

# WAKE UP

# CALL

How government contracts  
fail people seeking asylum

JULY 2020

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# SUMMARY

**Towards the end of 2019, the asylum accommodation and support system was almost fatally disrupted by the transition from one set of government contracts to another.**

People seeking asylum began to experience unacceptable and entirely avoidable destitution. There were chronic delays in accessing advice, chaotic moves in and between substandard asylum accommodation and inadequate help for people newly granted refugee status to move forward from the asylum process.

The asylum support system is intended to offer basic but crucial help to people who arrive here fleeing war and persecution, yet it was these people who bore the brunt of the chaotic changes, and, in the worst cases, were left without any access to money or accommodation at all.

This report brings together experiences shared by people with lived experience of the asylum system, and many organisations supporting them. It exposes a system characterised by substandard performance, fragility, an inability to withstand change and a tendency to lurch from crisis to crisis.

COVID-19 has provoked unprecedented change in the way that many people in the UK and across the world are thinking about how to better configure the systems around us. Some measures taken by the Home Office in response to the pandemic have been welcome; while other aspects of the Department's response have echoed the worst of the problems outlined in this report. During transition out of these Covid-19 measures it is paramount that these positive developments are not lost, as well as problems addressed, to ensure people seeking asylum are not put at risk. The asylum support system was already in a state of severe fragility before the pandemic, and it remains in a state of severe fragility now. These problems are systemic, and only systemic action can address them.

**"It exposes a system characterised by substandard performance, fragility, an inability to withstand change and a tendency to lurch from crisis to crisis."**

## OUR KEY RECOMMENDATION:

In order to mend the system, the Home Office needs to revisit the problems inherent in the asylum support and accommodation provision, problems which are explored in this report. This can only be achieved through an **open and accountable performance management regime**, designed to assess whether services are genuinely meeting the needs of people seeking asylum. It will require **enhanced support and changed ways of working**, and a rebalancing of the relationship between the Home Office, local authorities, providers, and the voluntary and community sector so that people are successfully supported to live with dignity whilst seeking asylum in the UK.

## The Home Office must, as a matter of urgency:

- ➔ Ensure Covid-19 transition measures prioritise the wellbeing and safety of people seeking asylum and are carried out in collaboration with all relevant stakeholders.
- ➔ Engage collaboratively with people with direct experience of the asylum process, and voluntary and community sector partners to improve the current system.
- ➔ Meet its own policy obligations, particularly ensuring that no one is made destitute or homeless who is entitled to support.
- ➔ Commit to the regular publication of detailed performance management information on both the AASC and AIRE contracts.
- ➔ Share transition plans for the new prepaid cards contract with relevant stakeholders, including people in the asylum system and the voluntary sector.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

Problems in the asylum support system are not new. Despite being set up to offer the most basic support, the system has a long, troubled history in which, due to multiple failures and malfunctions, people have often been left waiting in extreme poverty.

Towards the end of 2019, the system was seriously, almost fatally disrupted by the transition from one set of government asylum support and accommodation contracts to another. At this time, people seeking asylum began to experience unacceptable and entirely avoidable destitution. Many were left at risk of extreme poverty, forced to live in appalling conditions and, in some cases, became street homeless. The already stretched voluntary and community sector found itself scrambling to fill the gaps and absorbing many of the costs associated with dealing with the transition.

The problems experienced came as no surprise to the many groups, agencies and volunteers working to support people seeking asylum in the UK. The government's asylum support system has been characterised by fragility and disruption long before, during and after the contract transition of late 2019. In the years preceding the transition, the Home Office was repeatedly warned of the shortcomings in the existing design and delivery of the asylum support and accommodation contracts by a wide range of voluntary sector organisations and parliamentary and regulatory bodies.<sup>1</sup> Calls were made by these actors to implement structural change to deal with a number



"Many were left at risk of extreme poverty, forced to live in appalling conditions and, in some cases, became street homeless."

of issues, including the failures of the performance management regime to address persistently poor housing standards; the inequity of the dispersal system which placed pressure on some local authorities and communities; and the lack of a strategic and meaningful relationship, based on true partnership working, between government and statutory authorities. The Home Office stated that the new contracts would improve the system and “ensure that vulnerable asylum seekers have access to the support they need”<sup>2</sup> yet, when it came to implementation, it failed to make substantive changes, failed to anticipate the level of demand on substantial parts of the system, failed to ensure a smooth transition between outgoing and incoming providers and failed to effectively communicate the roll-out of services.

With the unprecedented challenges faced in all parts of society after the onset of COVID-19, a lot has changed, but also little has changed. While many of the challenges documented here have eased, many continue, and some have become much more acute. This report does not focus on the COVID-19 crisis but it does highlight how the asylum support system was already in a state of severe fragility before the pandemic, without the solid foundations necessary to enable it to weather unexpected storms. Despite some welcome measures taken by the Home Office to respond to the pandemic, the fragility of the system means that some of the most vulnerable people in the country remain at risk of further suffering as the country readjusts after the pandemic’s first wave.

Unless the asylum support system is meaningfully reconfigured around the needs of people seeking asylum and the communities in which they live, it is to be expected that the system will continue to lurch from crisis to crisis and, ultimately, fail the people it is meant to help. As people seeking asylum continue to struggle to navigate a complex and inadequate system, the groups and organisations which have contributed to this report hope that the experiences it contains will play a part in making this change happen.

The asylum system is expected to go through further transitions as the country responds to the evolving COVID-19 crisis. Urgent steps should be taken to ensure that this does not, once again, mean vulnerable people who are forced to depend on the system are failed by mismanagement. Another crisis is wholly avoidable, but the Home Office must act now.

## ASYLUM SUPPORT AND ACCOMMODATION CONTRACTS

**The government relies on external companies to run asylum support and accommodation services. This is done mostly through two main contracts, which were awarded in January 2019 with a view to starting in September 2019:**

- **Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility (AIRE).** This contract focuses on providing advice and guidance to service users on the asylum process, their rights and the support available to them. Additionally, it provides an ‘Issue Reporting’ phone line, which is a single point of contact, independent from accommodation providers and the Home Office, to report issues related to housing and asylum support. The contract was awarded to the provider Migrant Help, and is worth £235 million over a period of ten years.<sup>3</sup>
- **Asylum Accommodation and Support Services Contact (AASC).** This is a new generation of seven contracts covering asylum accommodation provision. These contracts are worth over £4 billion over a period of ten years. They were awarded to the private contractors Clearsprings Ready Homes (Wales and the South of England), Mears Group (Scotland, Northern Ireland and Yorkshire and Humberside and North East England) and Serco (North West and the Midlands and East of England)



## 2. WHAT WENT WRONG

### 2.1. A Single Point of Contact?

**“Total time spent waiting is 13 hours 40 minutes on hold between three clients!”  
Rainbow Haven, October 2019**



**The principal change to the asylum support system in the latter part of 2019 was the introduction of one single point of contact – Migrant Help – to respond to all needs and enquiries from people seeking asylum. However, in the last months of 2019, it became almost impossible for people seeking asylum to resolve their problems through this system.**

The main way for service users to contact Migrant Help is through a central phoneline that is free to call. From early summer 2019, service users and voluntary organisations began to report chronic problems getting through to advisers. By September 2019 the phoneline was universally acknowledged to be in crisis. Callers were routinely placed on hold for hours at a time and calls were frequently disconnected.

The consequences were drastic. People were unable to access financial support they desperately needed, left in unacceptable living conditions and, in some cases, forced to remain in dangerous situations. Many people seeking asylum and their caseworkers simply lost confidence in the system and stopped calling.

The situation on the phone line improved significantly in the early part of 2020, and further improvements have been reported as the year has progressed. However, the experience in late 2019 showed how vulnerable the asylum support system is to transitions which are not managed sensitively or competently by the Home Office, and the human suffering that results.

**“Our service runs using volunteers, and many of them are twiddling their thumbs, unable to work properly with clients, because they are stuck waiting to get through to the helpline. We have now stopped using it entirely.”  
Asylum Link Merseyside, October 2019**



## THE HUMAN IMPACT

**Farwa**<sup>4</sup> was accommodated in asylum accommodation with her son. She received serious threats from local gangs including threats to kidnap her son and kill her, which she reported to the police. In July 2019, she contacted G4S, but they told her she had to contact Migrant Help. Unable to get through and in desperation, she eventually left the accommodation and moved into insecure accommodation with a friend. This meant that she lost her entitlement to asylum support until she found help from Asylum Support Housing Advice to submit another application in September.<sup>5</sup>

**Kassim** was regularly being robbed by strangers in his accommodation and tried to report the issue to Migrant Help. Both Kassim and the support agency assisting him gave up trying to contact the phonenumber after more than two hours on hold. A complaint was submitted via Migrant Help's website on 1 October, but no response was received for over two weeks.<sup>6</sup>



"Unable to get through and in desperation, she eventually left the accommodation and moved into insecure accommodation with a friend."

## 2.2. Delays in accessing support

Since 2017, many voluntary organisations had reported improvements in the time taken for people seeking asylum to secure support they are entitled to.<sup>7</sup> However, in the wake of the new contracts, these improvements vanished leaving people facing huge delays, often with no support. Again, there were severe consequences for individuals and their families.

### WHAT IS ASYLUM SUPPORT?

People seeking asylum are unable to access mainstream social security benefits, nor do they, except in very limited circumstances, have the right to work.<sup>8</sup> Instead, the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act allows people seeking asylum to apply for financial support (in 2019 this rate was set at £37.75 per week for those on Section 95 and £36.95 for those on Section 4)<sup>9</sup> and accommodation. At the time of the contracts transition, asylum support rates equated to just over 50% of mainstream income support for a single adult.



#### Section 95

Section 95 of the Act allows the provision of support to people seeking asylum or their dependants who appear to the Home Secretary to be destitute or are likely to become destitute within 14 days. A person seeking asylum is defined as someone who has made a claim for asylum which has been recorded by the Secretary of State but which has not yet been determined. Applicants can request financial support alone or financial support with accommodation. Accommodation is provided on a no-choice basis, and usually involves 'dispersal' – generally outside of the south east of the UK – with only a few exceptions.

#### Section 98

Section 98 allows for the provision of 'emergency' financial and accommodation support to people seeking asylum pending their application for Section 95 support. Those accommodated under Section 98 will generally be housed in Initial Accommodation centres across the UK.

#### Section 4

Section 4 allows support to a limited number of people whose asylum claims have been refused, and who are therefore no longer eligible to receive Section 95 support. In addition to being able to demonstrate that they are destitute and need the government to support them, applicants must show that they are taking reasonable steps to leave the country, are unable to leave for reasons outside of their control, have made an application for judicial review of their asylum decision or that accommodation is necessary to avoid a breach of their human rights.

Financial support in 2019 was set at:

**£37.75**

per week for those on Section 95

**£36.95**

for those on Section 4





## CASE STUDY: REFUGEE ACTION

Refugee Action worked on 284 asylum support applications between 1 July 2019 and 31 January 2020:

- Of 259 cases where an initial decision by the Home Office was recorded, the average wait from the time the application was submitted to Migrant Help to an initial decision by UKVI across all types of support, was **20 days**.
- Of 189 applications for Section 4 support (for those who have been refused asylum), the average wait time to obtain the initial decision was **16 days**.
- On average, it took **40 days** for people to receive the financial and/or accommodation support they were granted after making an application.<sup>10</sup>

**20** DAYS  
**16** DAYS  
**40** DAYS

The test used by the Home Office to determine whether someone is eligible for support is for a person to be destitute or likely to become so within a 14 calendar day period.<sup>11</sup> Leaving people to wait for more than a month, on average, to receive money and accommodation they are entitled to left people in dangerous, inhumane situations for prolonged periods of time.



### THE HUMAN IMPACT



**Daud**, a vulnerable young person at risk of suicide, applied for Section 95 support through Migrant Help on 27 July. He called them several times for an update and was told he should wait. On 30 August his support agency discovered that the application had not yet been submitted to the Home Office for them to make a decision. Support was officially granted on 17 September after Daud had been made homeless and been destitute for over two weeks. However, as of 18 November, he had still not been accommodated.<sup>12</sup>

**Meena** gave birth in the summer of 2019. She applied for her new baby to be added to her support application at the beginning of July. Three months later, she had still not received the support she needed to meet her baby's needs.<sup>13</sup>

# 3. ASYLUM ACCOMMODATION

## 3.1. Accommodation standards

**Widespread and extensive reports of sub-standard, unsanitary and, in some cases, unsafe asylum accommodation have been commonplace for many years.<sup>14</sup> It was hoped that the new AASC contract would provide an opportunity to improve such standards. However, the standards in the new contracts closely resembled those in the previous ones, and the housing stock used to accommodate people seeking asylum has mostly remained the same under the new contracts.**

Although the new providers were required to carry out inspections and maintenance on properties in advance of the contract transition, this was not done within transition timeframes in some regions. In some areas, there were reports of outgoing providers failing to hand over live issues and maintenance requests. People seeking asylum were often moved into unsanitary properties where key inventory items were missing, and essential maintenance work was left unresolved. In some cases, this included dangerous structural issues and leaks.

### For example:

- One mother and baby in Newcastle were moved to a flat with no cooker, oven, fridge, microwave, washing machine, table, chairs, sofa, wardrobes or window coverings<sup>15</sup>
- A family in Hartlepool were moved into a property with a leaking roof, which fell in shortly after the family were relocated to emergency hotel accommodation<sup>16</sup>;
- A family with a daughter who used a wheelchair were moved into a fourth-floor flat<sup>17</sup>



*“Since May 2019 the family has been forced to live in a house, totally unsuitable, in fact hostile to their disabilities and miscellaneous health needs. It floods regularly, water comes through the door and windows, mould grows on the wall and there are rats in the kitchen.”*

**South Yorkshire Migration and Asylum Action Group (SYMAAG), December 2019**

*“As a person who has recently become an asylum seeker, I applied for support and the Home Office has provided me with a room in a shared house which is exactly uninhabitable. There are lots of living and dead rats in this house...”*

**Service user, PAFRAS, Leeds, October 2019**



It is very likely that the need to report issues relating to substandard housing was a contributing factor to the initially high demand on the Migrant Help phoneline. As a result of difficulties making contact at this time, people could end up being stranded in particularly dangerous situations for days and weeks at a time.

*“This lady lives in Serco accommodation with her four children, having moved there over two years ago... the window in her bedroom is broken... and has been for well over a year. The bedroom is freezing cold and unusable as a result. She has repeatedly reported the issue, previously to G4S and then to Migrant Help (who she has been calling since October 2019). There has as yet [December 2019] been no attempt to fix this issue.”*

**Baobab Women’s Project, December 2019**

*"One of our valued volunteers has had a serious leak...This was not fixed for over two weeks despite the fact it had been reported repeatedly to the provider and to Migrant Help. They were not able to use the hot water during this time as it made the leak worse. The leak eventually blew the electrics. The gentleman has a condition which means he needs a machine to assist him to breathe in the night and could not sleep because he could not plug in the machine. As a result, his physical and mental health deteriorated significantly - he said he was "exhausted". The problem was only fixed when someone he knew contacted the provider publicly on Twitter. The residents had been without power for five days, following over two weeks of leaks and being unable to use the hot water. The repair did not last long - while the situation is not as bad, there is still a leak."*

**L8 A Better Place, Kuumba Imani, Liverpool, February 2020**

*"Participant has been raising the same issues repeatedly for five months, in a property she had inhabited with her young children for over a year...a considerable amount of water was coming through the ceiling, often through an electric light, and causing repeated flooding. Secondary issues include the resulting damp, and problems with cockroaches and spiders. Despite many months of raising the issue, by phone and escalating by multiple emails, even with attached pictures and video of the water falling through the light, the problem has not been effectively addressed - the initial fix having failed, the participant was told by a housing officer that since there was no date/time stamp on the video, it could have been taken before the fix, and there was no way to prove otherwise."*

**Baobab Women's Project, December 2019**

## CASE STUDY: FREEDOM FROM TORTURE

Freedom From Torture (FFT) works with torture survivors who, as a group, are more likely to experience mental and physical health problems and therefore have particular accommodation needs. Although the allocation of appropriate accommodation for their clients is sometimes difficult to secure, the organisation reported that the situation worsened considerably across their five UK centres following the contract transition. FFT client stories show how failure to uphold asylum accommodation standards is not a question of inconvenience but can be a matter of life or death.

Home Office policy<sup>18</sup> dictates that FFT clients must be allocated accommodation within one hour travel distance from the FFT centre where they are receiving treatment. However, this policy was not followed consistently. For example, a highly vulnerable client with a history of self-harm and suicide was dispersed from one city to another, away from the essential services and support networks he relied on. This was despite FFT alerting Migrant Help to his situation on multiple occasions three weeks ahead of his dispersal date. Following his relocation, he took an overdose and was hospitalised. After discharging himself, he slept rough before presenting himself to the FFT office the following morning.

Home Office policy also states that FFT clients are entitled to single rooms. Yet again, this policy has often been ignored during the roll-out of the

new contracts. In one case, a torture survivor who had made an extremely recent suicide attempt and been hospitalised on a psychiatric ward was, firstly, allocated accommodation in a town one hundred miles from the London FFT centre where he was receiving treatment. Whilst FFT caseworkers succeeded in halting his relocation, he was subsequently moved to a shared room in London that worsened his distress. It took judicial review proceedings to resolve the situation, a step that should never have been necessary to simply ensure the Home Office's own policy was honoured.



## 3.2. North East: failed communication and multiple moves

**In the North East, the incumbent subcontractor (Jomast) and the incoming provider (Mears) failed to reach agreement over the property portfolio in which the majority of people seeking asylum were housed, causing wide-scale relocations, disruption and uncertainty.**

In June 2019 it was announced that negotiations between the providers had broken down and that alternative properties would need to be found – meaning that the transition in the North East would involve the procurement of hundreds of properties and the relocation of thousands of people.<sup>19</sup> Throughout the summer, and again nearing Christmas, the voluntary sector desperately sought clarity on contingency plans but no information was forthcoming. Only limited information was received just days before the moves of people in asylum accommodation were due to take place.

Throughout this process the communication provided to service users on the fundamental question of where they were to live was deficient.<sup>20</sup> There were cases of the letters notifying people of moves being sent in the wrong order and of people learning about their relocation via calling cards. Furthermore, despite being contractually required to give people seven days' notice of a move, some people were given far shorter notice periods, while many others were given moving dates, and packed all their belongings; only for no-one to come. In these cases, it took weeks and sometimes months before people were given further information about their relocation.

These crisis points were avoidable. The Home Office failed to effectively manage and oversee the process and to provide reassurance and clarity to those in the asylum system, the agencies supporting them and the local communities in which they live.



### THE HUMAN IMPACT

On 18<sup>th</sup> December 2019, Mears visited the address of **Abel**, a Freedom from Torture client, while he was out. The officer spoke to the other two tenants, giving letters advising they would be moved before Christmas. In mid-January, after Abel had been out of the house, he came home to find his housemates gone, the electricity turned off and no heating. He had to contact Mears himself to get power restored, which took several hours. In late January, Abel was moved to contingency accommodation.

**“This process had a significant effect on his mental state.”**

Ten days later he received a call from Mears who informed him he would be moved the next day and to wait. Abel packed everything and waited, and at 3pm that day called Mears to ask for an update. He was told to wait until 5pm but received a call telling him he would not be moved, but that he would be ‘top of the list’ for the following week. Abel is highly anxious with very low distress tolerance levels. This process had a significant effect on his mental state.<sup>21</sup>



## 3.3. Contingency Accommodation

**Accommodation providers are permitted to use contingency (i.e. temporary or “hotel-type”) accommodation to house people seeking asylum in certain circumstances. In September 2019, during transition, the AASC providers began to utilise this kind of accommodation.**

Problems which had arisen in previous years with the use of such contingency accommodation included: overcrowding of rooms, little access to healthcare, no access to financial support, lack of access to toiletries or laundry facilities, isolated locations, safeguarding concerns and lack of social activities leading to a deterioration in the mental health of residents. In some places, the use of this accommodation led to a marked deterioration in the relations between the Home Office and Local Authorities, and in some of the worst cases, community tensions arose.

By the end of 2019 use of contingency accommodation, and the multiple problems associated with it, started to rise. Once again, the Home Office demonstrated a reluctance to plan, consult and learn from recent experience. This resulted in a lack of dignity for people in such accommodation, risks to mental and physical health, and people living in unsuitable accommodation for weeks, and even months, on end. Similar concerns have been raised about the suitability and standard of contingency accommodation brought online during COVID-19. Lessons that could have been learnt by the Home Office and accommodation providers following transition have not materialised and opportunities to improve the experiences of people seeking asylum have been missed.

### CASE STUDY: YORKSHIRE AND HUMBER

Many of the locations of contingency accommodation brought online in Yorkshire and Humber since September 2019 were extremely isolated. People housed there, receiving no cash support, were often unable to access vital services, community activities or places of worship. There were many instances of people being moved around multiple sites, with very little notice, sometimes only of minutes. There were concerns about the quality of food provision and also about access to healthcare: in one case, a man who had not been offered a health appointment was rationing his medication, unaware he was entitled to access a prescription, causing him severe hallucinations until a support worker, with the help of a volunteer interpreter, brought the issue to the providers attention.<sup>22</sup> At the beginning, there was limited communication provided about the use of contingency accommodation to key stakeholders such as Local Authorities and the voluntary and community sector. In some instances, community and faith groups only became aware of the use of hotels after being approached by hotel residents who, unsure where else to turn, had made approaches seeking help.



**“Many of the locations of contingency accommodation... were extremely isolated.”**



## THE HUMAN IMPACT

### VOICES FROM CONTINGENCY ACCOMMODATION<sup>23</sup>

*"Sometimes we were needing something urgently. Women's care products or toothbrushes, toothpastes, painkillers, medicine for children etc. We were requesting them from the officer who was visiting sometimes but they were not very helpful about that... And in emergency situations for example period times, or having a painful headache, it was very hard to get the products. The nearest market was 35 mins away and it was very scary and dark to walk at nights."*

*"Sometimes the food was not halal and there were no other vegetarian options.... We requested it a lot of times but we never had a result. But we had no other chance because if we would refuse to eat it that means we had to sleep hungry at night."*

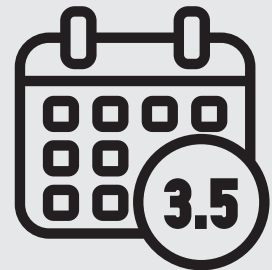
*"They are like fairies, we are told that they [support staff] exist, but we never see them".*

*"It was especially very hard for the children. They were always asking for chocolates and sweets but we could never buy them. And also, it was not a short period. It was three and a half months."*

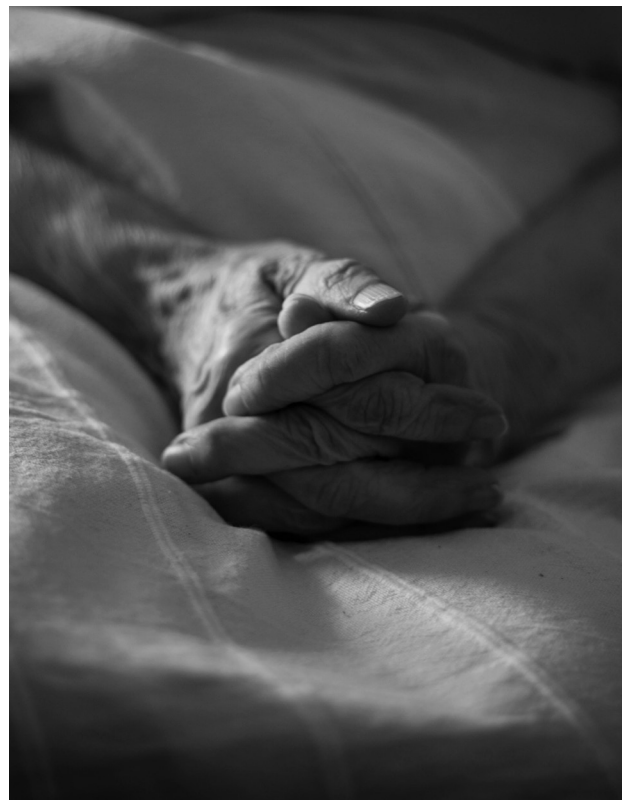
*"Every time I move, I become tired, it is difficult to build up the relationships again, to find new volunteering opportunities".*

*"Unfortunately, we don't have an activity, we can't use the washing machine for our clothes. Most of us don't have the resources to buy necessary things, even for the children. We are far from the city, from the Red Cross ... We are also far from Mosques, Churches and synagogues. We cannot use mobile communication because we do not have money. That's why it is difficult for us to contact our lawyers, only (sic) the internet. Many people live here for three months"*

**"It was not a short period. It was three and a half months."**



Problems like this were reported in many regions in the UK but were not present across the board. In some cases, problems were avoided where provider approaches differed, or a contingency infrastructure was already established. There were also positive reports of the treatment of people in some accommodation, with supportive staff in some facilities and an openness to working in partnership with local organisations on the part of the accommodation providers. Nonetheless, the experience of transition largely represented a missed opportunity for the Home Office to honour the commitment made at the start of the contracts to improve provision for people seeking asylum, ensure a more genuine partnership with local authorities and ensure constructive engagement with the voluntary and community sector. Again, it was people in the asylum system who suffered the consequences.





## 3.4. Delays in accessing accommodation

### “Failure” to travel

People granted section 4 support are often street homeless or relying on friends or charities to avoid homelessness. Once granted support, the Home Office should instruct a housing provider to collect them from a designated pick-up point and take them to their dispersed accommodation. During the transition period, they reported confusion and chaos around pick-ups and dispersal plans.

Numerous reports emerged of people not being given advance notice of their dispersal or told when or where they were going to be picked up. In these instances, having missed their transport, the service user would be unfairly and inaccurately marked as ‘Failure to Travel’. This would then result in delays to the provision of the support they were relying on to avoid destitution.

Refugee Action analysed a total of 264 cases from 1 September 2019 to 1 February 2020 and found that 17% of clients had a ‘failure to travel’ recorded on their record that was not the fault of the client.



### THE HUMAN IMPACT

**Farid** was made to wait outside his pick-up address all day on two separate occasions in October and November 2019. Whilst waiting outside the address, he suffered a series of taunts from local residents telling him he “shouldn’t be hanging around in the street”.

**“No-one came,  
no-one called him.”**

No-one came, no-one called him, and he was marked as ‘Failure to Travel’ by Serco. This meant his accommodation had to be rebooked and he was not accommodated for over three weeks leaving him needlessly at serious risk of destitution.<sup>24</sup>

## 4. PREPAID CARDS

**All people granted financial asylum support are issued with a prepaid card, currently called an ASPEN card.**

Although someone may be officially granted asylum support, they will not actually get any money until they receive a loaded ASPEN card and asylum reference number to activate it. In circumstances where a person is dispersed to accommodation without an ASPEN card they should be provided with emergency cash payments or vouchers to ensure they are not destitute whilst awaiting their card. However, during transition many people were left without any means of support at all.

### THE ASPEN CARD

Sodexo has been the Home Office supplier of asylum support payment services since 2000. In 2016 they launched the ASPEN card; a 'smart' prepaid Visa debit card provided to all people on asylum support that allows the Home Office to enable and disable functions in line with their policies. For example, those accessing Section 4 support are unable to withdraw cash or receive cash-back in shops and all users are prohibited from purchasing alcohol or gambling. Additionally, the Home Office is able to monitor all users spending on a card by card basis. Such monitoring can be the basis to suspend card payments without explanation, leaving people at imminent risk of destitution.

Since September 2019 and throughout the transition period, organisations across the country reported a significant increase in cases of ASPEN cards being delayed for weeks or even months, cards arriving without money pre-loaded and, in the worst cases, people being dispersed and left in new and entirely unfamiliar locations without cards. Almost two thirds of all enquiries to Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Refugee Forum between July 2019 and January 2020 related to ASPEN cards, with 43% specifically relating to people being dispersed without a card.<sup>25</sup> Bhatia Best, a solicitor's firm challenging the Home Office on its failures to provide support in a timely manner, identified details of over 30 cases of clients not receiving their ASPEN cards or requiring a replacement between November 2019 and January 2020, although they suspected "this only scratches the surface".

*"We are supporting more than 10 new arrival asylum seekers who have been dispersed without ASPEN cards within the last two weeks. No one has replied to us despite the urgency of this matter. We can only issue an amount of £10 per person, per week. Some of the families have children starting at school and cannot even afford basic necessities. Everyone is in a very desperate and vulnerable situation."*

**St Augustine's, Halifax, September 2019**

Analysis of 36 clients supported by the Refugee Action Asylum Crisis teams between September 2019–March 2020 found that people were experiencing an average delay of 15 days to receive a functioning ASPEN card once they were in their asylum accommodation. This was in addition to the average wait of 40 days that service-users experienced from the point of their application for asylum support to the point of their dispersal. Shockingly, this revealed an average end to end wait of 55 days for people dispersed without ASPEN cards to be in physical receipt of any kind of monetary support.

Many service-users are given emergency cash payments or vouchers to help them survive this wait, however Refugee Action's analysis revealed little consistency in the value or form of this support or when this support was issued. Alarming at least 30% of Refugee Action clients experiencing delays in receiving their ASPEN cards were not given this lifeline.

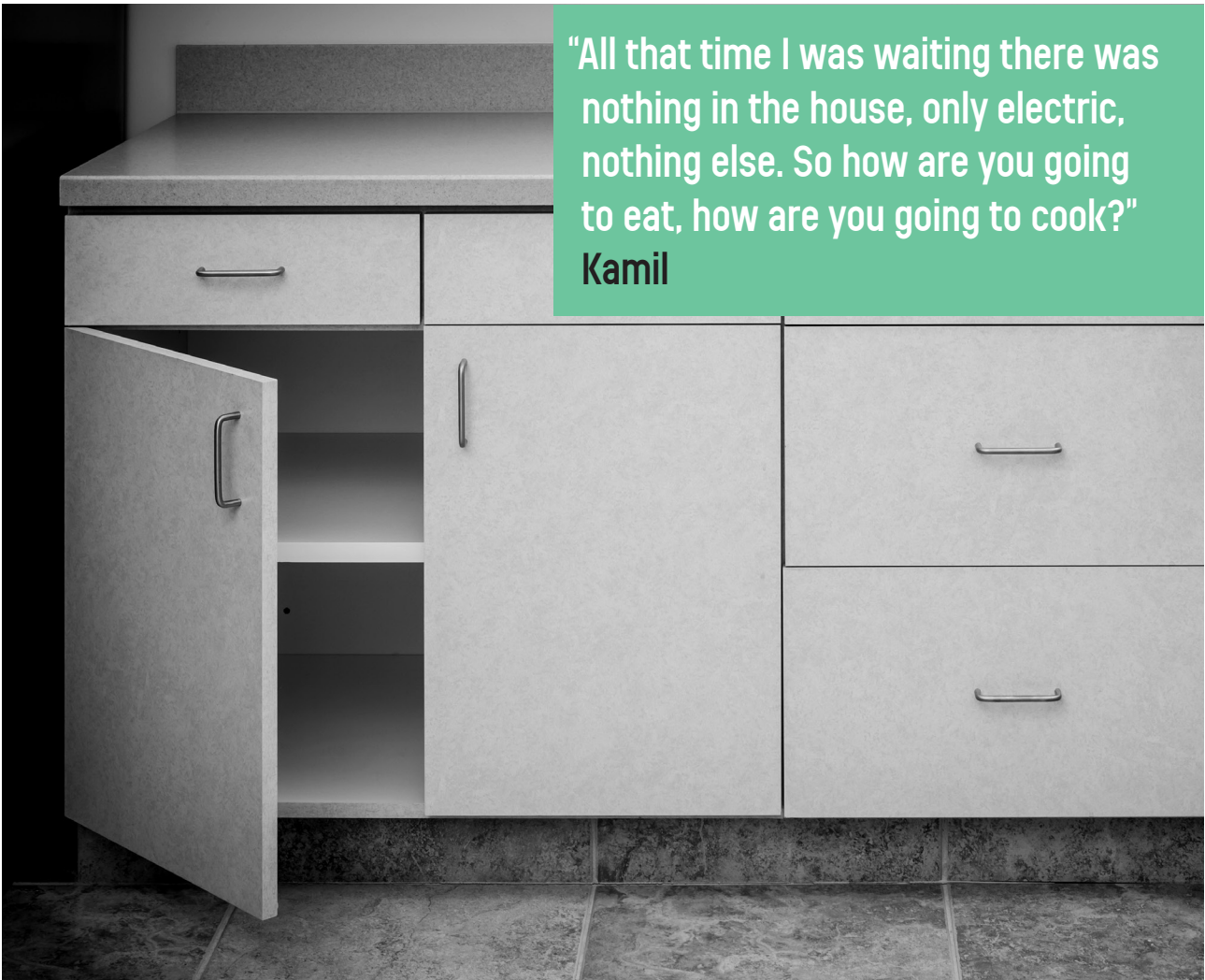
An average delay of

**15 DAYS**

to receive a functioning  
ASPEN card







“All that time I was waiting there was nothing in the house, only electric, nothing else. So how are you going to eat, how are you going to cook?”

**Kamil**



## THE HUMAN IMPACT

**Hasan**, a vulnerable person seeking asylum, was dispersed in January 2020 but his ASPEN card had no money loaded onto it. His Housing Officer provided him with an emergency payment in the form of vouchers but these expired three days later. Beyond this date, he had no access to food and simply did not eat.<sup>26</sup>

**Kamil**, who was dispersed away from his support networks without an ASPEN card or any form of emergency payments for three weeks with his only form of support being Refugee Action’s destitution payments, said: “I just had to wait. All that time I was waiting there was nothing in the house, only electric, nothing else. So how are you going to eat, how are you going to cook?”<sup>27</sup>

A change of provider for the pre-paid cards used by people seeking asylum was due in May 2020, but this has now been delayed until early 2021. It is essential that the Home Office uses this time to communicate and work effectively in partnership with Local Authorities and the voluntary sector, to ensure that problems like those experienced by Hasan and Kamil do not happen again.

The Home Office at present runs an asylum system which is too fragile to cope with any kind of transition without pulling people into crisis. **This must change.**

# 5. MOVE ON

**Once people are granted refugee status they are given a 28-day 'move-on' period before their asylum accommodation and support stops.**

In that very short time, they must find alternative accommodation and secure employment or access mainstream welfare benefits. To support refugees during this time, one new feature of the AIRE contract is a move-on service that is intended to provide advice, guidance and support to newly granted refugees. Migrant Help subcontracted these services across all four nations. The voluntary sector has repeatedly argued that the move-on period is brutally short and that, all too often, newly-granted refugees are forced into destitution and extreme poverty.<sup>28</sup> With this in mind, the importance of an effective move-on service through the AIRE contract cannot be overstated. Unfortunately, evidence suggests that the move-on service provided may prove to be inadequate to ensure people avoid destitution in this crucial period.

Reed in Partnership (Reed) was contracted to deliver the service in England. It offers a predominantly telephone-based service where new refugees are meant to receive three standard appointment calls during the 28 day move on period, during which advisers provide information and signpost to other agencies. People who are considered to be particularly vulnerable are eligible for outreach support. In some other areas, in contrast, face to face meetings with refugees have been offered. Furthermore, most voluntary agencies providing move-on services outside of the contracts will do so until a client has accessed support and housing. This often extends well beyond the 28-day period.

There were concerns during the contracts transition that Reed's service may not have been reaching sufficient numbers of newly granted refugees. A survey<sup>29</sup> of 37 'move-on' clients across three organisations in Greater Manchester in December 2019 found that only three of those surveyed had been contacted by Reed. Similar situations were reported in other regions. It is unclear why the level of contact was reportedly so low but is likely to do with the quality of data, particularly the telephone numbers of new refugees, and the lack of awareness among clients of the service who were sometimes not sure whether Reed had contacted them or not.

*"Service User is very confused about what to do next and speaks very little English. It is unclear whether he has received any contact from Migrant Help or Reed in Partnership but it is likely he would not have understood. Client now has very short amount of time to complete move on process!"*

**Open Door North East, January 2020**



The picture that emerged was of a service designed and delivered in a way that is unlikely to comprehensively meet the needs of its clients. Whilst move-on within the asylum system has largely ceased during the COVID-19 crisis, it is important that the concerns raised above are addressed ahead of transition back to the move-on process.



## 6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

People seeking asylum are made particularly vulnerable by their situation. Having fled conflict and persecution, they arrive in the UK in search of safety.

**Many do not speak the language, have physical and mental health problems and do not have the family and friendship networks most people take for granted. Without the right to work nor access to public funds, they have no choice but to rely on an inadequate asylum support system. When this support system fails, or faces significant problems, the impact on people seeking asylum is immense.**

Ultimately, the asylum contracts transition of 2019 was chaotic but instructive. Whilst the evidence in this report speaks specifically to the heightened crisis in the transition period, many of the issues raised were persistent prior to transition and continue to this day. Problems such as lack of planning, unclear communication, an absence of meaningful partnership working from the Home Office with frontline services and those in asylum accommodation, alongside a lack of transparency from the Home Office and contracted providers, are systemic.

Most recently, similar issues have been identified in relation to some aspects of the department's response to the COVID-19 crisis. COVID-19 has further exposed the fragility of the asylum support system and its inability to adequately respond to, and address, the needs of people seeking asylum at a time of significant crisis. As lockdown measures are lifted across the UK, we are once again faced with a 'transition' within the asylum support system that could, yet again, lead to vulnerable people being left in desperate circumstances.

Amid widespread calls to 'build back better' following the COVID-19 crisis, we urge the Home Office and its contracted providers to use this opportunity to address long-standing issues with the asylum support system. We cannot return to "business as usual", when "business as usual" was too often typified by failings. Lessons must be learnt from what happened at the end of 2019 - to ensure the very people the system is meant to protect are not, yet again, left paying the price.

**Our key recommendation** is that the Home Office must fundamentally address the problems inherent in the asylum support and accommodation provision.

It should review the structural problems inherent to the design and delivery of the asylum support and accommodation contracts. This includes considering the costs and impact of local dispersal with a view to directly funding areas that take in new arrivals in order to support them and their communities. It requires a rebalancing of the relationship between the Home Office, local authorities and providers, so that dispersal becomes a joint endeavour that respects local conditions. Finally, it will require an open and accountable performance management regime, designed to assess whether services are genuinely meeting the needs of people in the asylum system.



## The Home Office must, as a matter of urgency:

- Ensure Covid-19 transition measures prioritise the wellbeing and safety of people seeking asylum and are carried out in collaboration with all relevant stakeholders.
- Engage collaboratively with people with direct experience of the asylum process, and voluntary and community sector partners to improve the current system.
- Meet its own policy obligations, particularly ensuring that no one is made destitute or homeless who is entitled to support.
- Commit to the regular publication of detailed performance management information on both the AASC and AIRE contracts.
- Share transition plans for the new prepaid cards contract with relevant stakeholders, including people in the asylum system and the voluntary sector.



# Acknowledgements and methodology

The report is based on: qualitative and quantitative evidence submitted to Asylum Matters from its partners following a request for information on the impact of the contract transition over the period July 2019 – January 2020; and quantitative and qualitative data from Refugee Action’s Asylum Crisis services in Manchester, Bradford, Birmingham and London that help people seeking asylum access support.

A full list of organisations who have contributed to this report is on the final page.

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# Endnotes

- 1 National Audit Office, [COMPASS contracts for the provision of accommodation for asylum seekers](#) HC880, January 2014; Home Affairs Committee, sixth report of session 2015-16 [The work of the Immigration Directorates](#) Q3 2015 HC772; Home Affairs Committee, [Asylum Accommodation, Twelfth Report of Session 2016-17](#) HC637, January 2017; Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration: [An Inspection of the Home Office's Management of Asylum Accommodation Provision February - June 2018](#); Home Affairs Committee, [Replacing COMPASS](#), 17 December 2018
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- 3 <https://www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk/Notice/028be8bb-3c69-494d-bfdd-59c2e1b34379?p=@FQxUJRRPT0=NjJNT08=U> accessed 28.2.20
- 4 All names in this report are pseudonyms to protect identities. Images of service users whose experiences are referenced in this report have not been used.
- 5 Case study, Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit, September 2019
- 6 Case study, Huddersfield Mission, Kirklees, October 2019
- 7 See Refugee Action (2017) *Slipping through the cracks – how Britain's asylum support system fails the most vulnerable* (London), available at: <https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Slipping-through-the-cracks-final4-A4.pdf>
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- 9 From 15 June 2020, asylum support rates were increased by just over 26 pence a day to £39.60 per week
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- 15 West End Refugee Service, October 2019
- 16 Migration and Asylum Justice Forum, October 2019
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- 18 [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/597382/Allocation-Of-Accommodation-v5\\_0.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/597382/Allocation-Of-Accommodation-v5_0.pdf)
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- 21 Freedom from Torture, December 2019
- 22 Anonymous support worker, January 2020
- 23 These are the voices of service users in contingency accommodation in Yorkshire and Humber between September 2019 and February 2020. Their experience is not unique, there were similar experiences in other regions.
- 24 Refugee Action, December 2019
- 25 Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Refugee Forum received 76 enquiries between July 2019 and January 2020. 47 of these enquiries related to ASPEN cards, 33 of which related to being dispersed without a card.
- 26 Asylum Matters, January 2020
- 27 Refugee Action, December 2019
- 28 British Red Cross (2020) *The cost of destitution: a cost-benefit analysis of extending the move-on period for refugees*, available at: <https://www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/research-publications#Refugee%20support>
- 29 Survey devised by Manchester Refugee Support Network



Asylum Link Merseyside  
- Offering practical support and friendship to refugees and asylum seekers -

asylum matters



BHATIA BEST SOLICITORS

boaztrust  
serving destitute asylum seekers



Brushstrokes Community Project  
Strengthening and supporting refugees and migrants across Sandwell, West Birmingham and beyond



Coventry Refugee and Migrant Centre  
Rebuilding Lives, Enabling Integration

DASH



FREEDOM FROM TORTURE  
EMPOWERING SURVIVORS, REBUILDING LIVES

Greater Manchester IMMIGRATION AID UNIT

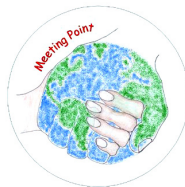
Helen Bamber Foundation  
working with survivors of human cruelty

hope projects

Huddersfield Mission  
Serving People, Changing Lives



LASSN  
Leeds Asylum Seekers' Support Network



MIGRATION AND ASYLUM JUSTICE FORUM  
JUSTICE FOR IMMIGRANTS! FREEDOM FOR REFUGEES!



opendoor NORTH EAST

PAFRAS  
Positive Action for Refugees & Asylum Seekers



REFUGEE ACTION



City of Sanctuary Sheffield



SYMAAG  
South Yorkshire Migration and Asylum Action Group



citizens advice Staffordshire North & Stoke-on-Trent



Tees Valley of Sanctuary

WERS West End Refugee Service  
strength through support