

**Written submission to the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI)  
ahead of the inspection of the provision of accommodation to asylum seekers**

**Executive Summary**

This submission outlines the results of Refugee Rights Europe's (RRE) independent research on the situation of asylum-seekers in state-provided accommodation in London. The submission provides evidence on the conditions in such centres. We will cover the following topics:

1. About RRE
2. Objectives
3. Background information
4. Length of time spent in asylum accommodation
5. Safety and experience of violence and mistreatment
6. Housing conditions
7. Access to information
8. Conclusion
9. 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. Objectives**

- a. The objective of the current research is to provide information relating to the lived experiences of asylum seekers in state-provided asylum accommodation in the UK. The data documents the situation one year on from the Home Affairs Select Committee's report on the COMPASS contracts and asylum accommodation.

**3. 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.

#### 4. Length of time spent in asylum accommodation

- a. 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.
- b. 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

#### 5. 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 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). 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.
- f. Concerns were raised regarding fire safety, with 46% of respondents not knowing where the fire exit was located. Our researchers were told that there are fire extinguishers in each kitchen, but some respondents were not aware of the positioning of these.

#### 6. 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. Respondents said there were mould and humidity issues in bathrooms and bedrooms. Photos shared with the research team appear to corroborate this information. One respondent explained that he is experiencing allergies and itchiness in his eyes and nose, which he believes is due to mould in his room. He reported his concerns about the mould to the management but they told him that this is a normal condition in the UK.
- d. 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. According to the respondents, one had been broken for about six months and the other one for two months. This had left the approximately 200 residents with only two working washing machines, which was reported to be a source of tension. Several of the hotplates on the stoves were not working, and respondents said this had been the case for an extended period of time. 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. A number of taps were broken in the toilets and bathrooms.

## 7. Access to information and complaint procedures

- a. 49% of respondents said they would not feel comfortable speaking to anyone about problems experienced in their accommodation. For some, this hesitance was rooted in a fear of losing their accommodation, whilst others did not feel comfortable communicating in English. For most respondents, however, the main reluctance appears to have been caused by the fact that their previous attempts to report grievances had not had any positive outcome.
- b. There appeared to be some confusion about the roles and responsibilities of different staff members operating in the building. Some respondents seem to have requested help from cleaning staff, who simply weren't in a position to address the more overarching issues. Others had sought help from security staff, whilst a number had attempted to speak to the manager directly. The latter explained: *"The manager does not speak nicely to us. There are many problems in our accommodation but she doesn't listen. [The manager] speaks to us like children and sometimes shouts at us."* Another respondent said: *"The [manager] didn't understand the people here. The manager doesn't listen if you try to go and talk to them. They would give a [telephone] number for someone else and says it's not their job. Sometimes the security people help us."*
- c. 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.

## 8. Main areas of concern and recommendations

One year on from the Home Affairs Select Committee's report on the COMPASS contracts and asylum accommodation, our research findings generated through RRE's pilot study indicate that a number of serious concerns remain unresolved. Based on the research findings, a number of overarching recommendations are proposed in view of future asylum accommodation contracts issued by the Home Office:

- a. **Length of time spent in asylum accommodation:** 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. In sum, ahead of any new contracts being signed between the Home Office and private

companies taking responsibility for asylum accommodation in London and the rest of the UK, the issues highlighted in this report must be addressed to ensure any future accommodation provision for asylum seekers is dignified and humane.

- b. 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. 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.
- c. Housing conditions:** The buildings hosting asylum seekers must be inspected regularly for safety and security. Broken equipment, disintegrating ceilings and walls must be swiftly repaired once reported, and residents must not be turned away or reprimanded when attempting to report major issues within the building. It is imperative that accommodation providers conduct regular checks to ensure that living standards are adequate and do not pose any risk to residents' health. Vermin, mould and other common problems ought to be addressed effectively as soon as they're reported to the management. Cleanliness of bathrooms and kitchens must be kept at reasonable standards through professional and appropriate cleaning.
- d. Lack of access to information and complaint procedures:** A functioning grievance procedure must be made accessible to residents. Individuals must be afforded an opportunity to raise concerns about their health and safety, without being reprimanded or being referred to one actor after another without any response at the end of the referral line. Serious concerns about criminal activity and serious threats must be listened to and addressed accordingly to ensure that the person reporting such incidents is not exposed to additional threats following their reporting. Furthermore, all documents should be available in an accessible language for each asylum seeker. This has to be guaranteed especially for those documents that require a signature. Informed consent has to be assured at all times.