

UK asylum seeker housing protections scrapped

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The British government will deny asylum seekers basic housing protections in order to move them from hotels into the private rented sector. Private landlords in England and Wales will be “temporarily” exempted from regulations covering everything from electrical safety to minimum room sizes.

The announcement follows Home Secretary Suella Braverman’s Illegal Migration Bill, which is passing through parliament and imposes blanket denials of the right to asylum and the expansion of internment camps. Barges, ferries and military sites are being refitted for detention. Next month, the first 50 (of up to 500) asylum seekers will be housed on three-storey barge the *Bibby Stockholm*.

According to the *Guardian*, the Home Office intends to use a total of 10 old cruise ships, ferries and barges for the purpose, with Braverman “close to confirming” an 1,800-capacity cruise ship to be docked in the Mersey.

Plans are also being made to expand the use of repurposed army barracks like former Royal Air Force base Manston. Designed as a holding centre for 1,000, last October, its 4,000 detainees were suffering from scabies, norovirus, diphtheria and MRSA, as well as being subject to violent abuse. A coroner’s inquest is still ongoing into one death of an asylum seeker who tested positive for diphtheria.

Currently, more than 50,000 asylum seekers are housed in hotels. With space in barges and military sites still limited, the Conservative government is forcing them into substandard and unregulated accommodation.

Private landlords are required to have a House in Multiple Occupation (HMO) licence from local authorities if they let to more than one household in a single property.

The licences require landlords to obtain an annual gas safety certificate, a declaration from a qualified electrician that electrical fittings are safe, and to provide working

smoke alarms for every inhabited storey of the building, plus a carbon monoxide alarm in every inhabited room with a gas or oil heater. If requested, landlords must supply a written declaration of the safety of electrical appliances and furniture. They are obliged to provide all tenants with a written statement of the terms of occupancy.

Regarding living space, bedrooms for one person aged 10 or over cannot be smaller than 6.51 square metres, while those for two or more aged 10 or above must be at least 10.22 square metres. A room for one child under 10 must be at least 4.64 square metres.

These requirements will be shelved for asylum seekers, with landlords allowed to house them for up to two years without a licence. The Refugee Action charity pointed out that the proposal means private Asylum Accommodation Service Contract providers, who make millions in profit from public funds, will be exempt from paying HMO licence fees to local authorities, and will not be required to pay for property repairs.

Mary Atkinson of the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants told press that the present accommodation for asylum seekers is already substandard, “with people seeking sanctuary housed in cramped, windowless rooms smaller than prison cells. Without HMO licences, already traumatised people will be at risk of living in places that are unfit for human habitation.”

Polly Neate, of homeless charity Shelter, said the government was “putting thousands of people, including children and older people, at serious risk.”

The government is overseeing a downward spiral of already dreadful conditions. Asylum seekers in hotels report cramped, overcrowded, unhygienic rooms with extremely unhealthy food and poor-quality healthcare. A Migrant Voice reports tells the story of one person living for a year in a two metre by two metre room with no windows, commenting, “His isolation and hopeless and

generally dehumanised situation had a devastating impact on his mental health, leading to self-harming and two suicide attempts.”

The anti-democratic nature of the government’s asylum accommodation plans is mirrored in the method through which the draconian measures are being enacted. The licensing proposal is being presented as a statutory instrument rather than a bill, meaning it will not go to a full parliamentary vote. Instead, it will be presented to a committee of 16-18 MPs for consideration and approval. It received a low-key announcement, being scheduled to coincide with Gove’s high-profile Renters (Reform) Bill.

Press attention has focused on that bill’s elimination of so-called “no fault evictions.” Under Section 21 of the Thatcher government’s 1988 Housing Act, landlords can serve an eviction notice on tenants who complain about disrepair rather than fixing the problems. This is routinely being used to evict tenants in order to jack up the rent.

But its elimination is hedged with potential loopholes that allow its continuation by different means. The bill strengthens landlords’ right to evict tenants for antisocial behaviour, using the government’s own catch-all definition of this as “any behaviour capable of causing nuisance or annoyance.”

Easier eviction for antisocial behaviour was urged by the National Residential Landlords Association, and there was intense lobbying by the Property Research Group established by Tory MP Kevin Hollinrake, the landlord of five properties. Nearly one in five Tory MPs, 68 in total, are private landlords. Braverman is one of five such who make more than £10,000 a year in private rent. 16 Labour MPs, including frontbenchers David Lammy, Emily Thornberry and Lucy Powell, are also private landlords.

The attack on asylum accommodation and strengthening of powers against “anti-social behaviour” are connected. On waiving HMO license requirements, the Local Government Association (LGA) warned of “the increase of substandard buildings” and “adverse impacts on the safety and wellbeing of asylum seekers.” They pointed to “a range of negative consequences,” including the “community cohesion implications of potential antisocial behaviour and increased pressure on public services.”

Thousands more a year will find themselves in these dire circumstances as the government accelerates its anti-migrant agenda. At a Council of Europe summit in Iceland, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak reached a new agreement on British cooperation with the European Union border force Frontex around “critical operational and strategic challenges including the situation in the

Channel.”

Sunak linked the attack on migrants with the government’s push for war against Russia, saying “we must also learn the lesson of this war—by being prepared to confront threats to our societies before they become too big to deal with. That includes acting on cybersecurity and AI, and it means tackling illegal migration.”

The prime minister also met Siofra O’Leary, president of the European Court of Human Rights, as part of his campaign to annul the court’s Rule 39 orders, which have been used to block the government’s deportation flights to Rwanda. The Illegal Migration Bill would allow the home secretary to ignore Rule 39 orders.

At the far-right National Conservatism conference last weekend, Braverman called for further restrictions on legal migration, while Gove blamed migration for the housing crisis.

New housebuilding is drastically below the government’s targets, thanks to relaxation of those targets by Gove. Under pressure from Conservative MPs seeking to make it easier for local authorities to refuse planning permission, the minister last year made the annual target of 300,000 new homes voluntary rather than compulsory. Trade body the Home Builders Federation suggests construction will fall to 120,000.

The government is seeking to scapegoat asylum seekers for a wider crisis, and they have the loyal support of the Labour Party. Labour’s Matthew Pennycook criticised the government proposal by saying it was “not bringing down the standards in HMO asylum accommodation to the minimum [presumably considered appropriate],” but “exempting them entirely.” At the same time, he made clear that Labour shares the Tories’ view of “the hotel crisis.”

Shadow Health Secretary Wes Streeting has previously insisted, “Speeding up claims, deporting people when their claims are unsuccessful, that’s the way to tackle the problem with the immigration system instead of spending millions housing people in hotels.”



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