

Written submission to the call for evidence on migrant homelessness by the APPG on Ending Homelessness.

Executive Summary

This submission is based on the results of Refugee Rights Europe's (RRE) independent research on the situation of asylum-seekers in state-provided accommodation in London. While the research was focused on the conditions in the accommodation centre, it also included questions on previous experiences with homelessness and other questions of relevance for this enquiry. Based on our findings, we are concerned that the accommodation provided may impact on the overall well-being of displaced people and their ability to settle into life in the UK, where factors such as lack of information and support, poor and unsafe living conditions, and long periods spent in accommodation centres, are likely to increase a person's chance of becoming homeless. In this submission, we would like to highlight the importance of decent standards in state-provided accommodation for the prevention of homelessness.

We will cover the following topics:

1. About RRE
2. Background information
3. Previous homelessness, legal status and length of time spent in asylum accommodation
4. Safety and experience of violence and mistreatment
5. Housing conditions
6. Access to information
7. Conclusion
8. Recommendations

1. About Refugee Rights Europe (RRE)

- a. Refugee Rights Europe is a human rights organisation and registered UK charity founded in late 2015 in response to the humanitarian crisis experienced by refugees and displaced people in Europe. The organisation is run by professionals from a range of different sectors, and its advisory group and board of trustees include academics and researchers, human rights specialists, media and communications experts, asylum workers, NGO managers, refugees, policy analysts and students.
- b. The organisation is independent of any political ideology, economic interest or religion. We believe in the indivisibility of human rights and are united by our aim to defend the rights of some of the world's most vulnerable individuals.

2. Background information

- a. The submission is based on our findings from research carried out in one of the main asylum seeker accommodation centres in London between 13-15 January 2018. The study is based on a survey of 33 individuals in their native language.
- b. 97% of the respondents were male. One woman participated in the study. 6.06% of respondents reported being under 18 years old.

3. Previous homelessness, length of time spent in asylum accommodation and legal status

- a. 33.3% of respondents had experiences with been sleeping rough since arriving in the UK. The amount of time spent in destitution ranged from two nights to nine months.
- b. 45.45% of respondents reported that they had been in the accommodation centre for a year or longer. 6.06% of respondents have been in the accommodation for over 2 years.

- c. 72.7% of respondents were waiting for the asylum decision; 12.1% were rejected and waiting for an appeal decision; 9.1% had been granted leave-to-remain; 3.0% had been rejected and were waiting for deportation.

4. Safety and experience of violence and mistreatment

- a. 63.63% of respondents said that they are feeling 'unsafe' or 'very unsafe' inside the accommodation. One respondent told researchers: *"I have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress because of what happened to me in detention in [my country of origin]. I don't sleep well here. It's very, very bad here for me – not just very bad."*
- b. A key concern that came up in multiple interviews was the fact that non-residents would come into the buildings at night. On one occasion, someone who appeared to be a drug-user entered and attempted to commit suicide in one of the kitchens. *"He didn't even live here. Blood was on the wall, the floor, everywhere; I was scared,"* said one of the youths we interviewed. On other occasions, non-residents would enter the building and threaten residents, or simply use the kitchens and hallways to sleep. For individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder, such events could be particularly difficult to cope with.
- c. 97% had a functioning lock in their room. However, one respondent explained that this doesn't make him feel any safer because one of his roommates was violent towards him. He had reported this to the management on a number of occasions, but they simply told him to call the police who would remove the roommate for a few nights before returning him to the accommodation again.
- d. 30% said they had experienced verbal abuse in their accommodation, both by fellow residents and by the management or staff (such as cleaning staff). A number of respondents were under the impression that the cleaning staff may hold racist views. Sometimes this was expressed through abusive or hostile language in English, and other times the respondents were shouted at in a foreign European language which they couldn't understand.
- e. A slightly lower proportion, 21% said they had experienced physical violence inside the accommodation. 3% said they preferred not to say whether they had experienced physical violence. This type of violence had been perpetrated by other residents, and non-residents who would enter the building – usually at night – and threaten them. No physical violence by managers or staff was reported.

5. Housing conditions

- a. 73% of respondents said their accommodation was 'dirty' or 'very dirty' when they moved in. Photos shared with the researchers appear to corroborate this view, depicting unsanitary levels of mould and grime across ceilings, dirt around windows, and unsanitary bathrooms and kitchens.
- b. There appears to be a widespread problem with vermin in the accommodation. 82% of respondents said there were mice in their rooms. 61% said they had seen one or more rats in the accommodation, but in most instances, it appears that the rats were in the backyard rather than inside the building. Many respondents told the researchers about cockroaches in the kitchen.
- c. 56.3% of respondents reported that something was broken when they moved in. At the time of the study, two washing machines were allegedly broken and out of use in the accommodation. This had left the approximately 200 residents with only two working washing machines, which was reported to be a source of tension. One respondent reported that they had recently been left for some three days without hot water in the building, which made it difficult to take a shower during the winter months.

6. Access to information

- a. Respondents did not appear aware of their rights and opportunities to change their situation. The majority of respondents (82%) specifically recalled signing a document, some form of contract, upon moving into the accommodation. Worryingly, only 44% of them said they understood the contents of the documents they had signed.

7. Main areas of concern and recommendations

Based on the research findings, a number of overarching recommendations are proposed in order to prevent homelessness for asylum seekers:

- a. **Lack of access to information and support services:** All documents, at all stages in the housing process, should be available in an accessible language for each asylum seeker. This has to be guaranteed especially for those documents that require a signature and informed consent has to be assured at all times. In particular, effective and accessible information and support on future housing should be provided for those asylum seekers who have been granted leave-to-remain and are within the 28 days moving period. Through all stages of seeking asylum, asylum seekers should have access to quality information and services to support them in questions about housing, health and other essential areas. This would require making more funds available for translation, information services and social workers.
- b. **Length of time spent in asylum accommodation and housing conditions** So-called 'initial accommodation' mustn't be used to host asylum seekers for an extended period of time. The Home Office must ensure that individuals are not exposed to sub-par living conditions for more than a short 'emergency' period. The issues highlighted in this report must be addressed to ensure that any future accommodation provision for asylum seekers is dignified and humane; this will help to prevent any negative impact on a person's ability to navigate the complex and often stressful reality of looking for housing.
- c. **Lack of safety and experiences of violence and mistreatment:** Asylum accommodation must be a safe haven for individuals awaiting the outcome of their asylum claim. The accommodation provider must, therefore, ensure that the wellbeing of its clients is safeguarded, with consideration for the specific needs of those with mental health issues. The accommodation must not be open to non-residents coming in to spend the night in the communal areas or use the premises for any dubious purposes. Residents must not be forced to share a room with someone engaged in criminal or anti-social behaviour; such residents must be removed and dealt with separately. Experiences with violence, especially for those carrying previous trauma, can make the process of settling into life in the UK, including finding housing and work, considerably more difficult.