

Joint Parliamentary Briefing on Asylum Accommodation – March 2021

During the pandemic, an unprecedented number of people seeking refugee protection have been forced into unsafe and inappropriate housing, including disused military barracks. **How people are housed is about more than providing shelter.** It is emblematic of the UK's vision of providing sanctuary to people seeking refuge. **We want people seeking asylum to be welcomed as our neighbours, not warehoused in camps.**

This briefing explains why the use of barracks and similar contingency accommodation is unacceptable both during and after a pandemic and offers an alternative vision for an asylum system that enables people seeking protection to rebuild their lives in safety within our communities.

How did we get here? Since 1999, Government policy has been to house people seeking refugee protection in communities whilst waiting for a decision on their asylum claim. During the pandemic, the **Home Office's approach has taken a frightening turn. New forms of completely inappropriate accommodation – such as disused army barracks and other institutional sites – are looking more like permanent features of the asylum system,** whilst long term structural issues continue to go unaddressed.

A harmful system. People seeking asylum have no right to work and are only eligible for Home Office housing and support if they have no other means of supporting themselves. **People have no choice over where or how they are housed** and are provided with [£39.63 cash per week](#). Normally, people would first be housed for three to four weeks in a hostel style full-board accommodation, before being allocated 'dispersal' accommodation in communities.

During the pandemic, **an unprecedented number of people seeking asylum have been stuck in emergency accommodation: over [12,000 people](#) (almost a fifth of all supported people seeking asylum) are currently living in hotels and other large full-board facilities.** Some have been stuck in the same room for many months, where their freedoms are controlled, they have little to no money for essentials, and extremely limited or no meaningful access to healthcare, legal advice, or even digital access. **This is an alarming divergence from people being housed in local communities.**

Over the past six months, **some people have been forced to live in shared dormitories in disused barracks in Napier and Penally.** The [conditions in the barracks](#) are shocking. Contrary to [public health guidance](#) and recommendations from the [local health boards](#), vulnerable residents have been forced to sleep in dorms of up to 28 people with beds just two metres apart. We know that people from [ethnic minorities are dying disproportionately of Covid-19](#), with particularly high infection rates among those with Black or South Asian heritage. And yet the Home Office continues to **house people seeking asylum - the vast majority of whom have ethnically diverse heritage - in overcrowded and unhygienic places, putting people at direct risk of Covid-19.** A [significant outbreak this year at Napier](#) barracks resulted in 197 people testing positive.

This type of accommodation inflicts serious harm on people seeking asylum and has been a [proven failure in other parts of the world.](#) Despite warnings from [health experts](#), [clinicians](#), [parliamentarians](#), [residents](#) and [others](#), the **Home Office has refused to close the barracks and move people to safe housing in the community,** and continues to consider [other inappropriate institutional sites](#).

A hostile environment. Instead of supporting integration, the Home Office's approach is creating a hostile environment for people seeking refugee protection. People living in both the barracks and hotels have been left exposed to the threat of Covid-19 and have reported extreme deteriorations in their mental and physical health.

People seeking asylum living in barracks and hotels have also faced a heightened level of harassment from the organised far-right. Despite this incredibly volatile situation, Ministers have continued to make inflammatory comments, disputing the testimonies of residents and experts, claiming that all accommodation is safe and appropriate. Internal Home Office documents even revealed that when deciding whether to use barracks as housing for people seeking asylum, the Department was more concerned about appearing too 'generous' to people seeking refugee protection than whether the housing provided was fit for purpose.

The way people seeking asylum are housed is a policy choice, one that appears increasingly politically and commercially driven. **The extended use of harmful forms of institutional accommodation is not inevitable.**

Mismanaged contracts and disinvestment. Despite multiple warnings from government committees and experts, inaction from the Home Office has left the asylum support system lurching from crisis to crisis, and in a steady state of decline.

At the end of 2019, the accommodation estate was moved from one set of contracts to another. Though promises of improvements were made, **extreme mismanagement led to an immediate shortage of accommodation, an increased use of inappropriate emergency sites, and resulted in huge amounts of hardship**. The accommodation that did exist was already in disrepair, and many people were completely unable to access help and support. These ten-year contracts are valued at £1bn, yet in contrast with government guidance, **information about how they are performing remains closely guarded**. Local authorities and communities remain cut out of the system, receiving no financial support to resource critical work to welcome people seeking asylum to their areas.

It is from this fragile base that the Home Office and contractors responded to the pressures of Covid-19. Further neglect, combined with increasing delays in decision making, means problems have only been getting worse. Inadequate scrutiny and oversight from the Home Office has left systemic issues unaddressed, and **people too often stuck in unsuitable, unsafe, and insecure housing**. People seeking asylum should not be paying the price for poor contract delivery and long-term mismanagement of the asylum accommodation system.

What needs to change? Right now, we are at a critical juncture. By refusing to close the barracks and take action to improve contracted provision, the Home Office is presiding over a managed decline of community-based dispersal and taking active steps towards the increased use of institutional accommodation. **It does not need to be like this.**

We want an asylum system that enables people to keep themselves safe and rebuild their lives free from persecution. **People seeking asylum should be housed in homes that guarantee their safety, privacy, and freedom, and enable them to live as part of the wider community.** There are a range of failures, both long-standing and new, that afflict the asylum accommodation system, and must urgently be resolved. However, at root, the Government must champion and invest in an asylum system that is **driven by the needs of people seeking sanctuary and is equipped to provide welcoming homes within our communities.**

To do this, we make the following demands on the Home Office:

- **Immediately close the barracks and cease any plans to open further similar accommodation.** Reliance on other forms of emergency accommodation, such as hotels, should be significantly decreased and strict time limits on people's stays there should be introduced.
- **Make a full commitment to housing people seeking asylum in communities,** by urgently addressing the long-standing structural issues in the management and monitoring of contracted provision, and by significantly investing in improvements to the current stock of dispersal housing.
- **Commit to a vision of a fair and efficient asylum system that allows those who seek sanctuary to safely rebuild their lives as part of our communities.**