

Asylum seekers being held in conditions akin to detention centres in UK

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A recently published report condemns the conditions of asylum seekers herded into temporary accommodation in Britain during the COVID-19 pandemic. It compared accommodation in hotels to detention centres.

The report was produced by academics at Napier University in Edinburgh in cooperation with Glasgow-based Migrants Organising for Rights and Empowerment (MORE). Its aims included documenting the experiences of asylum seekers in Glasgow and the impact of their relocation. It found that putting asylum seekers in temporary accommodation had increased the risk of them contracting COVID-19.

The report's interim findings included:

“The relocation of our participants to hotel-type accommodation during the pandemic had a negative impact on their health and wellbeing, as individuals were faced with a number of restrictions such as losing their cash payments, being unable to cook their own food, having their mobility restricted, being unable to visit friends or have visitors.

“Far from offering a ‘safe environment’ during COVID-19, our participants experienced these forms of temporary accommodation as unsafe and often as detention-like paces.

“Relocations to temporary or contingency forms of accommodation took place with little consideration of people's needs and with no consultation with asylum seekers themselves. In some cases, individuals were even threatened with deportation by the accommodation provider's staff if they resisted the move.”

From the start of the pandemic in March 2020 until October that year the Home Office increased its use of hotel accommodation for asylum seekers around eight-fold, from 1,200 to 9,500. The Napier university team spoke to around 50 asylum seekers in Glasgow.

The report details the intolerable situation many were forced into. It notes that a “key policy change that took

place during the pandemic was the withdrawal of financial support for those asylum seekers living in hotel-type accommodation throughout the UK. While asylum seekers usually receive £39.63 per week, the financial support was stopped for those who were moved to hotels during the pandemic. This was based on the grounds that for those moving to full-board accommodation, the basic necessities such as food and toiletries would be provided so there was no need to give cash payments.” This “policy decision was widely criticised for leading to the deterioration of asylum seekers' mental health and wellbeing, and its lawfulness was challenged in court by legal firms representing asylum seekers.”

Other asylum seekers were sent into a “Mothers and Baby Unit” in Glasgow, opened in October 2020. The report notes that “at the heat of the second wave... In January 2021, the Unit housed around 25 asylum-seeking women with babies or who were pregnant. Previously used for accommodating young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, the facility was refurbished by Mears in 2020, turning it into 37 self-contained bedsits.” It was criticised for its unsuitability and cramped conditions.

One woman, Miriam, was being sent to the Mothers and Baby Unit. As she was collecting her belongings, including some food, she was told, “You are a destitute, you an asylum seeker. You're not supposed to have all these things”. She asked a driver what would happen if she refused to go into the unit. The driver replied, “it's your right if you can refuse, you can refuse. But you should know that if you refuse [the] Home Office can also decide to deport you”.

Beginning in April last year, as the COVID-19 pandemic began to explode, several hundred asylum seekers in Glasgow were removed from temporary flats and put in five hotels around the city. Mostly men there were also pregnant women.

In June last year an asylum seeker, Badreddin Abadlla Adam, was shot dead by police after he stabbed six people including three fellow asylum seekers. The Sudanese man had been put in the Park Inn hotel, Glasgow. Forced to self-isolate in his room because of suspected COVID-19, his mental health quickly deteriorated. A friend explained to Sky News, “Because of bad food [at the hotel] this man [Badreddin] started to suffer from abdominal disturbances and vomit every time. The people thought he was affected by coronavirus and detained him in his room for one month which affected his mental health badly.”

Similar conditions were detailed in a Refugee Council report in April this year. It was based on interviews with around 400 asylum seekers in Hull, Leeds, London and Rotherham.

The Refugee Council said that its “staff have been extremely concerned about gaps in support for people, and have often had to step in to provide basics like shoes and coats and make sure that people receive the food they need. People’s mental and physical health has declined, and they have spoken about their feelings of isolation and abandonment.”

The council added, “Many people are lacking adequate clothing and footwear, often having arrived in the UK with just the clothes they are wearing. The Home Office does not provide clothing for people seeking asylum and the Refugee Council routinely works with people whose only footwear has been a pair of worn flip flops. Having such unsuitable footwear means people are unable to leave the hotel for exercise or to access services which are typically a fair walking distance from the hotels.”

Hotels are not the only inappropriate accommodation being used for asylum seekers. It is now a year since the former Napier barracks in Kent were first used to house asylum seekers. It was the scene of protest and a fire.

Marking the anniversary of its opening, Steve Valdez Symonds, the UK Refugee and Migrant Rights director for Amnesty International told the *Evening Standard* on September 21, “Over the past year, the squalid detention-like conditions at Napier Barracks have spread Covid-19, renewed or exacerbated psychological traumas and generally punished people for doing no more than exercise their right to seek asylum in the UK.

“The barracks are now a byword for the cruel injustice of the Government’s attempts to shirk responsibility for providing a fair, humane and properly-run asylum system.”

The recent influx of refugees from Afghanistan have not fared much better. Speaking before a Home Affairs

Committee meeting of MPs in parliament on September 22 Matthew Rycroft, Permanent Secretary at the Home Office, said 7,000 Afghan refugees were in hotel accommodation including 70 unaccompanied children. The government could not rule out them still being in hotels at Christmas, with Rycroft’s deputy, Tricia Hayes, telling MPs vaguely, “While at the minute we cannot put a date on when we are going to get people out of hotels, we all want to do it as quickly as possible.”

The use of hotels and other large facilities to accommodate asylum seekers is being used by far right and fascist forces to harass and abuse them. A Freedom of Information response by the *Guardian* newspaper from the UK Home Office showed 70 racist incidents at hotels and barracks housing asylum seekers in an 18-month period up to the end of July.

The Tory government is moving to make the situation for asylum seekers even more intolerable. Its Nationality and Border Bill currently going through parliament having passed two readings, includes proposals to set up offshore “accommodation and reception centres” in Africa and mainland Europe. It would also make it illegal for asylum seekers to enter the UK without prior permission. Those entering without permission, which would be the case for the majority of those coming to the UK, could face the threat of up to four years in jail followed by deportation. The United Nations refugee organisation, UNHCR, said in a September 23 statement that the proposals “would break international law.”



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