal accommodation, and the move-on period. These blockages, or transition points, not only affect the wellbeing of people seeking asylum but also strain the resources and capacities of various organisations involved and have significant cost implications for the Home Office.

**FIGURE 2.1**

**Navigating the asylum process: From claim submission to final decision**

A flowchart illustrating the accommodation pathways, options and blockages encountered by individuals as they progress through the asylum system



Source: Author's analysis

Note: This infographic illustrates typical pathways through the asylum support system and is not intended to be exhaustive

Two significant blockages in the asylum accommodation system occur at critical transition points, causing severe delays and hardships for people seeking asylum.

First, due to a lack of dispersal properties, there are major delays in moving people from initial or contingency accommodation into dispersal properties. The connection between the type of support received (see table 2.2) and the accommodation provided has become increasingly disconnected. Originally, individuals on section 98 support were intended to stay in initial accommodation temporarily, before moving into dispersal accommodation once transitioned to section 95 support. However this pathway has broken down, with many people remaining stuck in hotels even after being placed on section 95 support. This has resulted in what should be temporary accommodation effectively becoming permanent, with people seeking asylum spending months or even years in unsuitable settings due to the lack of available dispersal properties (Refugee Council 2022). This bottleneck exacerbates poor living conditions, hinders integration into local communities, drives up costs for the Home Office and perpetuates instability for those awaiting decisions on their claims.

**TABLE 2.2**  
**Asylum support types**

Support type	Description	Payment
Section 98	This refers to section 98 of the Immigration and Asylum Act (IAA) (1999). It is temporary or emergency support provided to people who appear destitute and are awaiting section 95 support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Catered - £8.86 per person per week</li> <li>• Self-catered - £49.18 per person per week</li> <li>• Cash payments until people receive their Aspen card.</li> </ul>
Section 95	<p>This refers to section 95 of the IAA (1999). It is support for those who have made an asylum claim and are awaiting a decision and those who have appealed an asylum refusal in time. People receiving s95 support must be assessed as destitute.</p> <p>Families who have exhausted all appeal rights and whose household includes dependents aged under 18 remain on s95 until the children turn 18 or they leave the UK.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• £49.18 per person per week</li> <li>• Aspen card - cash withdrawals possible (Migrant Help no date).</li> </ul>
Section 4	<p>This refers to section 4 of the IAA (1999). It is provided to those who have submitted an out-of-time appeal against an initial asylum refusal, as well as to those who have exhausted their appeal rights.</p> <p>To qualify, individuals must demonstrate that they are unable to leave the UK for specific reasons, such as medical issues, late-stage pregnancy, ongoing immigration claims, pending travel documents, further submissions, or voluntary return applications.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• £49.18 per person per week</li> <li>• Aspen card - no cash withdrawals (Migrant Help no date).</li> </ul>

Source: Author's analysis

At the other end of the process, the transition for those granted refugee status is equally fraught with challenges. Upon receiving their status, individuals are given 28 days to vacate their asylum accommodation from the point at which they receive their biometric residence permit (BRP), a timeframe that many find insufficient for securing employment, welfare support or alternative housing. This is compounded by the five-week wait period for Universal Credit payments, which can leave newly recognised refugees without financial support during a critical period of transition. The recent push to clear the ‘legacy’ backlog and reduce the use of hotels has led to an increase in the number of people granted refugee status, overwhelming local authority homelessness teams amid ongoing pressures (NACCOM 2024). Consequently, many newly recognised refugees find themselves facing homelessness at a time that would otherwise normally be a moment of relief. This gap in the system underscores the urgent need for a more realistic and supportive approach to the ‘move-on’ period, ensuring that those granted protection in the UK are not left destitute at a critical juncture in their lives.

## 2.7 WHO ARE THE KEY ACTORS IN DELIVERING ASYLUM ACCOMMODATION?

The delivery of asylum accommodation involves a network of key actors, each with distinct roles and responsibilities. Table 2.3 outlines the primary stakeholders involved in the process, detailing their specific duties and contributions to the asylum support system.

**TABLE 2.3**

### Key stakeholders involved in the delivery of asylum accommodation and support

Key stakeholders	Roles and duties
Home Office	<p>Manages and monitors the accommodation (AASC) and support (AIRE) contracts.</p> <p>Processes asylum applications and makes decisions on who is and is not entitled to asylum support.</p> <p>Allocates people seeking asylum to accommodation providers, coordinating with providers on placements across initial, contingency and dispersal accommodation.</p> <p>Responsible for contracting and paying providers to deliver accommodation, including hotels and large sites when dispersal capacity is exceeded.</p> <p>The secretary of state is required to provide accommodation and financial support to destitute people seeking asylum under section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, those awaiting assessment of their eligibility for section 95 support under section 98, and, in certain cases, refused asylum seekers under section 4. In practice, nearly all people seeking asylum require this support, as they are generally prohibited from working.</p>
Accommodation providers (Serco, Clearsprings and Mears)	<p>Provide and manage housing (initial, contingency and dispersal) through direct provision or by subcontracting with landlords and other suppliers.</p> <p>Oversee standards of safety, habitability and compliance with AASC contracts.</p> <p>Manage large sites and hotels used as contingency accommodation where dispersal options are unavailable.</p> <p>Provide transport services for people seeking asylum between different types of accommodation.</p> <p>Provide essential services including food, cash support (where ASPEN card is pending), and induction into accommodation and local area services.</p>
Migrant Help	<p>Operates the national AIRE helpline, offering information, advice and assistance to help people seeking asylum navigate the asylum support system and access services.</p> <p>Provides face-to-face support in initial accommodation.</p>
Housing subcontractors	<p>Landlords and service providers (eg catering) who supply housing and related services to accommodation providers.</p>

Local authorities (LAs) <sup>5</sup>	<p>Review and assess accommodation providers' proposals to use housing in their areas, particularly focusing on suitability, safety and community impact.</p> <p>Coordinate with the Home Office and SMPs to manage dispersal plans.</p> <p>Provide statutory support under section 17 of the Children Act 1989 for families, and under the Care Act 2014 for vulnerable adults, including homelessness assistance to newly granted refugees. Where notified/aware of concerns, safeguard children, young people and vulnerable adults, including those at risk of exploitation (Weihmayer 2024).</p> <p>Local authorities are not usually directly involved in providing asylum accommodation but may support broader integration services (healthcare access, education, language training), as well as support social connections and social cohesion (ibid).</p> <p>Monitor accommodation standards in their area, including through inspection of Houses of Multiple Occupancy (HMOs) to ensure they comply with safety requirements.</p>
Strategic Migration Partnerships (SMPs)	<p>Facilitate partnership working between the Home Office, local authorities, public services, accommodation providers and voluntary organisations.</p> <p>Act as regional coordinators of dispersal allocations, assisting in the planning and operational decisions on where people seeking asylum are housed.</p> <p>Advocate on behalf of regions, monitor the implementation of dispersal and asylum support plans, and share best practices and statistics to guide local and national policies.</p> <p>Support the management of the National Transfer Scheme, coordinating the movement of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children across local authorities within their region.</p>
Combined authorities	<p>In certain regions, support LAs and SMPs with the operational aspects of asylum accommodation, such as assessing properties procured by accommodation providers.</p> <p>The Greater London Authority hosts the SMP.</p>
Devolved nations and governments	<p>Coordinate regional asylum and integration strategies, support local authorities in preparing for asylum dispersal, and engage with the Home Office on asylum policy matters.</p> <p>Provide additional support services tailored to local contexts, such as within the New Scots integration strategy.</p>
Voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations	<p>Provide independent support and advocacy for people seeking asylum, helping individuals navigate the asylum system and providing essential services that are often not covered by statutory bodies.</p> <p>Many VCS organisations provide targeted services that address specific needs, such as mental health support, support for survivors of torture, and assistance for LGBTIQ+ asylum seekers.</p> <p>Provide practical support, such as food banks, clothing and hygiene products, to help fill gaps in provision.</p> <p>Foster community engagement and integration, eg through language classes, social activities and community programmes to build local networks.</p> <p>Provide access to free or low-cost legal support to help people navigate the asylum system.</p>
Legal representatives	<p>Provide legal aid advice to people seeking asylum, regarding initial claim, appeals and further submissions.</p> <p>Safeguard the rights of people seeking asylum by ensuring that legal standards and due processes are upheld, eg through challenging inadequate accommodation conditions.</p>

Source: Authors' analysis

<sup>5</sup> As noted by Weihmayer (2024), there is significant variations across local authorities in how they respond to the needs of people seeking asylum, with some councils adopting more proactive and holistic approaches, while others may remain more reactive, often due to resource constraints and capacity limitations.

### 3.

## WHAT ARE THE KEY CHALLENGES IN ASYLUM ACCOMMODATION?

This chapter examines the operational aspects of the current asylum accommodation system, highlighting both the challenges and areas for improvement identified by participants with lived experience of asylum accommodation and stakeholders in policy workshops.

### 3.1 POOR LIVING CONDITIONS

*“So, I was like, ‘Would you tell me, just look in my eyes, would you be able to live in this flat?’”*

Male, 18–24, Scotland

Participants in our listening sessions consistently described their living conditions as substandard. They spoke about accommodation which was in poor repair, unsanitary, lacking privacy, overcrowded, and equipped with inadequate facilities that made them feel unsafe, unwell and isolated.

These accounts echo findings from existing research highlighting systemic issues with asylum accommodation (Brown et al 2024a). In particular, in recent years – given the massive increase in usage – there have been a large number of reports detailing severe problems in contingency hotel accommodation. One of the most pervasive issues is the poor living conditions, which include substandard food quality and the absence of cooking facilities. As one participant said of their experience living in a hotel:

*“I don’t know how to describe it, but it was like food just given to people just to eat, or just for the sake of it being food, but it wasn’t a good standard. It wasn’t healthy.”*

Male, 25–34, Wales

Many people seeking asylum report that their accommodation suffers from serious issues like pests, mould, and an overall lack of cleanliness and hygiene – made especially difficult due to the nature of shared living in cramped conditions. As one person shared:

*“We will stay in the room [with] four in the room, just one room. No cleaning, no bedsheets, you will sleep on that bedsheets for a month.”*

Male, 25–34, Scotland

In two of three listening sessions, participants explained the discomfort they and their families faced in going to the bathroom, as a result of safety concerns, sexual harassment and hygiene issues. One woman described sharing a home with “six to eight women and children” and having two toilets between them – expressing fear for the health of her three-month-old baby. Another said that she did not feel comfortable using the toilet available in her shared accommodation and so instead would go to the market to use the public facilities there, while a third kept



a “personal bucket” in their room to avoid using the main bathroom. One woman, fearful of going to the bathroom in her shared accommodation, stopped drinking water regularly and developed a urine infection.

These conditions are exacerbated by delayed or insufficient responses to repair requests. The lack of privacy and personal space, particularly in overcrowded rooms – which large families or strangers are required to share – has been reported as further compounding people’s stress and discomfort (Refugee Council 2021, 2022; Guma et al 2023; Human Rights Watch and Just Fair 2023; Migrant Voice 2023; Refugee Action 2023b; London Borough of Hounslow 2023; Helen Bamber Foundation and Asylum Aid 2024).

People living in hotels and large sites, such as Wethersfield,<sup>6</sup> have also described their accommodation as both isolating and confining, as a result of its location, substandard and cramped conditions, and the strict rules in place. As one participant told us:

*“There is no facilities nearby, there is no busses around either, so we felt really isolated, and there’s no activities for us to do. And we’re not allowed to bring any friends, and we don’t have any friends anyway, but we’re not allowed to have anyone over, and we were told to report to them if we were to go out ... So, every day ... what they said is, ‘You can’t leave the accommodation.’ So, it feels almost like a prison, basically. And food was given without our own choices, basically; a no-choice basis and there’s no place for you to eat either, so you just have to go to the reception, get the food pack and then bring it back to your room.”*

Male, 35–44, England

It’s important to recognise that while most recent research has focused on the conditions within hotel and large site accommodations, there is evidence that dispersal properties also face issues. Reports have consistently highlighted problems such as poor maintenance, overcrowding and inadequate facilities, similar to those found in hotel accommodation (HAC 2017; ICIBI 2018).

### 3.2 LACK OF FACILITIES AND ACCESS TO ESSENTIALS

The infrastructure within asylum accommodation is often inadequate to meet the basic needs of residents. Reliable internet access is frequently unavailable, isolating residents from essential online services and communication with the outside world (Refugee Council 2021, 2022, Human Rights Watch and Just Fair 2023; Migrant Voice 2023).

The lack of communal spaces further exacerbates this isolation, as people seeking asylum typically have no access to areas to socialise or receive visitors (London Borough of Hounslow 2023). Moreover, the facilities often lack safe spaces for families with children to play and learn (Guma et al 2023; Human Rights Watch and Just Fair 2023; London Borough of Hounslow 2023; Helen Bamber Foundation and Asylum Aid 2024). For instance, the Children and Young People’s Commissioner Scotland (CYPCS) (2022) reported on a ‘mother and baby unit’<sup>7</sup> where asylum-seeking women and their young children were housed during the pandemic, noting:

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6 For more information about the asylum accommodation site at Wethersfield, see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/asylum-accommodation-wethersfield>

7 Following the submission of a human rights report by the CYPCS, the accommodation provider, Mears, ceased using the accommodation as a mother and baby unit, with it being repurposed for single people seeking asylum.

***“There was no room for the babies to play, explore, learn to crawl, or stand ... The largest area of ‘empty’ space was often in front of the cooker, making it unsafe for play.”***

Children and Young People’s Commissioner Scotland (CYPCS 2022)

In addition, basic necessities like clothing, footwear and hygiene products are often inadequately provided (British Red Cross 2021; Refugee Council 2021, 2022; London Borough of Hounslow 2023).

### **BOX 3.1 BRITISH RED CROSS PROVIDING CLOTHES FOR PEOPLE SEEKING ASYLUM**

Between November 2022 and April 2024, the British Red Cross Crisis Response team used £220,000 from their Disaster Fund<sup>8</sup> – earmarked for emergency situations – to provide clothing for nearly 12,000 people in asylum hotel accommodation. Around half of these requests were made by accommodation subcontractors or Migrant Help.

Initially, this initiative followed requests from NHS and statutory partners to respond to a scabies outbreak in hotels, which had spread following overcrowding at Manston in 2022. However, it quickly became a regular part of the Crisis and Emergency Response work, highlighting the gaps in provision that are not covered under the AASC contracts or by accommodation providers.

During an oral evidence session for the Joint Committee on Human Rights, Christina Merriott, former director at the Red Cross, emphasised the severity of the situation:

***“To reiterate, British Red Cross is supplying shoes to children in those hotels who only have flip-flops when it is snowing. We do delivery of coats. Those people are not having wonderful five-star lives.”***

Joint Committee on Human Rights 2023

The reliance on a humanitarian organisation to meet basic needs raises serious questions about the effectiveness of the current support system for people seeking asylum.

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8 See: <https://donate.redcross.org.uk/appeal/disaster-fund>

### **BOX 3.2 THE NEED FOR MENSTRUAL PRODUCTS IN ASYLUM ACCOMMODATION**

Bloody Good Period<sup>9</sup> is a charity dedicated to fighting for menstrual equity. The organisation works closely with asylum seeking and refugee groups to provide essential period supplies and address barriers to healthcare through sexual and reproductive health education. Their advocacy efforts focus on ending the shame and stigma around menstruation and ensuring fair treatment for people who menstruate.

In a listening session with Bloody Good Period's Experts-By-Experience group, several key issues were raised about the provision of menstrual products in asylum accommodation. One of the most significant concerns was the difficulty in accessing period products in a respectful and dignified manner. One participant shared her discomfort:

***"I was very embarrassed to go and ask for more pads from men at reception. Very ashamed being asked why I finish earlier than others."***

Another participant highlighted the problem of receiving unsuitable products, which led to further discomfort:

***"I was given the wrong period products and kept staining the bed."***

These experiences underscore the need for accommodation providers to supply appropriate products that cater to different bodies and menstrual flows.

The session also revealed the dangerous situations that can arise from inadequate support, with one woman recounting how a man who initially helped her obtain period products later assaulted her:

***"He went from helping me to taking advantage of me."***

This tragic experience highlights the critical importance of ensuring that women have safe, independent access to necessary supplies without having to rely on strangers.

The group noted that receptions were predominantly staffed by men, making it uncomfortable for them to ask for products or seek support when they needed it.

Furthermore, the group stressed the importance of staff training in asylum accommodation. Staff members need to be aware of the gendered experiences of people seeking asylum and the potential trauma they may have faced, including trafficking or gender-based violence.

### **3.3 INADEQUATE SUPPORT AND SERVICES**

In contingency hotel accommodations, access to essential support services is typically limited, leaving people seeking asylum without the necessary resources to navigate their situation. Many residents face significant barriers in accessing healthcare, education, and legal services (Refugee Council 2021, 2022; Human Rights Watch and Just Fair 2023; Refugee Action 2023b).

The remote locations of many hotels can further isolate people seeking asylum, making it difficult for them to access community services or integrate into society

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<sup>9</sup> See: <https://www.bloodygoodperiod.com/>

(Refugee Action 2023b; Helen Bamber Foundation and Asylum Aid 2024). Often contingency hotels and large sites, such as Wethersfield, are in remote areas outside of towns and cities, exacerbating the lack of access to essential facilities and services. As one participant described:

***“So, we were being put in the middle of nowhere in Cheshire. There are no facilities nearby, there are no buses around either, so we felt really isolated. And the transportation is also a problem, to go to the hospital or GP or the pharmacy. Because I crave the human interaction, and to be with society, and to acclimatise and be with my community, I had to walk to Manchester, about eight hours, in winter rain and whatever the weather, because there is always a problem with the transportation again.”***

Male, 35–44, England

Compounding these challenges is the issue of inadequate financial support, with many people seeking asylum experiencing problems with ASPEN cards and receiving incorrect payments (British Red Cross 2021; Refugee Council 2021, 2022; Human Rights Watch and Just Fair 2023; Helen Bamber Foundation and Asylum Aid 2024).

These challenges underscore the need for an overhaul of the support framework for people seeking asylum, a topic that will be further explored in chapter 4.

### **3.4 SAFEGUARDING CONCERNS**

The safety of people seeking asylum in contingency hotel accommodation is compromised by various factors. Charities working closely with people seeking asylum have raised alarms about increasing far-right activity at hotels and large sites. In 2022, the Refugee Council noted that “far-right groups continue to try to gain access to hotels, harassing people outside”. Hope Not Hate (2023) found that there was a 102 per cent increase in racist and anti-migrant activity outside asylum accommodation between 2021 and 2022. This culminated in August 2024 in what was described as the most “widespread outbreak of far-right violence since the second world war”, with two arson attempts and racist graffiti sprayed on asylum accommodation in Rotherham and Tamworth (Hope Not Hate 2024).

Additional safety concerns are also evident, particularly for young people accommodated in hotels. Charities have highlighted the risks faced by young people whose age are disputed by the Home Office and who are subsequently placed in adult accommodation without proper oversight or local authority safeguarding (Helen Bamber Foundation, Humans for Rights Network and Refugee Council 2024). One participant in our study described the discomfort and fear they felt when sharing a room with a young person:

***“I did not expect ... I mean, expectation is one thing, but the reality is different when I was sharing a room with a minor, so that was quite shocking to me, to share the room, the accommodation with a minor person, and nothing was done to have him his own privacy as well as protection. Because I am an LGBT person, and there could be some kind of allegation of inappropriateness. Although the person is not homophobic that I am sharing with, but he, himself, needs to be protected, too. So, it was shocking for me to have a minor sharing the room.”<sup>10</sup>***

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10 Additional measures have been taken to avoid identifying people in this section. Due to the sensitivity of the issues described, participants’ gender, age and location are not identified in parentheses.

Harassment from other residents, including sexual harassment, is another pressing issue, with women and LGBTQI+ people at particular risk (Human Rights Watch and Just Fair 2023; Helen Bamber Foundation and Asylum Aid 2024). For instance, one woman described being moved into a mixed-gender property.

***“They brought me to another accommodation, like a hostel, and totally, the accommodation is dirty, smelly and I don’t feel protected staying there, because I get a sexual harassment in there because they mix and match in that floor. So, I need to share the toilet, and whenever I go out, the men who are outside there, they used to call me, they used to come and knock the door, and later, I had a UTI problem – urinary tract infection.”***

A recent report from Women for Refugee Women (2024) details numerous ways in which women in hotel accommodation experience surveillance and constraints. These include enforced policies such as mandatory sign-ins and sign-outs, the imposition of curfews, restrictions on visitors entering hotels, and invasive practices like entering rooms without permission. Additionally, some women reported intrusive questioning and harassment by hotel staff.

Families living in cramped and stressful accommodation are at heightened risk of experiencing domestic violence (Helen Bamber Foundation and Asylum Aid 2024). Moreover, poor treatment from staff, including erroneous threats of deportation, further contributes to an environment where people seeking asylum feel unsafe (Guma et al 2023; Migrant Voice 2023; Women for Refugee Women 2024). One participant recounted:

***“The housing officers, sometimes when they came in to visit the flat, they ask you, ‘When you [going] back in your country?’. You know that life was trauma, stress; and the people supposed to take care of you, and they starting questioning you, ‘When you going back in your country?’ And sometimes, at that time, if you complain about housing provider, they say they going to deport you.”***

Concerns about safety are exacerbated by incidents of violence within accommodation settings. National news coverage of the attack at the Park Inn hotel in Glasgow in 2020 highlighted the vulnerabilities and fears of those living in such environments. These traumatic experiences have lasting effects, leaving individuals feeling unsafe and exacerbating mental health challenges. One person who was affected by the event shared the lingering impact:

***“I just had this flashback from what happened, the Park Inn, isn’t it? Like, I just rose up from the bed. So, I was like, I’m not safe.”***

### **3.5 IMPACT ON HEALTH AND WELLBEING**

The most often reported impact of the challenges faced by people seeking asylum is the toll on their mental health due to stressful living conditions, lack of privacy, and insufficient support (British Red Cross 2021; Refugee Council 2021, 2022; London Borough of Hounslow 2023; Helen Bamber Foundation and Asylum Aid 2024). These conditions have led to widespread mental health crises among people seeking asylum, with many experiencing anxiety, depression and, in some cases, suicidal thoughts. This leaves a lasting legacy even after people receive status, as they must then contend with mental health issues created or worsened by the system, drawing further on public resources.

Participants in our listening sessions recounted their struggles with mental health. One participant spoke of the impact of the living conditions on their mental wellbeing, leading them to experience suicidal ideation:

***“For me, I got insomnia when I was in the hotel, and I feel degraded, I feel disrespected. It’s impacted my mental health so much ... There were times I think of suicidal thoughts, think of taking my life, but I had just one hope ... that I have a family. That was the only thing that was keeping me going ... Up till now, I’m still battling with the trauma and the stress. Whenever I think of that life I’ve lived ... I feel so sad, I feel ashamed of myself. And the only crime I committed was to come and seek asylum. That was the only crime I committed.”***

Male, 25–34, Scotland)

The psychological toll of prolonged stays in asylum accommodation was also highlighted by a participant who had been living in the same place for eight years. The cumulative stress had severely worsened their mental health, leading to intense feelings of frustration:

***“But as I’ve been living in the same accommodation for eight years, now my mental health has gone seriously worse. Sometimes, if I’m talking to somebody about that issue, I straight away become angry, and I feel like my head is hot, and I feel angry. It’s just thinking that it’s just because of one decision I have to be that long in [asylum accommodation] ... You know when you press somebody to some level, he or she gives up. That, no, now I cannot take. This is too much.”***

Female, 25–34, England

The lack of consideration for individuals’ mental health needs, particularly in shared accommodation, further exacerbates these issues. One person described how being moved into a shared hostel following a relationship breakdown and dealing with pre-existing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) led to a mental health crisis and hospitalisation:

***“I was feeling so lost, and then start thinking about things in the past, and then where am I now? With different people, strangers, and telling my story to every new person ... I was fed up, like, what am I doing here? Living with strangers and people that I don’t even know ... So, that was so bad, and it really affected me so badly, and then I start thinking, like, I was so distressed and very ... I was confused, until I broke down and then I was like, ‘I’m fed up. I had enough of everything’, and then I end up in the hospital.”***

Female, 35–44, Wales

These accounts highlight the critical need for greater consideration of the mental and physical wellbeing of residents in asylum accommodation.

### BOX 3.3 MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS AT RAF WETHERSFIELD

A joint report by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and Doctors of the World (DOTW), *Like a prison: No control, no sleep*,<sup>11</sup> has raised serious concerns about the health and wellbeing of residents at the Wethersfield asylum accommodation site. The findings reveal alarming levels of mental health crises among residents, exacerbated by the site's 'prison-like' conditions and inadequate protection measures.

The report is based on medical data collected from 122 individuals accommodated at Wethersfield via a mobile clinic service offered by DOTW and MSF. The clinic offers longer-length GP appointments, using translation services where required. Psychological distress was assessed via the 'CORE-10' tool – a recognised measure for assessing how a person has felt over the past week.

Key findings from the report include:

- **Severe mental health crises:** Over 74 per cent of individuals accessing the mobile clinic presented with severe psychological distress. Of those individuals, 41 per cent reported experiencing suicidal ideation, along with incidents of deliberate self-harm and suicide attempts. Many residents suffered from symptoms consistent with PTSD and depressive symptoms, largely due to past experiences of violence or abuse – 68 per cent of those accessing services had such histories.
- **'Prison-like' conditions:** The Wethersfield site is described by residents as reminiscent of a prison, with limited control over their environment and constant feelings of insecurity. Twenty-seven per cent of individuals reported that they felt unsafe in the site, while a doctor working in the mobile clinic reported that patients told her the site "feels like a prison, with no control and no sleep".
- **Protection failures:** The Home Office has a policy to screen individuals for suitability before placing them in containment sites like Wethersfield, especially those with serious physical and mental health needs.<sup>12</sup> However, the report highlights that 75 per cent of individuals accessing the DOTW-MSF medical services at Wethersfield were likely not suitable for placement there, according to this policy.

The report urgently calls for the closure of RAF Wethersfield and an end to the policy of using mass containment sites for people seeking safety. Instead, MSF and DOTW recommend placing people seeking asylum in dignified, community-based accommodation where they can access appropriate physical and psychological healthcare (MSF and DOTW 2024).

## 3.6 INSUFFICIENT OVERSIGHT AND COMPLIANCE

Effective oversight and compliance mechanisms are vital for maintaining good standards in asylum accommodation. However, policy workshops and consultations with experts consistently highlighted the inadequacy of such measures, leading to poor standards that go unsanctioned. Without robust monitoring and accountability

11 See MSF and DOTW (2024).

12 The 'Allocation of asylum accommodation policy' sets out which individuals *are* unsuitable or *may* be unsuitable for ex-Ministry of Defence sites (Home Office 2024b). Potential victims of modern slavery who have received a positive reasonable grounds decision having been referred into the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) *are* unsuitable, while people who are disabled, who have experienced torture, rape or other serious forms of violence, have complex health needs such as tuberculosis or communicable diseases and/or serious mental health issues where there is a high risk of suicide, self-harm or risk to others *may* be unsuitable.

measures, it is challenging to ensure that accommodation providers meet the required quality and safety standards as set out in the AASC contract.

The current inspection regime for asylum accommodation is a patchwork of various monitoring requirements and inspections delivered by numerous bodies. Table 3.1 provides a detailed overview of the different stakeholders involved in monitoring and inspecting quality and safety in asylum accommodation.

**TABLE 3.1**  
**Forms of monitoring and inspection in asylum accommodation**

Form of monitoring/ inspection	Description	Frequency	Strengths	Limitations
Self-inspections by private providers	Providers inspect properties monthly and report on compliance with contractual standards to the Home Office. Further inspections are required if maintenance issues are identified.	Monthly	Regular internal checks, established monitoring processes.	Potential bias; providers may underreport to avoid penalties. Lack of independence.
Home Office inspections	The Assurance Team conducts spot-check inspections to ensure compliance with contractual standards. Inspection capacity has increased but remains inconsistent.	Historically aimed to inspect one-third of properties annually; frequency has dropped by 45 per cent in recent years (Wilding et al 2024).	Holds contracts and can enforce penalties directly.	Underresourced, infrequent and sometimes inconsistent in quality. Evidence that only one officer was responsible for more than 70 hotels in London.
Local authority inspections	Inspections by environmental health officers, fire and rescue services, and HMO licensing checks.	Ad-hoc, often reactive based on complaints.	Statutory authority allows for stringent enforcement and penalties.	Inspections are not systematic and often occur after issues have escalated. Poor coordination with the Home Office.
ICIBI inspections	Independent inspection of the Home Office's management of asylum accommodation, including large sites and contingency accommodation. Reports are submitted to parliament.	Irregular, with several years between inspections.	Provides independent and comprehensive assessments.	Limited frequency due to broad remit and resource constraints. Reports can be limited in terms of immediate impact.

Source: Author's analysis

While there are a number of ways in which asylum accommodation is subject to monitoring and inspection, significant limitations undermine the current approach. Private providers conduct monthly inspections and share regular compliance reports with the Home Office, but these measures are insufficient to maintain



good standards. Inherent conflicts of interest mean that providers may underreport issues to avoid penalties (HAC 2017), and a lack of independence undermines their reliability.

Moreover, the AASC KPIs only cover a limited number of the contractual requirements, resulting in a lack of effective oversight regarding critical issues such as safeguarding or resident wellbeing. Even when KPIs are not met, the Home Office has the discretion to waive the service credit payment (or financial penalty). Reports indicate that this has been common practice, with the Home Office at times favouring a ‘light touch’ approach to enforcement, using less drastic measures to maintain good relationships with providers (see DXK, R v Secretary of State for the Home Department, 2024<sup>13</sup>). The poor state of much asylum accommodation would suggest that such an approach has not been effective, as was also the case in 2017 when the Home Affairs Committee concluded that the ‘current compliance regime is not fit for purpose’ (HAC 2017).

Inspections carried out by Home Office inspectors have been constrained by underresourcing, Covid-19 and, potentially, by a growing hotel estate. The rate of inspections has dropped dramatically – by 45 per cent – in recent years (Wilding et al 2024), with evidence showing that in London, for instance, one inspection officer was responsible for more than 70 hotels in the region (London Councils 2024). This reduced frequency of inspections leads to significant gaps in oversight, allowing poor standards to persist unchecked.

Local authorities play an important role in inspecting properties in their areas. When evaluating the COMPASS contracts, the Home Affairs Committee recommended transferring inspection, monitoring of compliance and imposing of sanctions to local authorities. However, local authority inspections are typically ad hoc and reactive, dependent on reports of issues and access to properties. This reactive approach means that when local authorities do get involved, problems are often already severe, undermining a preventative approach. Furthermore, local authorities frequently lack the funding and capacity to conduct regular inspections, and poor coordination between local authorities and the Home Office further fragments oversight.

Finally, while the ICIBI has provided independent and comprehensive inspections of asylum accommodation in recent years, their ability to conduct frequent inspections is limited by the wide remit of the office. Although their reports are thorough, this limited frequency – and the difficult relationship between the chief inspector and previous home secretaries, as well as significant delays in publishing reports<sup>14</sup> – reduces their immediate effectiveness in driving improvements.

These limitations highlight the urgent need for more robust, frequent and independent inspections to ensure higher standards and greater accountability in asylum accommodation. Without significant improvements in the monitoring and inspection regimes, the quality of living conditions for people seeking asylum is likely to remain inadequate.

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13 See: <https://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/Admin/2024/579.html>

14 The interim Independent Chief Inspector, David Bolt, reiterated concerns raised by his predecessor, David Neal, regarding the delayed publication of reports in the latest ICIBI annual report, saying that: “only three of the 21 inspection reports published during the 2023-24 business year met the ministerial commitment to lay reports in Parliament within eight weeks.” (ICIBI 2024)

## 4.

# WHAT ARE THE SUPPORT EXPERIENCES OF ACCOMMODATED PEOPLE SEEKING ASYLUM?

The current system of support for people seeking asylum in the UK is inadequate, leaving many frustrated and overwhelmed by a labyrinth of bureaucracy with limited access to meaningful, face-to-face help and guidance. This chapter outlines the existing support framework for accommodated people seeking asylum, focusing on the AIRE contract delivered by Migrant Help, which centralises the provision of support services. It identifies key shortcomings of the current model before proposing principles for a more effective and humane approach.

### 4.1 HOW SUPPORT IS CURRENTLY OFFERED

The AIRE (Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility) contract, introduced in 2019, was designed to provide impartial and independent information, advice, guidance and assistance to help people seeking asylum navigate the asylum support system effectively. The contract covers advice and guidance, issue reporting, feedback and complaints, and eligibility. As described in chapter 2, the contract prohibits the provider from offering legal advice or advocacy on individual cases.

Migrant Help operates a national helpline available 24/7, offering tele-support to people seeking asylum. However, feedback from policy experts suggests that this service functions primarily as an “escalation helpline”; that is, escalating issues and concerns to the Home Office and accommodation providers, rather than providing holistic, person-centred support. Migrant Help lacks direct access to individual asylum support cases, limiting its ability to provide real-time updates on key developments, such as the timing of moves from initial to dispersal accommodation. While it is responsible for recording activities related to complain resolutions as outlined in the AIRE Statement of Requirements, Migrant Help does not proactively communicate these outcomes back to complainants. Its role is primarily to pass information to the Home Office or private providers, maintaining an audit trail but often without tracking the outcomes of escalated cases beyond statutory timelines for resolutions.

The AIRE provider is prohibited from providing advocacy on behalf of people accessing the service, including making representations to the Home Office on the outcome of asylum support applications or appeals (Home Office 2018b). While it can inform people of their appeal rights and signpost to other organisations for legal representation, the contract explicitly prevents them from directly advocating during the asylum support appeals process or advising individuals on whether the Home Office’s decision is incorrect. This restriction significantly limits its ability to support service users in challenging unfavorable decisions (ASAP 2024).

## 4.2 PROBLEMS WITH THE CURRENT MODEL

Despite its intentions, the AIRE contract suffers from several shortcomings. One of the main criticisms is the helpline's consistent failure to provide adequate support, with an internal audit rating the service as inadequate (Das 2022). Participants in listening sessions reported numerous difficulties using the service, including long wait times and receiving minimal assistance that often amounts to little more than being told the expected response times.

Poor communication from Migrant Help and accommodation providers was a significant point of concern for participants. For instance, one person described how simple maintenance problems, such as a broken light bulb, are often passed between housing managers and Migrant Help for weeks without resolution. Some also spoke of the sense of chastisement they encountered when raising a complaint:

***“The basin pipe was fully clogged, and the oven and the fridge were not working. Whenever I called Migrant Help, [they said] ‘Oh, my God. So many issues you are raising up. Why do you keep calling?’”***

Female, 25–34, England

Others expressed reluctance in raising complaints, because they were fatigued by the lack of support they received from Migrant Help and accommodation providers:

***“I’ve had, like, five different housing officers. Now I’ve got a new one again, and I’ve not even started telling her about the issue, because when you’re sick and tired about things like [this], [you think] let me just leave it. I’m not going to make any complaint again. If I can’t sleep in the house, then I’ll find [elsewhere] to sleep.”***

Male, 25–34, Scotland

Stakeholders have expressed concerns that the AIRE contract is not equipped to handle the increasing number of asylum applicants nor the complexity of their experiences and support needs. While Migrant Help provides in-person support at initial accommodation sites, this early assistance has been lost for many people seeking asylum as contingency accommodation has expanded. The lack of face-to-face interaction is particularly problematic for those in remote or isolated contingency hotels, where the need for direct support is high but challenging to deliver due to geographic barriers.

Another significant flaw is the absence of a robust feedback loop between Migrant Help, private providers, the Home Office and the complainants. This gap means that issues raised by people seeking asylum are often left unresolved, with no mechanism for tracking progress or ensuring accountability.

The lack of legal advice<sup>15</sup> across the country further strains the system, pushing more people to rely on Migrant Help for issues that go beyond their remit. At the same time, the inadequacies of the system and the difficulties getting through to the helpline have placed undue pressures on the wider voluntary sector. Organisations such as the Refugee Council (2022) report spending considerable time assisting people seeking asylum in contacting Migrant Help and advocating on their behalf, which is an inefficient use of voluntary sector resources.

The current model is also criticised for being highly transactional rather than relational. Unlike previous systems where key workers or caseworkers provided ongoing, personalised support, the AIRE model lacks this continuity of care, leading to a disconnect between people seeking asylum and essential services.

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15 For an in-depth analysis of the severe deficit in asylum legal advice, see Wilding (2022).

#### **BOX 4.1 CHALLENGES IN ACCESSING ASYLUM SUPPORT AND ADVICE**

The Asylum Support Appeals Project<sup>16</sup> (2024) report, *Access to advice on asylum support and asylum support appeals*, underscores the challenges faced by people seeking asylum in accessing support and legal advice, particularly under the current AIRE contract managed by Migrant Help.

Based on interviews with 15 people seeking asylum, 64 interviews with frontline workers and a survey with a further 15 organisations, the report highlights the extreme pressure on the system, experienced by people seeking asylum and those supporting them alike. The high levels of asylum claims awaiting a decision has exacerbated the inadequacies of the support system, especially in new and remote dispersal areas where there is a lack of experienced advisors and legal support.

One of the most critical issues highlighted is the inefficiency of the AIRE helpline. The report details significant concerns about the helpline's performance, noting that calls often take hours, and the advice provided can be inaccurate or misleading.

The report points out that Migrant Help is restricted by the AIRE contract, which does not allow for advocacy. As one frontline worker reported:

***“If they could advocate it would be very helpful – if we tell Migrant Help something they can’t do anything. If we are talking for instance about accommodation, we don’t always feel understood. We report an issue, it disappears into a black hole.”***

Nor does the contract allow for follow-up on the outcomes of complaints and requests. This limitation adds an additional layer of bureaucracy between people seeking asylum, the Home Office and accommodation providers, making it difficult for individuals to resolve issues effectively.

The lack of legal advice is another critical barrier, particularly in new dispersal areas where services are sparse. The report highlights the need for face-to-face support services, noting that telephone advice is insufficient for addressing the complex and varied needs of people seeking asylum. The absence of legal aid for preparing asylum support appeals further complicates the situation, leaving many without assistance to challenge refusals or withdrawals of support.

The consequences of these systemic failures include increased destitution, homelessness and worsening mental health among people seeking asylum. The report calls for a fundamental redesign of the AIRE contract, with a focus on outcome-based support, face-to-face services, and a more transparent and accountable system.

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<sup>16</sup> See: <https://www.asaproject.org/>

## 5.

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TRANSFORMING ASYLUM ACCOMMODATION

The asylum accommodation system is at a critical juncture, with a pressing need for reform to address its high costs, inefficiencies, and impact on people seeking asylum and local communities. The new Labour government has already taken important steps by committing to unblock asylum processing and clear the asylum backlog, a critical move that should reduce the current overreliance on hotels and large sites, ultimately driving down costs. The decision to close the Bibby Stockholm barge and the cancellation of plans to house asylum seekers at RAF Scampton are also positive steps, signalling a shift towards more humane and effective management of asylum accommodation.

These initial actions should be part of a broader and more ambitious vision for the future of asylum accommodation – one that prioritises humane, safe and community-based living conditions for people seeking asylum, and which benefits local communities. This concluding chapter sets out a comprehensive plan to achieve this vision, guided by a number of key principles drawn from our extensive research with people seeking asylum and policy experts.

### PRINCIPLES FOR A NEW ASYLUM ACCOMMODATION AND SUPPORT SYSTEM

The redesign of the asylum accommodation and support system should be guided by principles that ensure dignity, safety and integration for people seeking asylum, while also benefiting local communities. These principles form the foundation for our recommendations:

- 1. Robust and transparent oversight:** The new system must have rigorous and independent oversight mechanisms to ensure the dignity, safety and security of people seeking asylum. Providers should be held accountable, standards consistently met, and failures promptly addressed to build trust and transparency within the system.
- 2. Suitable, community-based accommodation:** Accommodation should prioritise safety, privacy, autonomy and connection (Refugee Action 2023a). A community-based model not only benefits people seeking asylum but can also support community cohesion and mutual understanding.
- 3. Supportive environments for health and wellbeing:** Accommodation design and management should prioritise physical and mental health, incorporating trauma-informed principles to promote safety and healing. Environments that support health contribute to overall wellbeing and aid long-term integration.
- 4. Meaningful and tailored support:** People seeking asylum should have access to key workers offering personalised and holistic support, whether through local authorities or partnerships with

VCS organisations. This support should be embedded within local infrastructure, including legal advice, mental health services and adult education.

5. **Integration from day one:** Given that the majority of people seeking asylum are likely to be granted status, the support system should foster integration from arrival. Services like English language and skills training enable people to contribute to their communities in the long term, benefiting both people seeking asylum and local communities.
6. **Listening to the voice of people seeking asylum:** The design and delivery of asylum accommodation and support should be informed by the lived experiences of those who use the system. Through fostering meaningful dialogue between people seeking asylum, service providers, and policymakers, it is possible to build trust, enhance accountability, and design a system that reflects the real challenges and opportunities faced by those living in asylum accommodation.
7. **A fair and collaborative approach to dispersal:** Dispersal should be reimagined as a shared responsibility that supports community engagement. Fair funding settlements with regional bodies are essential to ensure dispersal is backed by adequate resources, strengthens local services, and fosters active dialogue with communities and local authorities.
8. **Consistent national standards with local flexibility:** Clear national guidelines should ensure a minimum standard of care and support for asylum seekers across the country. These standards must allow local partners the flexibility to adapt services to local contexts while maintaining quality and consistency.
9. **Value for money and alignment with wider objectives:** Any redesign of the asylum system must ensure value for money by efficiently using resources and aligning with broader goals such as improved housing, community cohesion and effective decentralisation. This approach will enhance support for people seeking asylum while benefiting local communities.

As detailed in the previous chapters of this report, the current approach to asylum accommodation and support is marred by mismanagement, inefficiencies and inadequate oversight, delivering both extremely costly and substandard provision. In their current form, the contracts neither guarantee safe and secure accommodation nor an integrated model of support. Reform is needed to bring down costs, improve quality and instil a more holistic approach to supporting people in the asylum system.

**Our central proposal for reform is to decentralise the asylum accommodation and support system.** Decentralisation would allow for a more tailored approach to the commissioning of asylum accommodation and support, building on existing knowledge and relationships at the local and regional level. Given local councils understand the housing market in their areas and are politically incentivised to limit the extensive use of hotels for people claiming asylum, a decentralised approach should help to reduce the costs of accommodation.<sup>17</sup> Decentralisation would also make it easier for local areas to link up asylum accommodation and support with broader responsibilities for housing and community cohesion, as well as specific local authority duties for homelessness once people are granted

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17 This would in turn help to reduce ODA in-donor refugee costs and free up development spending on other areas.

refugee status. On the basis of a suitable package of financial support from the Home Office, this would enable more coordinated and holistic provision.

## **5.1 DECENTRALISATION OF ASYLUM ACCOMMODATION AND SUPPORT**

A decentralised approach has the potential to deliver better-quality accommodation and support, while also bringing down costs. We set out how this might work below, building on the work of other recent proposals for decentralising the asylum accommodation system (see eg Commission on the Integration of Refugees 2024). We explore three dimensions of decentralisation: the governance framework, the scope of the decentralised provision, and the geographical distribution of support.

### **1. The governance framework**

As explained earlier in this report, the current model of asylum accommodation and support is highly centralised. Accommodation is delivered through a handful of large contracts with private providers, while advice is delivered through one national contract with Migrant Help, with limited engagement with local authorities. The result is a fragmented and depersonalised provision.

A decentralised model has the potential to transform the provision of asylum accommodation and support. But there are differing governance frameworks for supporting such arrangements, each of which have pros and cons.

One option would be to return to the pre-2000 approach, where local authorities had a duty to accommodate people seeking asylum who had lodged a claim in their area. While this would allow for local authorities to directly coordinate accommodation for people seeking asylum with their other responsibilities on housing, community cohesion and social services, it would also place excessive pressures on the south east, given the large numbers of arrivals across the Channel.

To address this, a system could be introduced to distribute people seeking asylum to local authorities across the country, while retaining local authorities' duty to accommodate them. This would give local authorities direct responsibility and powers over asylum accommodation at the same time as ensuring a fair routing system, which could be managed in a similar way to the current National Transfer Scheme for unaccompanied children. But there would still be some practical challenges under this approach. Perhaps most importantly, a model based on local authorities working individually may struggle to benefit from economies of scale. Measures of accountability would also be more diffuse, given that each local authority would be separately responsible for accommodating its own allocation of claimants.

An alternative way forward would be to decentralise responsibilities for asylum accommodation to regional bodies, which would be granted powers to commission appropriate provision across their region. There are four main candidates here.

First, there are combined authorities, institutions comprised of local councils working together across regions which are granted devolved powers and are typically headed by metro mayors. Combined authorities bring strong political leadership and the ability to integrate asylum accommodation within their broader responsibilities. They are also well placed to take on new powers from central government, as they already have this role in a range of other policy areas. However, they do not have full coverage across England and they do not typically have experience of working on migration and asylum issues. This means they may not always be best placed for receiving new powers on asylum accommodation.

Second, regional Strategic Migration Partnerships (SMPs) offer distinct advantages in commissioning asylum accommodation. SMPs are independent regional partnerships led by local authorities and funded largely by the Home Office. They cover the whole

of the UK and lead on the coordination of local migration and asylum issues with the Home Office, local authorities, public services and the community and voluntary sector – including on refugee resettlement schemes, the national transfer scheme for unaccompanied children, and asylum dispersal.<sup>18</sup> As they are led by local authorities, their role would enable more joined-up thinking between asylum and other areas under local authority control, such as community cohesion, housing and social services. Given their established remit, direct connection with local authorities and comprehensive geographical coverage, SMPs are well positioned to be one of the lead vehicles for delivering on a decentralised asylum accommodation model. However, not all SMPs necessarily have the capacity or the structures in place to manage new commissioning powers.

Third, there could be a return to local authority consortia as was the case under the earlier model of asylum accommodation. Partnerships of local authorities may be an effective option where there are particular councils that are willing and well-placed to take on new powers and have established ways of working together.

Finally, in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the devolved administrations could take on new powers on asylum accommodation. This would help them to coordinate asylum accommodation with existing activities – for instance, in Scotland the ‘New Scots’ Refugee Integration Strategy, led by the Scottish government, the Scottish Refugee Council and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA). They are also coterminous with Strategic Migration Partnerships in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (though in the latter case the SMP is currently not operational).

The analysis above suggests that each of these options have their pros and cons and there is no perfect model of governance available. Reflecting these limitations, we propose moving forward with an initial flexible ‘pathfinder’ model.

Given their existing expertise and direct involvement of constituent local authorities, we consider that SMPs are the most appropriate starting point for the decentralisation of asylum accommodation. **We therefore suggest that the Home Office introduces a small number of pathfinder ‘regional asylum deals’ with individual SMPs, negotiating on funding and delivery of provision.** To agree regional asylum deals, SMPs would convene a steering group of representatives from all of its constituent local authorities, who would collectively agree a negotiating position in discussions with the Home Office.

On the basis of this negotiating position, the SMP and the Home Office – in conjunction with other relevant regional and local bodies – would then agree a plan for the provision of asylum accommodation and support for their region or nation. **The plan would determine which body should be responsible for the commissioning of asylum accommodation for that region or nation – whether this is a combined authority,<sup>19</sup> a consortium of local authorities, a devolved administration, or the SMP itself.<sup>20</sup>** The Home Office would retain the core duty to accommodate and support people seeking asylum, but would delegate these responsibilities to the regional body (which we refer to as shorthand for the relevant SMP, combined authority, local authority consortium or devolved administration). Once this was agreed, the steering group of local authority

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18 Albeit the ICIBI reports that the SMP in Northern Ireland is not currently functioning. In this case, an alternative arrangement would need to be sought with the Northern Ireland Executive Office Strategic Planning Group (Refugees and Asylum Seekers). See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/an-inspection-of-contingency-asylum-accommodation-for-families-with-children-in-northern-ireland-may-june-2023>

19 Where regions have multiple combined authorities which work well together, powers could be decentralised to these combined authorities in partnership.

20 The exact scope of provision is discussed in the next subsection.



representatives would be convened regularly to monitor the operation of the regional asylum deal.

Where a pathfinder involved transferring commissioning powers directly to the SMP, this would be done through the legal and contracting function of the legal bodies which host them (typically individual local authorities or local authority bodies). Some SMPs are already familiar with this model of commissioning – for instance Migration Yorkshire commissions different projects and services through Leeds City Council (their host legal body), while London SMP does so through the GLA (Greater London Authority). Others would need to strengthen their capabilities to operate this commissioning model – if they had the appetite for these responsibilities, the Home Office could offer capacity-building support to prepare them to take on commissioning powers ahead of an agreed regional asylum deal.

This approach offers several key benefits. By agreeing regional asylum deals with SMPs and transferring commissioning powers to regional bodies, governance can be more closely aligned with local authorities, allowing for greater and more constructive engagement with the Home Office compared to the current model and reducing the risks of blockages and discontinuities in provision. SMPs have established relationships with local authorities at all levels (including council leaders and chief executives), government departments, and other key stakeholders, as well as experience with resettlement schemes and the national transfer scheme for unaccompanied children. On the basis of agreement from the steering group, they are therefore well placed to represent constituent local authorities and negotiate with the Home Office on regional asylum deals. At the same time, allowing for flexibility in the delivery vehicle for commissioning of asylum accommodation would give local authorities (through SMPs) a say in shaping the right approach for their region or nation.

The key challenge this model would face, however, is the varying levels of capacity and interest in taking on these responsibilities across regional bodies. The research for this project suggests that in some SMPs, local authorities and combined authorities there is strong interest, knowledge and capability to deliver this work effectively, but this is not the same everywhere. This is why we have suggested that the most sensible approach would be to first test this model with a small number of pathfinder regions (eg two or three). The pathfinders should be initiated in line with the 2026 break clause of the AASC contracts – or earlier if possible within existing contracts. A pathfinder region could be selected on the basis of where (a) there is local appetite and expertise for commissioning asylum accommodation, and (b) where the current contracts are not delivering as they should. If the pathfinders are successful, decentralisation could then be rolled out to all regions and nations once the current contracts end in 2029, or in 2026 if pathfinders are feasible prior to the break clause.

## **2. Scope of decentralised powers**

A second dimension of decentralisation is the exact scope of the powers being transferred from central government. There are a range of different types of support under the current system which could be considered for decentralisation. Table 5.1 lists some of the key types of support and who is currently responsible for their provision.

**TABLE 5.1****Actors responsible for different types of support under existing model**

Type of support	Responsibilities under current model
Provision of safe, habitable, fit for purpose and correctly equipped accommodation	Private providers (Serco, Mears and Clearsprings), who primarily rent dispersal properties from private landlords
Maintenance of accommodation up to required property standards	Private providers and subcontractors
Provision of full board food service or food vouchers/cash payments as required	Private providers and subcontractors
Provision of travel assistance and transport services to and from accommodation	Private providers and subcontractors
Provision of induction briefings for people in initial accommodation	Private providers and subcontractors
Provision of advice and guidance	Migrant Help
Provision of GP registration service	Private providers in conjunction with GP practices and NHS
Management of anti-social and violent behaviour	Private providers in conjunction with local authorities and police
Single point of contact for requests for assistance, complaints and reports of maintenance issues	Migrant Help
Safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults	Joint responsibility of private providers, Migrant Help, local authorities and other agencies
Provision of broader 'wraparound' services to support, for example, language learning, group activities, community integration, etc	Local authorities, charities and community groups

Source: Authors' analysis

As table 5.1 illustrates, the current range of services is delivered by a mix of the three major providers and Migrant Help, alongside subcontractors, local government and public services, and community groups. A decentralised model therefore needs to determine which of these services should be delivered at a local/regional level and which should remain at a national level.

At a minimum, in the pathfinder regions we propose the decentralisation of the funding and powers to commission the provision of asylum accommodation to regional bodies. These regional bodies would be free to decide to procure accommodation from a range of providers, including private sector landlords, housing associations and local authorities. Regional bodies may also decide to subcontract the procurement of asylum accommodation, rather than doing it themselves. This could be to individual local authorities – which in many cases are likely to be well placed to procure asylum accommodation in their areas – or to non-profit or private providers.

Beyond the core service of providing accommodation for people in the asylum system, we recommend that responsibility for most of the remaining provision listed in table 5.1 is also decentralised to regional bodies in the pathfinder regions. This is because partial decentralisation risks fragmenting the delivery of services

and bringing additional complexity into the system. Moreover, many of the key benefits of our proposed model come from the decentralisation of ancillary services such as induction and GP registration. Delivery of these services could be subcontracted out from regional bodies to individual local authorities, given that in many cases local actors already have relevant expertise through their broader work on community cohesion and refugee resettlement programmes. Decentralisation would therefore allow for a more coordinated approach with some of the integration support which local areas are already involved in.

In particular, there are notable benefits to the decentralisation of the provision of advice and guidance, as currently delivered through the AIRE contract with Migrant Help. As discussed earlier in the report, the current centralised approach has resulted in a distant and depersonalised service, often with heavy delays for those seeking support. Leaving this service at the national level while decentralising responsibilities for accommodation risks creating a fragmented picture for asylum support. On the other hand, decentralising asylum advice and guidance would help to forge links between this service and local government's wider activities and expertise providing assistance for vulnerable groups.

**We propose that the regional pathfinders should involve transferring responsibility for the bulk of accommodation and support services from private providers and Migrant Help to regional bodies.** This would include the provision and maintenance of accommodation; full board food service and food vouchers/cash payments; provision of induction briefings and of advice and guidance; and the provision of GP registration, social care, safeguarding support and wider 'wrap-around services'. Where appropriate, this would be done in conjunction with other public services (eg GP registration) or subcontracted to local authorities or to non-profit or private providers. In particular, regional bodies would be well placed to engage local councils and the voluntary and community sector to support with some types of provision – such as with advice and guidance. This approach would give the maximal opportunity for a more joined-up and locally tailored mode of delivery.

Crucially, **a robust new funding settlement must be agreed with pathfinder regions to enable them to effectively fulfil the responsibilities that would be decentralised under this proposal.** This funding would cover the costs of accommodation and support services, giving regions flexibility to deliver provision as they see fit. Clear funding arrangements would also need to be in place to plan for future numbers and provide sufficient resources in the event of fluctuations in asylum applicants, with the Home Office providing a financial backstop for unexpected surges in demand. Given the recent challenges in procuring asylum accommodation, a fair funding package is essential to secure local and regional buy-in for this proposal.<sup>21</sup>

There are a small number of areas where it would be appropriate for provision to not be decentralised. Retaining a single point of contact for queries, requests of assistance, and complaints at the national level would help to draw a clearer distinction between the provision of accommodation at the regional level and a centralised complaints handling function, thereby helping to reassure people that the complaints process is fair and independent. It would make sense for transportation for people across the country to their initial accommodation to be commissioned nationally, given this cuts across different geographies. In the event of full decentralisation across all regions and nations, there may also be a case for continued national commissioning of surge capacity for emergency purposes or in the event of significantly higher asylum applications than forecast.

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<sup>21</sup> For this reason we also recommend that the recommendation on decentralisation is complemented by a plan to increase the availability of dispersal properties, as discussed later in the report.

### 3. Geographical distribution of asylum accommodation

We have so far discussed to which bodies asylum accommodation and support should be decentralised, and exactly what powers and responsibilities should be decentralised. A third question to resolve is how people being accommodated in the asylum system should be distributed around the country.

As discussed earlier in the report, a dispersal model was originally introduced to ensure asylum claimants were not overly concentrated in accommodation in London and the south east. While first introduced on a voluntary basis – where local authorities could choose to participate – the government has more recently begun to roll out a model of mandatory ‘full dispersal’. Local authorities were grouped by region and for each region a plan was agreed for accommodating a share of the total asylum cohort based on its population size.<sup>22</sup> The intention is to reach a fair distribution by 2029 (House of Commons Library 2023). Yet progress has been slow given the reluctance shown by many local authorities and the variability of housing costs across the country.

There are a number of challenging trade-offs in determining the best distribution of asylum accommodation around the country. On the one hand, given the current cost pressures, there is a strong incentive to accommodate people where it is the least expensive. On the other hand, this is likely to result in concentrations of people in certain areas, which could raise concerns about pressures on local services. Moreover, if cost is the sole consideration for dispersal, then this risks placing people in inappropriate locations – for instance, places which are isolated with limited transport links, places which pose greater barriers to integration, and/or places with pre-existing community tensions.

For this reason, we propose a two-stage approach to dispersal, building on the existing approach. A decentralised model could allocate claimants to the 12 regions and nations around the UK. For each region and nation, the Strategic Migration Partnership (together with any other regional body granted commissioning powers through the regional asylum plan) would then manage the ‘routing’ of people to individual local authorities.

We recommend that the first stage of allocation to regions and nations could be based on a distribution formula, taking into account a number of relevant factors. This could follow the lead of other countries which have taken similar approaches. For instance, Germany has taken a methodical approach to the dispersal of its asylum-seeking population, based on the Königstein Key, a procedure for determining quotas for each Länder (ie state) based on their tax revenue (weighted by two-thirds) and population size (weighted by a third) (Aksoy et al 2023). The UK government could apply a similar methodology adapted for the UK context – given that tax revenue is heavily centralised in the UK – and with a broader set of relevant criteria. In practice, it is likely that population size will be one of the primary considerations. But other measures could include regional GDP, availability of affordable housing, and size of the current asylum-seeking population.

The first stage of allocation could be implemented in the short term across all 12 regions and nations, not just in pathfinder regions. This would allow for a more transparent and rigorous approach to dispersing people across regions and nations. As with current policy, it may take time for regions to adapt to a new approach to dispersal, so a transition period could be set out to achieve an equitable distribution over time.

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22 Initially regional plans were agreed in collaboration with local government; however, under the more recent revised regional plans, the distribution was determined centrally and local authorities were informed of the outcome.

For the pathfinders, the second stage of allocation would then be up to SMPs, together with any other regional bodies who have been given commissioning powers as part of regional asylum deals. The steering group for each SMP would make routing decisions based on discussion between local authority representatives and consideration of relevant factors, such as availability, cost, transport links, infrastructure, the needs of individuals (particularly vulnerable groups), and community cohesion. SMPs would provide the most appropriate forum for this kind of discussion – indeed, SMPs often already play a similar role for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and resettled refugees.

We recognise that there is a risk that local authorities could struggle to come to agreement at the regional level on a fair allocation of claimants, given the political sensitivities and multiple complex factors involved. How to address this challenge should therefore be a key consideration in the development of the pathfinders. There are a number of potential options for resolving disagreements at the regional level which could be explored – from consultations through the steering group to, as a last resort, a mechanism for a ‘backstop’ allocation to be applied by the Home Office if no agreement can be found.

In sum, the central principles of our proposed model would involve the decentralisation of asylum accommodation and support to regional bodies. People would be dispersed to regions based on a formula which allows for an equitable regional distribution based on population size and other relevant factors.

The governance arrangements in pathfinder regions would depend on regional asylum deals between the Home Office and SMPs, who would agree between them which body should be responsible for delivery of asylum accommodation and support – depending on the region, this could be a combined authority, a consortium of local authorities, the devolved administration or the SMP itself. Local authorities would shape SMP decision-making through steering groups made up of council representatives.

The regional bodies would be responsible for procuring and overseeing accommodation, providing financial support, and offering advice and guidance. Where appropriate they could choose to subcontract provision.

Our proposed model would allow for more coordinated provision tailored to local expertise. Drawing on their local relationships and knowledge, regional bodies would be well placed to procure good-quality, value-for-money accommodation in appropriate locations across local authorities.<sup>23</sup>

## 5.2 CLOSE FAILING LARGE SITES AND REVIEW THEIR USE

Addressing the challenges posed by large accommodation sites is critical. While the government has taken steps to close the Bibby Stockholm, and abandoned plans for a site at Scampton in Lincolnshire, their broader strategy for large sites remains unclear. We propose two key recommendations on this issue.

First, **large sites that consistently fail to meet acceptable living standards should be closed immediately**, with residents relocated to more appropriate settings that uphold their dignity and wellbeing. Evidence, including from the APPG on Immigration Detention (2021), shows that ex-military facilities cause significant harm to residents. As detailed in this report, RAF Wethersfield provides a compelling case for why such closures are necessary. The forthcoming outcome of the Judicial Review on the suitability of military bases for asylum accommodation will provide further clarity on the legal situation (Deighton Pierce Glynn 2024).

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<sup>23</sup> Ensuring cost-effectiveness will also depend on wider government efforts to expand cheaper options for asylum accommodation, as discussed in the following recommendations.

Second, if any large sites are retained, **a comprehensive review should be conducted, with strict parameters placed on their use.** If used, this should only be for emergency or induction purposes and only for short stays, ideally no longer than 28 days. Additionally, they should serve a constructive purpose, such as conducting comprehensive health and vulnerability assessments to ensure that people seeking asylum are placed in appropriate locations with the required support.

### **5.3 STRENGTHEN ACCOUNTABILITY, OVERSIGHT AND COMPLIANCE**

Addressing the concerns related to the standards of asylum accommodation requires the establishment and enforcement of clear accountability measures within existing contracts. **The current ‘light touch’ enforcement culture within the Home Office should be replaced with a more rigorous approach where penalties for non-compliance are applied consistently and without exception.**

The existing system for raising issues and lodging complaints is inadequate. To create a more responsive and transparent system, it is essential to strengthen communication channels. **Establishing clear feedback loops among Migrant Help, the Home Office, accommodation providers and people seeking asylum will enable individuals to raise complaints and issues with confidence, knowing that there is a structured process for tracking and resolving these matters promptly.** This improvement will not only enhance service delivery but also build trust in the system.

In both the immediate term and with a view towards the post-2026/2029 landscape, there is a pressing need for comprehensive and independent oversight of asylum accommodation standards, including those within dispersal accommodation. **Empowering the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI) with the authority to publish reports independently and access relevant contracts will significantly increase transparency and accountability across the system.**

Finally, to address the fragmented nature of inspection and build trust and confidence in the system, **the Home Office should draw on best practices from inspection models such as His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) and the Care Quality Commission (CQC).** HMICFRS’s approach – which publishes findings to enhance transparency, identifies and shares best practices, provides professional advice and emphasises value for money – offers valuable insights for improving the oversight of asylum accommodation. Similarly, the CQC’s model of guiding inspections with clear quality statements that define what ‘good’ looks like – going beyond minimum standards – can help ensure consistent, high-quality provision and accountability across the system.

### **5.4 INCLUDE PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE**

**We recommend that the governance of asylum accommodation, whether through a centralised or regional model, includes a collective forum for experts by experience to ensure their insights directly inform service design, decision-making and improve accountability.** These forums should facilitate dialogue between residents, service providers, regional bodies and/or the Home Office, fostering transparency and building trust in the system. Embedding lived experience into the governance structure can play a crucial role in user-led design, accountability and the monitoring of decentralised models, working alongside regional bodies to shape and oversee the new approach.

## 5.5 ADDRESS SYSTEM BOTTLENECKS

To ensure the asylum accommodation system operates more effectively and humanely, it is crucial to address key bottlenecks that currently exacerbate the challenges faced by people seeking asylum, particularly those transitioning out of the system. Two critical areas that require immediate attention are the move-on period for newly recognised refugees and the availability of temporary housing stock.

**To mitigate the risks associated with the short move-on period, we recommend extending the move-on period from 28 to 56 days.** This extension would provide newly recognised refugees with a more realistic timeframe to navigate the complexities of securing stable housing and accessing support services. By doubling the move-on period, the government would be taking a vital step towards reducing the incidence of homelessness and aligning the system with homelessness relief duties for other populations. Under a decentralised approach, where regional bodies manage asylum accommodation, the transition would likely be smoother, as greater involvement of local government would help the transition for refugees between asylum accommodation and mainstream housing at the point of being granted refugee status. **To prevent surges of homelessness resulting from concentrated decision-making in specific areas, the Home Office should implement a staggered approach by coordinating the distribution of decisions across regions.** This would avoid overwhelming local housing resources, ensuring decisions are managed effectively during periods of high volume.

Another critical bottleneck in the system is the lack of available temporary housing stock, which exacerbates delays in moving people seeking asylum out of initial or contingency accommodation and into more stable dispersal accommodation. This bottleneck needs to be addressed as part of a wider strategy to improve the supply and quality of temporary accommodation, not just for people seeking asylum but also for other vulnerable groups. To address this, **we support the piloting of a capital subsidy programme designed to allow local authorities and housing associations to purchase properties specifically for temporary housing** (Wareing and Eckley 2024). Homes which were purchased and renovated could then be rented out at local housing allowance rates.

This has the potential to enable the phased reduction of reliance on hotels and large sites as new accommodation becomes available. By gradually increasing the supply of temporary housing, the government can not only reduce costs associated with hotel use but also contribute to the broader social housing stock, benefiting the wider population. In combination with other measures aimed at reducing hotel use, this strategy could lead to substantial savings and a more sustainable housing solution for people seeking asylum, other vulnerable groups and local communities alike.

## 5.6 ENHANCE SAFEGUARDING MEASURES

To ensure the safety and wellbeing of all people seeking asylum, it is imperative to enhance safeguarding measures across the asylum accommodation system.

**One of the most immediate steps to improve safeguarding is the mandatory inclusion of specific safeguarding key performance indicators (KPIs) in all asylum accommodation contracts.** These KPIs could be introduced through a contract variation, ensuring that the safety and wellbeing of residents are consistently prioritised, assessed and monitored. By embedding these measures into the contractual obligations of accommodation providers, the government can hold providers accountable for maintaining high standards of care and protection for all residents.

In a decentralised model, safeguarding standards would be upheld within a nationally agreed framework, while local safeguarding partnerships could tailor practices to the needs of asylum seekers in their communities. This approach would leverage local expertise and networks, enhancing the effectiveness of safeguarding measures by integrating them with existing local protocols and support systems.

Effective safeguarding begins with a thorough understanding of the specific needs and vulnerabilities of people seeking asylum. While there are existing processes to screen for vulnerabilities, stakeholders have noted their inadequacy and failure to identify at-risk individuals. **We recommend strengthening these processes by implementing enhanced vulnerability assessments for all individuals upon arrival, utilising the UNHCR and IDC vulnerability screening tool.**<sup>24</sup> This tool is designed to identify those at heightened risk, such as survivors of torture or trafficking, or those with significant health needs, and to ensure that they are placed in the most appropriate and supportive accommodation settings. By conducting these comprehensive assessments early in the process, the system can better match individuals with the support services they require, thereby improving outcomes and reducing the risk of harm.

**To further strengthen safeguarding, it is essential to provide comprehensive training for all staff involved in the asylum accommodation system.** This training must include anti-racist, trauma-informed approaches, domestic abuse awareness and should emphasise the importance of protecting vulnerable populations, including women, children, LGBTQI+ individuals, people with disabilities, and victims of modern slavery and trafficking. Preventative measures should ensure the safety of women and children, such as maintaining female staff presence in contingency accommodation, ensuring housing officers do not enter rooms without permission, and addressing reports of harassment. Regular, mandatory training updates, as well as ensuring staff are DBS checked, will help embed safeguarding as a central focus in service delivery.

Additionally, **providers and the Home Office must adhere to best practice safeguarding guidance, including acting on safeguarding concerns, sharing relevant information, and providing transparent feedback about outcomes to those raising concerns,** in line with data protection legislation.

Finally, specific measures must be put in place to protect young people who are age-disputed at the border. These individuals are particularly vulnerable and require additional safeguards to ensure their safety. **We recommend implementing enhanced safeguarding protocols that automatically flag age-disputed young people to local authorities for assessment. Crucially, these individuals should not be placed in adult accommodation until their age has been verified, nor be made to share a room.** By taking these steps, the system can better protect young people from the risks associated with inappropriate placement and ensure they receive the care and support they need.

## 5.7 IMPROVE SUPPORT AND SERVICES

Ensuring nationwide access to legal advice for people seeking asylum is essential, particularly in remote and underserved areas, which are often referred to as ‘legal aid deserts’. These areas lack adequate legal services, leaving people seeking asylum without the support they need to effectively navigate the complex asylum system. This issue is exacerbated by the ambition for full dispersal, which places additional pressures on legal aid provision in areas where services are already scarce.

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24 See: <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/media/unhcr-idc-vulnerability-screening-tool-identifying-and-addressing-vulnerability-tool-asylum>



Research by Jo Wilding (2022) highlights that remote legal advice is not a viable solution, due to a lack of surplus capacity that could be redeployed within the legal advice sector. **It is vital therefore that there is a comprehensive review of legal aid provision to ensure it meets the demands of full dispersal, with a focus on expanding services in remote and underserved areas.**

Additionally, many people seeking asylum are housed in geographically remote or physically isolated locations, which further hinders access to key services, such as healthcare, education and community support. These environments can exacerbate feelings of isolation and make it difficult for people to rebuild their lives, particularly where transport connections are poor. **Providing travel passes is a practical solution to enable people seeking asylum to attend necessary appointments and maintain social connections.** Moreover, a **long-term strategy should ensure that places chosen for dispersal are adequately equipped with the infrastructure and services necessary to support people seeking asylum.** This should include joint working between the Ministry of Justice and Home Office to develop a legal aid infrastructure that delivers adequate services for the demand of the asylum system.

## 5.8 ENSURE ACCESS TO FACILITIES AND ESSENTIALS

Families with children require specific accommodation that provides safe and appropriate living conditions. **Prioritising the allocation of suitable family accommodation, including access to communal spaces and safe areas for children to play and learn,** is important for ensuring that families maintain their wellbeing and that children can continue their development in a stable and supportive environment.

**Asylum support payments need to be reviewed and adjusted to better reflect the cost of living.** Restoring the link to 70 per cent of mainstream welfare benefits would provide a more adequate level of support, helping people seeking asylum meet their basic needs. Ensuring access to essentials like menstrual products is crucial for maintaining dignity, while access to necessary communications allows people seeking asylum to connect with vital services and support.

## 5.9 PROMOTE HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Our policy workshops highlighted that the most important step for improving health and wellbeing among people seeking asylum was to improve the conditions in which they live and the support they receive. We therefore intend for our recommendations on decentralisation, combined with improved inspections and safeguarding measures, to improve the wellbeing of people in the asylum system.

More specifically, **we recommend adopting a ‘health-first’ approach in asylum accommodation.** This includes comprehensive health screenings upon arrival and ongoing access to healthcare services. By prioritising health in the design and management of accommodation, the system can better support the overall wellbeing of people seeking asylum, reducing the risk of long-term health issues and improving their quality of life.

Furthermore, a key driver of poor mental health in contingency accommodation has been the room sharing policy, whereby people seeking asylum are made to share their room with a stranger. This is particularly concerning for vulnerable groups, including for LGBTQI+ individuals, people with PTSD or who experience sleep disturbance, pregnant women and people with health needs. To address this, **we recommend revising the room sharing policy for individuals with specific needs, making it easier for people to request private rooms to reduce the risks associated with room sharing.**

### **5.10 INVOLVE COMMUNITIES TO FOSTER COHESION AND INTEGRATION**

In the wake of the recent riots and the racist targeting of asylum hotels, **it is crucial to develop community cohesion strategies that engage both local residents and people seeking asylum.** A decentralised approach offers greater opportunities for community voices to shape these strategies, ensuring they are responsive to local needs and concerns. Initiatives such as Welcome Hubs can play a key role in facilitating interaction and promoting positive relationships between communities. These strategies help to reduce tensions and create a more supportive environment for people seeking asylum as they adapt to their new surroundings.

Finally, in the longer term, **a national integration strategy is essential for building an effective and coherent immigration and asylum system.** This strategy should prioritise English language learning, skills training, mental health support and social inclusion for people in asylum accommodation. Such early interventions can significantly enhance integration and improve long-term outcomes for people seeking asylum (Pecoraro et al 2022; Commission on the Integration of Refugees 2024; Knapp et al 2024).

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