

# The use of temporary asylum accommodation in the UK

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## Introduction

Temporary asylum accommodation in the UK includes hotels, surplus military sites and vessels. At the end of December 2023, there were 111,132 asylum seekers being supported by the government, of whom 45,768 and 60,714 were in hotels and other types of accommodation respectively<sup>1</sup>. This figure had steadily increased in the last few years before falling in more recent months, and it has included asylum seekers who originate from a wide range of countries, including Afghanistan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan and Syria.

The use of hotels became increasingly widespread from September 2019, with the number of asylum seekers in hotel accommodation rising from 1,200 in March 2020 to 25,000 in February 2022 and to more than 56,000 in September 2023. The Government has also expanded its use of large-scale accommodation centres and sites to house people seeking asylum in the UK. These include the Napier Barracks in Kent, the Bibby Stockholm barge in Dorset and the Wethersfield airfield in Essex. There are also plans to open additional sites, such as the former RAF base in Scampton, Lincolnshire.

## What is the asylum accommodation system in the UK?

The Home Office has a legal duty to provide otherwise destitute asylum seekers with accommodation, and Government guidelines outline two key stages of accommodation that asylum seekers move through.

The first stage consists of **initial accommodation**. This is where asylum seekers live either while waiting for a decision on their applications for longer-term housing and financial support, or while waiting to be moved into longer-term housing once their applications have been approved. This accommodation can take a range of forms, including hostel-style accommodation, hotels and large-scale accommodation sites.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-december-2023/how-many-people-do-we-grant-protection-to#support-provided-to-asylum-seekers>

It is often full-board shared accommodation with meals provided where asylum seekers could traditionally expect to stay for 3-4 weeks, but it is now much longer.

The second stage consists of **dispersal accommodation**, which asylum seekers become eligible for once their initial applications have been approved. This is longer-term, but still temporary, accommodation that ideally takes the form of private dwellings, such as a shared house or a flat, where asylum seekers live until the Home Office reaches a final decision on their asylum claims.

There is also **contingency accommodation**, which the government has increasingly used because there is not enough initial and dispersal accommodation available. This can be hotel rooms, but also large-scale accommodation sites and barges.

### **What is the reality behind the asylum accommodation system?**

The reality is that the asylum accommodation system in the UK is one where asylum seekers experience dreadful conditions that cause them distress, negatively impact their health, and violate their basic human rights. Refugee Action has accused the asylum housing system of being 'cruel by design'<sup>2</sup>, and individual accommodation sites like the Wethersfield airfield and the Bibby Stockholm barge have been likened to prisons<sup>3</sup>.

This situation has been caused and exacerbated by various factors, including:

- **Home Office delays in processing applications and the resulting asylum backlog** have led to an increase in the number of both asylum seekers awaiting decisions on their claims and the accommodation sites needed.
- **The Home Office outsources the running of asylum accommodation to private for-profit companies** like Clearsprings Ready Homes, Mears and Serco. This is a system that has arguably not done enough to draw on and strengthen the resources, services and support that local authorities and housing associations can offer, but instead allows private companies to make huge profits by providing sub-standard accommodation to vulnerable people.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Hostile-Accommodation-Refugee-Action-report.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.helenbamber.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/HBF%20HRNF%20Ghettoised%20and%20traumatised\\_report%20on%20Wethersfield\\_December23.pdf](https://www.helenbamber.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/HBF%20HRNF%20Ghettoised%20and%20traumatised_report%20on%20Wethersfield_December23.pdf); [No Floating Prisons: Bibby Stockholm Barge – Right to Remain](#)

- There is **not enough suitable accommodation available** for asylum seekers for various reasons, including insufficient collaboration between central government and local authorities, the fact that asylum seekers aren't being moved through the system quickly enough, and the UK's wider housing shortage.
- All three factors have led to the **lack of a pathway through which asylum seekers move from initial to dispersal accommodation**, and the ever-increasing **widespread use of repurposed contingency accommodation**, such as hotels, vessels and disused military sites.

### What specific challenges and issues do asylum seekers experience?

Asylum seekers in temporary asylum accommodation in the UK have experienced a range of widely recognised challenges and issues, including:

- **They become trapped** in unsuitable, and often isolated and remote, contingency or supposedly "temporary" accommodation for **months and even years**. They are often held long-term in detention-like conditions with their lives on hold.
- **Accommodation is allocated on a "no choice" basis**, and asylum seekers do not usually have a say with regards to where they live, when they will be moved or where they will be relocated to. This means they can be dispersed to **new and unfamiliar areas across the UK** with which they have no connection, and they can be moved between properties.
- Asylum seekers living in temporary asylum accommodation have experienced **a wide range of harmful, inhumane and sub-standard living conditions**. These conditions include:
  - Overcrowding and an absence of privacy;
  - Unsanitary conditions, including mould, leaks and rodent infestations;
  - Low-quality and inedible food that leads to hunger, health problems and malnutrition;
  - Physical health issues, including chronic pain, diabetes and disabilities, that are not treated nor catered for;
  - Mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, difficulty sleeping, flashbacks, loneliness, suicidal thoughts and re-traumatisation;



- Feelings of intense fear for their safety, and about leaving their accommodation and experiencing racist attacks and harassment;
- Isolation and segregation, and limited contact and integration with wider British society;
- Detention-like conditions, including not being allowed to cook their own food, surveillance measures, restrictions on their movement, and not having agency over their lives;
- Not having enough money to buy essential items, such as toiletries, clothing, medicine, baby milk and bus tickets;
- Insufficient access to medical care, legal advice and welfare support;
- Children experiencing disruptions to their education and struggling to attend school because it is too far away;
- A number of reports and newspaper articles have also reported on people being subjected to verbal abuse and harassment by staff<sup>4</sup>.

### What is the wider context?

The use of this temporary accommodation is a key part of the Government's response to asylum seekers. Alongside the Illegal Migration Act, which amounts to a ban on asylum, the Rwanda plan and the wider political priority to "stop the boats", it contributes to the tough and deterring asylum system in the UK.

The Government has begun to close hotel accommodation in favour of what it says are cheaper accommodation options. These include the even greater use of former Ministry of Defence sites and vessels, and room sharing across all types of accommodation. This approach will likely continue to cause distress amongst asylum seekers and hinder their integration and wellbeing.

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<sup>4</sup> [No rest, no security. Report into the experiences of asylum seekers in hotels \(migrantvoice.org\);  
https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/may/20/asylum-seekers-abused-and-intimidated-by-staff-in-home-office-hotels](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/may/20/asylum-seekers-abused-and-intimidated-by-staff-in-home-office-hotels)