

Briefing on Asylum Accommodation and Quasi-Detention - November 2022

Overview

- The current 'crisis' in the asylum accommodation system is a result of the failure of the Home Office to make timely decisions; recent reforms in the Nationality and Borders Act; and a lack of partnership working with local communities by the Home Office and its providers.
- From 2021, as well as increased use of unsuitable hotel accommodation, the Government has sought to develop a national portfolio of large-scale asylum 'accommodation centres' in which to place people seeking asylum in the UK.
- Previous attempts to institute such centres have resulted in facilities [best described as 'quasi-detention'](#).
- Current Clause 97 in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill threatens to exclude local communities from decisions over whether such facilities are placed in their communities.

Background

In October 2022, with the [decision-making backlog in the asylum system at record levels](#), and people [in limbo](#) in the system for years at a time, [reports emerged](#) of a humanitarian crisis at the 'short-term holding facility' at Manston. Occupancy at the site was reported at [up to 4000](#) with people reportedly being detained for far longer than 24 hours, a diphtheria outbreak, and families sleeping for weeks on mats on the floor, in conditions [described as 'wretched'](#) by the Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration.

Events at Manston have been linked to a [collapse in Home Office decision making](#), and mismanagement of the asylum accommodation system. For over twenty years, people seeking asylum have been housed as an integral part of our communities through the asylum 'dispersal' system. However, the system has [long been vulnerable](#) to shocks. In 2020, the [National Audit Office](#) noted that the Home Office '*does not have a single, integrated process to forecast demand*', and '*had not updated its accommodation forecast since 2019*', making planning for accommodation providers harder. During the COVID pandemic, as its decision-making function drastically slowed, the Home Office and its providers started to rely extensively on the use of [unsuitable 'contingency accommodation'](#) – largely hotels - to fulfil their statutory obligation to house people seeking asylum who would otherwise be destitute. From 2021 the Home Office also instituted, and sought to institute, unsuitable large-scale 'quasi-detention' sites, such as the still operational ex-military barracks at Napier, Folkestone, with [drastic impacts on the health](#) of those placed there.

In response to events at Manston, the Home Office in the short term has continued to increase its procurement of hotels. Now and previously, these sites have often been instituted with little or no consultation of local stakeholders, and have attracted controversy, frequently damaged community relations and provoked tensions, including action by far-right groups. Currently, it is reported that [at least fourteen](#) local authorities are either considering or have mounted legal action against the Home Office regarding the standing up of 'unsafe' hotels in their areas.

Minister Robert Jenrick on 8 November stated that [there are three strands](#) to the Government's current efforts: ensuring fairer asylum dispersal across the country; looking for other sites, away from hotels, which '*provide better value for money for the taxpayer*', and to '*accelerate the processing of asylum claims*'. It is currently reported that the Government is [considering the use of](#) holiday camps and caravan parks to lessen its reliance on hotel accommodation, and Ministers in Parliament have referenced a desire to institute ['simple' forms of accommodation](#).

Why segregated facilities cause harm

A wealth of research¹ evidences the harm inflicted on people seeking asylum in institutional accommodation of all kinds², and including the quasi-detention facilities at Napier and formerly at Penally in Pembrokeshire. [Persistent concerns](#) include a lack of effective screening processes and safeguards, high levels of self-harm or suicidal ideation, lack of privacy and sleep deprivation caused by shared facilities, geographical and social isolation experienced by residents, concerns around quality of food; a lack of healthcare and access to legal advice, and severe consequences for people's mental health. When Inspectors from the Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration [surveyed men at Napier](#) all respondents said they had felt depressed at some points, and about a third said they had felt suicidal. These experiences are also common in hotel accommodation, with residents talking about being ['in a place like prison'](#).

"You're surrounded with fences around you. And security guards are always watching you. And there are several blocks... And well, it's an army camp. So, people are sharing the area with each other. I mean, several people in the dining room and blocks, and you always feel that you are in a place like prison."

Interviewee, [In a Place Like Prison](#), Asylum Matters and partners, December 2021

The segregated nature of the sites has made them attractive to extremist groups and activists seeking to grow their following – the organisation Hope Not Hate [recorded 125 'visits'](#) to contingency hotel accommodation by far right activists and groups in 2021, often including harassment of people placed there. A proposed large-scale centre at [Linton-on-Ouse](#) in North Yorkshire saw such activity, with incidents of in person leafleting of households in the village, demonstrations and social media stunts by far right groups and individuals, some with Neo-Nazi links.

Recommendations:

- **The Government must focus its efforts on widening dispersal in consultation with communities and speeding up decision making; getting decisions right first time.**
- **The Government must not use segregated facilities to place people seeking asylum. Large scale 'accommodation centres' or camp style housing have no place in a humane and effective asylum system and must not be used to house vulnerable people in the UK.**

¹ See, inter alia, [Briefing of Helen Bamber Foundation on Asylum Accommodation Centres](#), October 2021; [Asylum Matters: In a Place Like Prison](#), December 2021 [Report of the Inquiry of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Immigration Detention](#) on quasi detention, December 2021; Doctors of the World, [Asylum Seekers Access to Healthcare in Initial and Contingency Accommodation](#), April 2022

² Refugee Council: Lives on Hold, [experiences of people living in asylum hotel accommodation, a follow up report](#), June 2022; Refugee Council: [I Sat Watching Life Go By My Window For So Long: the experiences of people seeking asylum living in hotel accommodation](#), April 2021

Taking power away from communities

In the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, the Government paved the way for a national system of asylum ‘accommodation centres’. The Home Office had previously [tendered out for assistance](#) to build and maintain such sites and successfully opened ex-military facilities at [Coltishall](#) in Norfolk (now closed), [Napier](#) and [Penally](#). It [made attempts](#), despite local opposition, to construct similar facilities in [Barton Stacey](#), Hampshire, in the shadow of [Yarl’s Wood Immigration Removal Centre](#), and in 2022 at Linton-on-Ouse. This site was vociferously opposed by the local community where a [concerted local campaign](#) opposing the development was mounted by residents and the [constituency MP](#); and the District Council [issued pre action correspondence](#). Following the [withdrawal of permission to use this site](#) by the Ministry of Defence in August 2022, the Home Office officially confirmed in September that it would not press ahead. 24 charities and campaigning groups [wrote to the Home Secretary and the Defence Secretary](#) asking them to abandon plans for further ‘accommodation centres’ in the wake of this failed experiment.

Currently, residents have a right to appear and be heard in decisions about local planning decisions which affect them. Current Clause 97 of the [Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill](#), introduces two new routes to apply for planning permission for the development of Crown Land in England: where the development is considered to be of national importance, and where it is necessary that the development be carried out as a matter of urgency, and where development is of national importance but not considered to be urgent. The provisions allow the appropriate authority (such as Government Departments and others with a Crown or Duchy Interest) to apply directly to the Secretary of State for planning permission in these two circumstances instead of the Local Planning Authority. One consequence of this may be that the Government seeks to use this clause to override local concerns about placing harmful large scale asylum detention or ‘accommodation’ facilities in local neighbourhoods.

Recommendation:

- **Clause 97 must be removed from the Levelling up and Regeneration Bill as it will remove the obligation to consult local people before granting planning permission for controversial developments on Crown Land.**

Conclusion

- The Home Office [must radically reform its decision making function](#) to make asylum decisions swiftly and fairly, and get them right first time.
- It is essential that the Government focus its efforts on widening dispersal in the UK, providing resources and tools to communities, rather than on creating punitive, segregated sites which restrict the rights of people seeking sanctuary in the UK through quasi-detention.
- The Government should scrap the unfair and divisive two-tier system of refugee protection introduced in the Nationality and Borders Act and reverse measures which increase the amount of time people are forced to stay in asylum accommodation.

[Asylum Matters](#) is a charity working locally and nationally to address systemic issues in the asylum system and advocate for positive change. Our four regional representatives work in North East England, North West England, the West Midlands and Yorkshire and Humber. For further information on this briefing, contact your [regional representative](#) or info@asylummatters.org