

Temporary asylum accommodation

Key policies and practices

This review provides the policy context for the research project: [*Investigating the use of temporary accommodation to house asylum seekers and refugees during the Covid-19 outbreak*](#). The project explores the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on asylum seekers living in Glasgow, by focusing on those individuals placed in temporary accommodations. It aims to capture the everyday experiences of asylum seekers living in these accommodations by adopting a digital ethnographic method, which is co-produced with Migrants Organising for Rights and Empowerment (MORE), a grassroots organisation based in Glasgow advocating for human rights and dignity for asylum seekers and refugees.

The review outlines some of the key policies and practices in the field of asylum accommodation and explores how the implementation of these policies has changed in recent years and in the context of Covid-19. Focal points of this review include the different forms of accommodation used for housing asylum seekers in the UK; the legal basis for housing provision; the key providers' stakeholders and organisations in the field; outsourcing and contract changes' issues around accommodation standards; and performance management. The review concludes by considering the particular issues that Covid-19 has caused within accommodation provision.

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Summary

In our review of the policy context regarding asylum accommodation in the UK, we found the following key developments and practices:

- There has been a noticeable increase in the use of temporary accommodation such as hotels for housing asylum seekers in the past few years. The trend began in September 2019 during the transfer of asylum contracts from COMPASS to AASC but the number rose sharply following the start of the pandemic in March 2020.
- A more recent policy development regarding asylum accommodation has seen the repurposing of new facilities such as military barracks for use as contingency housing, deemed as necessary due to the pressure on asylum accommodation brought about by the Covid-19 crisis and rise in the number of new asylum seekers.
- In Glasgow, another type of contingency housing for asylum seekers called ‘Mothers and Baby Unit’ was opened in October 2020 and has come under criticism from local charities, media and politicians for its unsuitability and cramped conditions.
- The time that asylum seekers spent in these temporary accommodations has also increased. While the expectation is that asylum seekers will be moved out of ‘initial accommodation’ or temporary accommodation, and into ‘dispersed accommodation’ within 35 days, during the first Covid outbreak, average stays had increased to stays of at least 115 days.
- While asylum seekers usually receive £39.63 per week, the financial support was stopped for those who were moved to hotels during the pandemic. This was based on the grounds that for those moving to full-board accommodation, the basic necessities such food and toiletries are provided so there was no need to give cash payments.
- The relocations of asylum seekers during the pandemic were often not accompanied with clear policy and support regarding Covid-19. For example, there was no policy in terms of Covid testing available for asylum seekers during the pandemic, even though individuals were moved around and lived in shared accommodation; the provision of appropriate laundry facilities and cleaning products to asylum seekers such as soap was also found to be inadequate, as was access to communication.
- The communication between accommodation providers and other essential agencies operating within the context of local authorities remains poor. For example, no formal contracts existed between the providers and Migrant Help as of 2020 even though their individual contracts required them to work together. Similarly, the Migrant Help’s systems were not integrated with the Home Office’s information on asylum applicants preventing secure and effective data sharing to enable the effective response to asylum seekers’ concerns.

1. Background

Asylum seekers are housed in temporary or contingency accommodation before being moved into more long-term housing. In official discourse, temporary accommodation is known as initial accommodation and long-term housing as dispersed accommodation. Temporary housing includes hotel-type accommodation, the use of which has seen a considerable increase since 2019. For example, in October 2020 there were 9,500 asylum seekers living in 91 hotels throughout the UK, a significant rise from the March figure which was only 1,200 individuals.¹ Several reasons have been identified behind this increase. Firstly, September 2019 has been highlighted as one of the key turning points regarding the use of contingency accommodation. This period coincided with the transfer of asylum contracts from COMPASS to AASC, a change which saw a rise in the number of people being moved to hotels, causing a great deal of disruption for asylum seekers.² Secondly, the rise in the use of hotels has been attributed also to the ‘new asylum seekers continuing to enter the system and partly the result of a pause on moving people out of accommodation upon the completion of their case.’ The suspension was introduced in the context of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic crisis. Thirdly, some asylum seekers were relocated to hotels following the announcement of the first Covid-19 lockdown, as a way of providing accommodation that was ‘Covid safe’. The Mears group which is the accommodation provider contracted to cover Scotland stated their reasons for relocation as below:

To reduce the need for both asylum-seekers and Mears staff to make regular journeys to and from multiple accommodation locations we considered, in discussions with the Home Office and with Glasgow City Council, providing fully serviced support in good quality hotel accommodation where we could arrange regular access to health workers and implement all guidance on COVID-19. The aim was to create a safe environment to greatly reduce the spread of Covid-19 among asylum seekers in Glasgow. Health authorities are fully aware of all measures Mears are taking.³

A more recent development regarding asylum accommodation has seen the repurposing of new facilities such as military barracks for use as contingency housing. Notably, since September 2020 two large military facilities in the UK, Napier Barracks in Kent and Penally Barracks in Pembrokeshire, have been used for accommodating more than 600 asylum seekers at their peak.⁴ The Government deemed the introduction of these new facilities as necessary due to the pressure on asylum accommodation brought about by the Covid-19 crisis and rise in the number of new asylum seekers. But this form of housing has been met with growing criticism from various organisations and stakeholders working with asylum seekers and refugees as well as politicians. The criticism has been around the unsuitability of these military facilities for housing people especially in the context of Covid-19, where social distancing can be difficult to maintain, and thus the safety of residents cannot be guaranteed. A recent inspection (March 2021) by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration confirmed that both facilities are unsuitable, highlighting their ‘filthy and run-down’

¹ The overall number of people who claimed asylum in the first six months of 2020 was 16,358.

² Refugee Action, [How government contracts fail people seeking asylum](#)

³ [Statement by Mears in response to the Scottish Refugee Council](#)

⁴ The Guardian, [End housing of asylum seekers in old army barracks, UK ministers urged](#)

conditions.⁵ Indeed, the High Court passed a judgement on 3 June 2021, ruling that accommodating asylum seekers in these barracks ‘was and is flawed and unlawful, both in relation to (a) the initial decision to transfer asylum seekers to the Barracks, and (b) the monitoring or review of suitability post transfer.’⁶

Local context

Within Scotland, Glasgow is the only ‘dispersal area’ with more than 4000 asylum seekers being housed in the city.⁷ As of 2020, relative to its population Glasgow has also the highest number of asylum seekers than any council area in the UK (59 per 10,000 residents).⁸ The city has also a significant number of asylum seekers housed in temporary or hotel-type accommodation. Moves by accommodation providers to relocate asylum seekers to hotels following the first Covid-19 lockdown ‘took place at scale in Glasgow because the initial accommodation there was deemed unsuitable for social distancing.’⁹ Around 350 asylum seekers were moved from their apartments to the various hotels in the city centre following the outbreak of Covid-19 in March 2020. Several months later, in July 2020, the Scottish Refugee Council reported that there were around 300 people living in hotels in Glasgow.¹⁰ Yet in August 2020, a month later, this number was noted to be 188, indicating significant levels of variation. One factor that might have contributed to this fluctuation was the widely-reported tragic incident that happened at the end of June 2020 in one of the hotels, Park Inn, where one asylum seeker was killed and three others were injured. As a result of this incident, many of asylum seekers (around 100) residing there were moved to alternative, dispersed accommodation around the city. This incident and the tragic death in May 2020 of an asylum seeker living in another hotel in the city, generated a significant amount of media attention to issues around hotel-type accommodation within Glasgow and placed the decisions of accommodation provider, Mears, under intense scrutiny. It is in this context that in July 2020 Glasgow city council issued a temporary ban on new asylum seekers arriving in the city so as to ‘ease pressures’ and help the accommodation provider to find appropriate accommodation for those residing in hotels.¹¹

While the use of military barracks such as Napier Barracks in Kent and Penally Barracks in Pembrokeshire have been at the centre of national media and public debates during the pandemic, more locally, in Glasgow, another type of contingency housing for asylum seekers has generated a great deal of interest. This is the so called ‘Mothers and Baby Unit’, which was opened in October 2020. In January 2021, the Unit housed around 25 asylum-seeking women with babies or who were pregnant. Previously used for accommodating young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, the facility was refurbished by Mears in 2020, turning

⁵ BBC News, [Asylum seekers: Napier Barracks and Penally camp 'filthy and run-down'](#)

⁶ [High Court Judgement, 3 June 2021. Case Nos: CO/312/329/354/397 & 402/2021](#)

⁷ BBC News, [Glasgow stabbings: Concerns over asylum hotel plan ahead of incident](#)

⁸ Asylum Statistics. Briefing Paper, Number SN01403. House of Commons Library, 17 March 2020, p. 14.

⁹ House of Commons Library, ‘Asylum accommodation: the use of hotels and military barracks,’ Briefing Paper, Number 8990, 24 November 2020

¹⁰ The Guardian, [Hundreds of Glasgow asylum seekers still in 'untenable' hotel accommodation](#)

¹¹ Scottish Housing News, [Glasgow issues temporary pause on asylum seekers as humanitarian concerns deepen](#)

it into 37 self-contained bedsits. While in the past the facility was used to provide transitional accommodation for single occupants, Mears turned it into long-term accommodation for asylum-seeking mothers and their children from pregnancy up until the child is two years old. What is more, the mothers were moved to this place during the pandemic, relocated during January 2021, at the heart for the Covid-19 ‘second wave’. Mears’ decision to open the Unit has come under criticism from local charities, media and politicians for its unsuitability and cramped conditions, especially in the context of Covid-19, which are having a negative impact on the health and wellbeing of mothers and their children. Its creation has galvanised the support of different actors in the city who are increasingly campaigning for change to the facility and even its closure.¹²

2. What support do those seeking asylum receive?

As part of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, those applying for asylum who are destitute are entitled to apply for support. This support, often referred to as Section 95 support, provides those seeking asylum with accommodation and/or subsistence support after being assessed as ‘destitute’. Applications for Section 95 support can take some amount of time, therefore those seeking asylum may apply for temporary forms of support, often referred to as Section 98 support. As part of Section 98 support, accommodation is provided to those who have applied for Section 95 support and are awaiting the outcome of that process. Those applying for Section 98 support are housed in ‘initial’ or ‘temporary/contingency’ forms of accommodation on a ‘full-board’ basis which usually takes the form of hotel.

The expectation is to be moved out of initial accommodation (IA) within 35 days. Between September 2019 and February 2020, the average stay in IA reported by the National Audit Office was 26 days. Yet, even before Covid restrictions emerged, asylum seekers were experiencing stays of at least 86 days¹³. During the first Covid outbreak, average stays had increased to stays of at least 115 days. The National Audit Office recommended that providers focus on reducing the amount of time asylum seekers spend within initial accommodation, questioning whether providers were properly incentivised to move people into dispersed accommodation quickly enough.¹⁴

Following acceptance of a claim for Section 95 support, those seeking asylum are placed into ‘dispersed accommodation’. The dispersal policy operates on a ‘no-choice’ basis; individual asylum seekers have no say in the location in which they are sent within the UK. A claim for each form of support requires a destitution test, though the burden for Section 98

¹²More recently, a group of organisations launched the Freedom to Crawl campaign (<https://www.freedomtocrawl.org/>) calling for the closure of the Unit. This is addition to the ongoing work and campaign of various local grassroots groups like MORE to close the facility down.

¹³ Home Affairs Select Committee, [Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 \(Coronavirus\)](#)

¹⁴ National Audit Office, [Asylum accommodation and support](#)

support is less onerous as per the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. A person is classed as destitute, as part of the act if:¹⁵

“(a) he does not have adequate accommodation or any means of obtaining it (whether or not his other essential living needs are met); or

(b) he has adequate accommodation or the means of obtaining it, but cannot meet his other essential living needs.”

Financial

The nature of Section 95 or Section 98 support is in the form of accommodation and subsistence or subsistence-only support. Subsistence-only support is provided in a minority of cases, where those seeking asylum have adequate accommodation but not enough money to cover their essential living costs. The value of subsistence support is £39.63 per week for both adults and children. There are supplementary payments available for pregnant mothers (£3 per week), children under 1 (£5 per week) or children aged 1-3 (£3 per week) to ensure access to healthy food. Maternity grants of £300 are also available if the baby is between 8 weeks from birth or 6 weeks after birth.

Further financial support has been announced via a letter sent to charities by the Immigration minister Chris Philp.¹⁶ This would support those who have been put in contingency accommodation with an additional £8 a week and a backdated clothing allowance of £3 a week. Yet there have been no further announcements on the administration of these payments.¹⁷ Furthermore, for many asylum seekers have been moved from serviced apartments into full-board hotel accommodation their financial support has been withdrawn.¹⁸

According to government statistics¹⁹, there were:

- 10,315 individuals in receipt of support under Section 98 as on November 2020. This figure is over two times higher than the same time in 2019 (3,049). The government assumes this sharp increase is related to COVID-19, with more people seeking asylum being held in temporary forms of accommodation while their claim for Section 95 support is being considered.
- 46,520 people seeking asylum who have been granted Section 95 support with 91% of those claiming accommodation and subsistence support.
- There were 20,009 applications for Section 95 support in 2019.

¹⁵ Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, S95, 3

¹⁶The Independent, [Home Office admits asylum seekers in hotels should be getting cash support - but new payments 'not enough'](#)

¹⁷ [Asylum Matters, Asylum Accommodation and Support Contracts \(AASC\):](#)

¹⁸ Home Affairs Select Committee, [Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 \(Coronavirus\)](#)

¹⁹ Gov.uk [How many people do we grant asylum or protection to?](#)

Food

Those housed on a ‘full board’ basis - generally those in initial accommodation claimed under Section 4 or Section 98 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 - are required to be provided with all three meals. The contract is very detailed in specifying the range of dietary requirements to be catered for including ‘special dietary, cultural or religious requirements (including, without limitation, gluten free and diabetic options where necessary)’.²⁰ Babies and small children are required to have access to appropriate food whenever necessary. The contract also specifies that menus need to be validated by a qualified nutritionist or suitable health professional. The contract specifies these requirements as performance standards and asserts that accurate and auditable records of the food provision needs to be maintained to assure varied and nutritionally appropriate menus have been provided.

Health and Healthcare

As part of the process of claiming asylum, the initial screening interview will attempt to ascertain any health or medical concerns with claimants.²¹ The resulting information should be shared with accommodation providers so any reasonable adjustments can be made. These requirements are also specified in the ‘fit for purpose’ requirements within the accommodation contracts.²² This includes assessing the most suitable location to be placed when moved to initial accommodation or limit the potential locations for dispersal housing.²³

All migrants into the country, no matter legal status, should have access to medical treatment when required free of charge. People being moved into initial accommodation should be offered a health screening from an onsite medical team. Those in initial accommodation have the right to register with a GP and can get assistance from the medical team if required.

3. What organisations are involved in housing migrants?

A number of organisations are involved in the process of providing support for asylum seekers including:²⁴

Organisation	Role
The Home Office	Designs, procures and manages contracts to supply accommodation and AIRE service
Mears Group	1 of 3 accommodation providers. Mears Group cover the Scottish

²⁰ [Asylum Accommodation and Support Statement of Requirements](#), p46

²¹ [EHRC, Access to healthcare: a guide for organisations working with people seeking asylum](#)

²² [Asylum Accommodation and Support Statement of Requirements](#)

²³ [EHRC, Access to healthcare: a guide for organisations working with people seeking asylum](#)

²⁴ Source: National Audit Office, [Asylum accommodation and support](#), p 15

	region and are responsible for managing supply and maintenance of accommodation, and housing subcontractors, which supply housing and other services to accommodation provider
Migrant Help	The provider tasked to operate the national Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility service
Local Authorities	to approve providers' proposals to site housing in respective local areas, and meet the needs of asylum seekers granted leave to remain in the UK
Strategic Migration Partnerships	link various stakeholders with asylum seekers, migrants and refugees in areas where these Partnerships operate
Voluntary sector organisations	providing support and advice to asylum seekers

4. What are the contracts for outsourcing this work?

The estimated costs over the lifetime of the contracts is £4.0bn (2019 to 2029) or £400 million per year, and on average around £560 per month per person.²⁵ The contract with the Mears Group to provide asylum accommodation and support for Scotland is valued at £514m.

The Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility (AIRE) was a new addition to the latest auction of asylum service contracts (2019). This contract was awarded to Migrant Help (£235m) to mediate the relationship between the accommodation providers and the Home Office. Service users will be encouraged, as specified in the AASC Contract (2019), to engage with the AIRE service to provide feedback, report issues with the accommodation, any requests for assistance or complaints. While Migrant Help is assigned to provide these services, the charity itself has outsourced this work across the four regions and charity organisations have reported major problems and failures with its service provision and delivery.²⁶

5. What are the accommodation minimum standards?

According to the AASC Statement of Requirements, all accommodations from the Providers must meet minimum standards across four distinct levels: safe; habitable; fit for purpose; and correctly equipped. The minimum standards contained within Annex B are a specified Performance Standard within the contract and form the basis of the development of the contract's key performance indicators (KPIs). Failure to meet these standards may require the provision of compensation to the Home Office by the Provider.

²⁵ National Audit Office, [Asylum accommodation and support](#)

²⁶ Refugee Action, [Joint letter to the government: Crisis in asylum support.](#)

The ‘safe’ standards cover the key structural issues around the accommodation and violation of any of these standards must be rectified within 4 hours or the Service User should be evacuated from the property.²⁷ These issues include gas safety, water safety or the results of Housing Health and Safety Rating System inspections being Category A, B or C.

‘Habitable’ standards²⁸ cover issues around the provision of hot water, electricity, heating, safety measures such as smoke and carbon monoxide detectors as well as valid certification for gas and electrical wiring. Faults at this level need to be permanently fixed within 5 working days with an interim fix within 24 hours.

The ‘fit for purpose’ category covers a broad range of categories. If the property is deemed ‘unfit for purpose’ then the Providers have 21 working days in order to remedy the faults. The range of requirements in this section (Annex B4) covers issues from lighting, ventilation, weatherproofing to the requirements around kitchens, bathrooms and bedrooms. Importantly, this covers ‘the interior structure of Accommodation and all fixtures and fittings are safe and free from defects or artefacts that may pose a hazard to Service Users’.²⁹ These standards extend to the decor, with the contract stating that ‘accommodation will not be regarded as fit for purpose if the internal and external aspects of the Accommodation are not in good decorative order’³⁰. These requirements also cover accessibility issues and specify that in order to be ‘fit for purpose’ they need to meet obligations under Human Rights Act 1998 and the Equality Act 2010.

The contract specifies the performance standards for this element of service provision, with the Provider being required to ensure they meet the requirements of Annex B. The contract specifies that the timescales must be met and all property maintenance be audited. Service Users can raise complaints or issues with the maintenance of the accommodation via the AIRE service, and information on ‘reactive’ maintenance needs to be shared with the AIRE service in order to keep Service Users informed.

6. What problems have been noted with the service provided by the companies?

At an estimated cost per month of £560 for each accommodated person seeking asylum, the government is paying 28% more for this contract than the previous COMPASS contract. The figure for the latter contract stood at £480 per person per month, a cost that was significantly lower than the amount (just over half) of money that local authorities spent for each service user prior to the transfer of contract to private providers in 2012.³¹ The National Audit Office asserts that this rise in price can be attributed to the belief the previous COMPASS

²⁷ [Asylum Accommodation and Support Statement of Requirements](#), B2

²⁸ [Asylum Accommodation and Support Statement of Requirements](#), B3

²⁹ [Asylum Accommodation and Support Statement of Requirements](#), p84

³⁰ [Asylum Accommodation and Support Statement of Requirements](#), p84

³¹ [The role of asylum in processes of urban gentrification](#), p. 10.

contracts were underpriced and resulted in unsustainably low bids which resulted in significant financial losses for some firms. The price increase also reflects the lack of bidding interest in this auction, with two regions having to go out to auction again.

Performance standards

Key performance indicators have been built into the contractual arrangements between the Home Office, Accommodation and AIRE service providers, with the Home Office monitoring accommodation standards and providers' responsiveness using its performance framework consisting of the 10 key performance measures³². Significant criticisms were recorded in relation to one of these measures which encouraged providers to 'prioritise new arrivals over those who have already been in initial accommodation for a long time'³³, resulting in a situation where people would spend much longer time in their initial hotel accommodation than the target of 35 days.

The performance of Migrant Help, the AIRE provider, was particularly poor in its initial months of their contract. The NAO reports that the AIRE service only answered 2% of calls within 60 seconds in the final three months of 2019 against an expected service standard of 90%. In the first three months 2020 this had risen to 94%. Part of the reasoning for the delay was put down to actual call durations lasting between 12 and 17 minutes against an expected call duration of 4 minutes agreed by Migrant Help and Connect Assist - the company Migrant Help outsource call centre work to.³⁴

Questions were also raised about the systems and procedures to monitor performance with the Home Office primarily relying on self-assessment and self-reporting by providers, including instances where Mears and Migrant Help reported 'incomplete or late data'.³⁵ Contrary to the Government's current policy, the Home Office was withholding the data on the contracts' performance resulting in a situation where requests were made by voluntary organisations and local authorities to be able to access such data to enable them to address gaps and to 'better support people'.³⁶

The review of the documents identifies a developing situation with more KPI achieved as contracts matured and in response to the Home Office monitoring and imposing sanctions. The NAO report highlights performance improvements in relation to a number of standards, including accommodation maintenance issues and resolving people's complaints.³⁷ In responding to the Public Accounts Committee's questions about the Home Office's response to the persistent failures by providers to achieve KPIs, Permanent Secretary of the Home Office suggested that as of October 2020, providers were 'held to account' resulting in 'continual

³² [Home Affairs Select Committee, Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 \(Coronavirus\)](#)

³³ National Audit Office, [Asylum accommodation and support](#), p10

³⁴ National Audit Office, [Asylum accommodation and support](#), p24

³⁵ National Audit Office, [Asylum accommodation and support](#), p9

³⁶ National Audit Office, [Asylum accommodation and support](#), p9

³⁷ National Audit Office, [Asylum accommodation and support](#), p8

improvement, month on month’ and that sanctions were imposed to ‘ensure continued improvement’.³⁸

Within the current system, any failure to meet the required standards results in an imposition of ‘penalty points’ which may trigger the requirement to pay back some of the funding received by Providers. At the same time, there appeared to be no clear system to ensure that any imposition of sanctions by the Home Office on underperforming providers would not lead to any further reductions in the quality of services.³⁹ It was noted in the NAO report that the Home Office itself has only managed to survey 7% of properties against its own target of 25%.⁴⁰

Lack of communication between stakeholders

Concerns about the lack of communication between the Home Office and Accommodation Providers on the one hand, and local authorities, on the other hand, were also raised on a number of occasions.^{41 42} For example, pre-Covid, local authorities and MPs were expected to be contacted by the Home Office/Providers wherever a new hotel was ‘brought on board’. However, Home Office and Providers were failing to consult in advance with local authorities or MPs⁴³ with observations by the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee about the consistently ‘poor communications’ from the Home Office or its contractors.⁴⁴

Following the start of the pandemic, the Home Office suspended the requirement for the local authorities to approve proposals to site new dispersal accommodation in their respective areas⁴⁵ attributing the failure to engage with local stakeholders to the ‘urgency of the situation’.^{46 47} It must be noted that the Home Office provides no funding to local authorities for any costs associated with hosting asylum seekers; any costs to support asylum seekers whose claims were resolved (making them ineligible to for the Home Office’s support) are absorbed by the local authorities’ budgets.⁴⁸

Furthermore, there appears to be no direct communication between the Home Office and local police forces to consider ‘risks and the issues that arise because of the hotel usage’, including risks to the security and wellbeing of asylum seekers, since this matter is further outsourced to Providers.⁴⁹ The communication between Providers and other essential agencies operating within the context of local authorities remains equally poor, including, for example,

³⁸ [Home Affairs Select Committee, Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 \(Coronavirus\)](#), Q90

³⁹ [Home Affairs Select Committee, Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 \(Coronavirus\)](#), Q121

⁴⁰ National Audit Office, [Asylum accommodation and support](#), p42

⁴¹ [Home Affairs Select Committee, Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 \(Coronavirus\)](#)

⁴² House of Commons Briefing Paper, Number 8990, 24 November 2020

⁴³ [Home Affairs Select Committee, Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 \(Coronavirus\)](#), Q42

⁴⁴ [Home Affairs Select Committee, Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 \(Coronavirus\)](#), Q46

⁴⁵ House of Commons Briefing Paper, Number 8990, 24 November 2020, par 1.1

⁴⁶ House of Commons Briefing Paper, Number 8990, 24 November 2020, par 4.1

⁴⁷ Letter from the HO’s Permanent Secretary to the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, p2-3

⁴⁸ National Audit Office, [Asylum accommodation and support](#), p46

⁴⁹ [Home Affairs Select Committee, Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 \(Coronavirus\)](#), Q69

failures to notify local GP services or the local care commissioning groups to ensure the availability of healthcare services to the resettled asylum seekers.

Some parts of this system operate in complete isolation from each other even when the effective co-operation is required and expected. For example, no formal contracts existed between the Accommodation Providers and Migrant Help as of 2020 even though their individual contracts required them to work together.⁵⁰ Similarly, the Migrant Help's systems were not integrated with the Home Office's information on asylum applicants preventing secure and effective data sharing to enable the effective response to asylum seekers' concerns.

7. How has Covid-19 affected these policies?

Difficulties maintaining social distancing:

Previous Home Affairs Committee reports have recommended the phasing out of shared bedrooms, yet the July 2020 report into Covid-19 noted that several asylum support groups submitted evidence that shared spaces - including bedroom sharing and shared communal spaces - that make physical distancing difficult continued.⁵¹ Helen Bamber Foundation's evidence reported that vulnerable people requiring single occupancy accommodation were not getting this despite being granted this request by the Home Office.⁵² All providers agreed in May 2020 that single occupancy would be standard for all new claimants - though sharing would resume when it is safe to do so (Mears). Home Office had, on public health grounds, said that people in shared accommodation be considered one household - related to Covid 'bubbles' - rather than moving people into single occupancy housing.⁵³

Lack of access to testing and medical care

The committee findings and oral evidence to the Public Accounts Select Committee recount the difficulties in accessing testing during the first wave of the pandemic.⁵⁴ Following the expansion of capacity in the summer it is noted that this should have an effect on allowing greater access to testing. Initially those housed in accommodation were told to self-isolate if they had suspected symptoms. Evidence submitted to the Home Affairs Select Committee notes that coupled to problems with access to testing are problems attached to the related public health messaging. Changes in the timeline for self-isolation or the public health guidance on

⁵⁰ National Audit Office, [Asylum accommodation and support](#), p25

⁵¹ [Home Affairs Select Committee, Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 \(Coronavirus\)](#)

⁵² [Home Affairs Select Committee, Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 \(Coronavirus\)](#), p12

⁵³ [Home Affairs Select Committee, Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 \(Coronavirus\)](#), p14

⁵⁴ [Public Accounts Committee](#) Oral evidence: Asylum Accommodation and Support Transformation Programme, HC 683

symptoms were not available in any language other than English until the 20th March⁵⁵ - 8 days after the government had moved from a contain phase to a delay phase.

As mentioned above, people seeking asylum that are residing in initial accommodation are able to claim NHS services free of charge. Yet reports indicate over 90% of those seeking asylum are not registered with a GP.⁵⁶ This is argued to be because asylum seekers are not aware of their entitlement and accommodation providers are not under an obligation to encourage them to register. This puts asylum seekers at particular risk given the uncertainty of where they can get medical care during the pandemic.

Lack of access to communications

The use of temporary/contingency accommodations has had a detrimental effect on access to communications technology for those seeking asylum. The Home Affairs Select Committee was given evidence to suggest advice given to asylum seekers was to seek out public free Wi-Fi spots rather than improve provision within the accommodations. This has resulted in asylum seekers having less social contact, being able to draw upon less forms of welfare support and limited access to GP consultations which have moved online due to the pandemic.⁵⁷ Furthermore, the suggestion of public free Wifi spots increases the risk of exposure to Covid-19.

Cleaning and cleanliness

The report notes that evidence submitted suggests not all asylum seekers are gaining access to appropriate laundry facilities, cleaning products in communal spaces and even restricted access to soap.⁵⁸ The restricted financial means of those seeking asylum has seen them being priced out of provisions such as soap or hand sanitiser within the first wave of the pandemic.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ [Written evidence submitted by Doctors of the World UK \(COR0017\) Lack of translated COVID-19 guidance](#)

⁵⁶ [Written evidence submitted by Doctors of the World UK \(COR0017\) Lack of translated COVID-19 guidance](#)

⁵⁷ [Home Affairs Select Committee, Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 \(Coronavirus\)](#), p17

⁵⁸ [Home Affairs Select Committee, Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 \(Coronavirus\)](#), p17

⁵⁹ [Covid-19: Asylum Seeker Services in Glasgow - Wednesday 17 June 2020](#)