



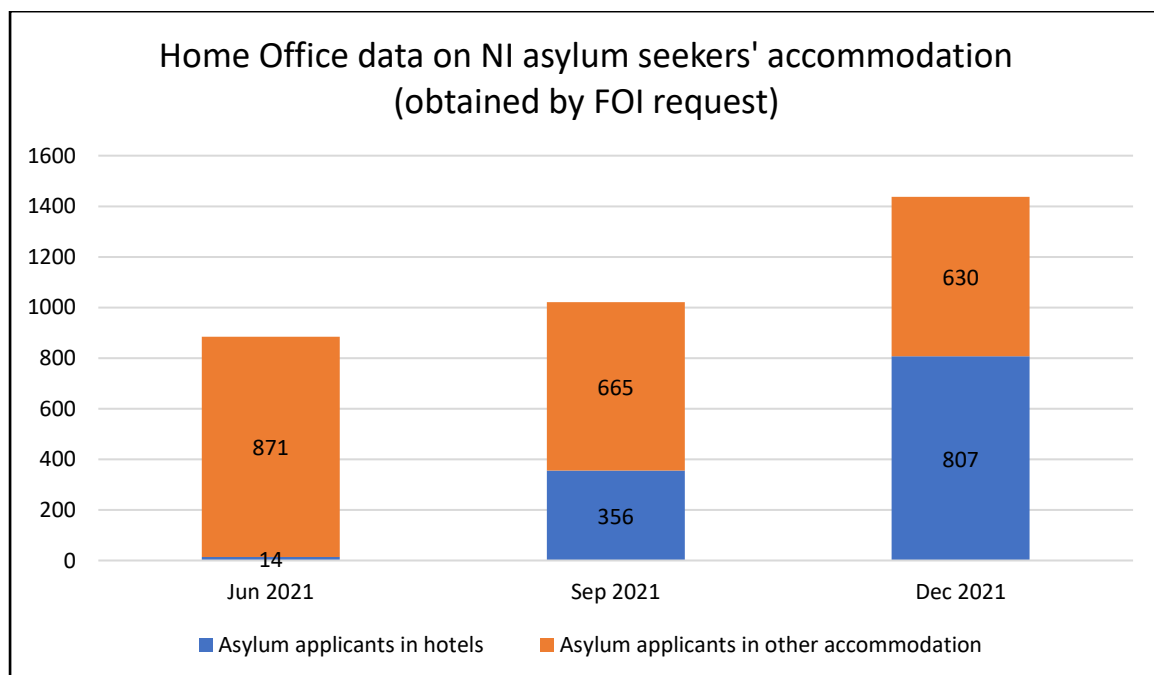
"It is hard to be in this system":

the Use of NI Hotels as 'Contingency Accommodation' for Asylum Seekers

I. Background to the use of hotels -- where this issue came from

Asylum accommodation in Northern Ireland is the responsibility of the private firm [Mears Group](#), under the £113m [Asylum Accommodation and Support Services \(AASC\) contract](#) with the Home Office, which runs until August 2029. Up until the middle of 2021, the way this generally worked was that people in Northern Ireland applying for asylum were usually placed briefly in 'initial accommodation' and dispersed within a matter of days into group flats or houses located in amongst the local community.

In the second half of 2021, the practice changed dramatically, with people placed instead in 'contingency accommodation' in hotel rooms around Belfast and further afield. While people were told this was a temporary measure, some have reportedly spent upwards of four to five months there.



At the end of June 2021, according to Home Office [statistics](#), there were 885 individual asylum seekers in NI in receipt of Home Office [section 95 asylum support](#). In response to an

FOI request, the Home Office said that at that time that of these, 14 asylum seekers -- **less than 2%** -- were "housed in Hotels / Contingency accommodation in Northern Ireland".

Three months later (and after the airlift of Afghan refugees from Kabul and a [pledge](#) from the NI Executive to support the UK's promised Afghan resettlement scheme), those figures had risen to 1,021 individual asylum seekers receiving support in NI, of which **over one third** (a total of 356, including 79 minor asylum applicants under the age of 18) were being housed in hotels. A clarification of the number of asylum seekers including their accompanying dependents is still pending.

Fast forward to end December 2021, and Home Office [figures](#) show 1,437 people receiving section 95 asylum support in Northern Ireland. By FOI response it indicated **well over half** of them (809 people, or 56% of the total) were being accommodated in hotels in Northern Ireland, 168 of them children under the age of 18.

On 1 April 2022, according to Home Office figures, there were 1,067 asylum seekers housed in 14 initial accommodation (IA) contingency hotels in Northern Ireland.

II. Who is responsible?

According to a July 2020 Home Office [fact sheet](#) on asylum accommodation,

historically, providers have used contingency accommodation during peaks in demand and the contracts allow for this.... we continue to consult local authorities about hotel use and where we place new asylum seekers entering the support system.

A later [fact sheet](#) on "the use of temporary hotels to house asylum seekers during Covid 19" reiterated that local authorities were involved in identifying "suitable temporary accommodation".

In response to a Freedom of Information request from PPR asking about the policy basis of the practice, the Home Office wrote on 22 April 2022,

operating hotels as contingency accommodation for asylum seekers is not something the Home Office (HO) want to be doing and is not a long-term solution. (FOI ref 69027)

Indeed, in mid-February the Home Office had [written to NGOs](#) across the UK informing them of its plans to fast-track moving asylum seekers *out* of hotels and into long-term accommodation. It is unclear why the NI trend is in the opposite direction.

Role of NI authorities

Up until August 2019 the Housing Executive had a formal role overseeing provision of asylum accommodation, which was provided by private company Serco under Home Office contract. However, with the new Mears contract, the explicit role of the Housing Executive in asylum accommodation ended.

The Home Office FOI responses refer to the current use of hotels for asylum seekers as 'contingency accommodation' under the terms of the existing contract with Mears. By communication of 9 March 2022 to PPR, Mears explained:

On 1 April 2022 the Home Office was housing 1,067 asylum seekers in 14 "initial accommodation contingency hotels" in Northern Ireland.

Mears is currently providing additional contingency accommodation in hotels in response to the rise in the number of people presenting for asylum in Northern Ireland. This is in line with the Home Office's approach across the UK. We have been working with local authorities and other partners to provide support to service users.

In reply to FOI requests however, the Executive Office, the Department for Communities and the Housing Executive here (as well as the Northern Ireland Office, to which the DFC had referred us in response to our FOI requests) all said they did not hold any relevant information about the use of hotels for asylum accommodation. The Executive Office, the DFC and the Housing Executive all declined to attend an Iftar event organised by PPR on 26 April 2022 to highlight the difficulties experienced by families placed in hotel accommodation here in the context of the wider Kind Economy initiative -- although the Department of Justice and Department of Finance did send representatives, as did the Alliance Party, the SDLP, the Green Party and Sinn Féin.

"Horrible -- I hadn't realised the extent of how bad it is". Kate Nicholl, Lord Mayor of Belfast, after listening to families describe conditions in the hotels at the Kind Economy event in Belfast on 26 April

In **Scotland**, where the use of hotels as asylum accommodation was rolled out earlier, tragic incidents amongst people placed in hotel accommodation for long periods contributed to [public concern](#). Scotland's Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government [has repeatedly written](#) to the Home Secretary to query the increased use of hotel accommodation for asylum seekers.

But here, aside from a few press reports occasioned by extremist protests against asylum seekers' presence, very little has been said about the new practice. FOI requests about the use of hotels for asylum accommodation elicited a string of 'we do not hold any relevant

information'-type replies. Significantly, even consultation on the Executive Office's draft [integration strategy](#) for refugees and asylum seekers, which closed in March, omitted mention of the issue. The draft strategy refers to the Office's "work with the Strategic Migration Partnership (NISMP) in the oversight of these [asylum] contracts" (p. 25) -- yet does not have a single mention of the shift to use of contingency accommodation in hotels or its impact on asylum seekers. (See PPR's consultation response [here](#).)

"It is hard to be in this system". Asylum seeker living in NI

As described above, both the Home Office and Mears have referred to local duty bearer involvement; moreover we know that local duty bearers *should be involved*, by virtue of the responsibilities they hold. To give an example, the Department for Communities retains responsibility for housing overall, and for the Decent Homes Standard, housing fitness standard and other relevant policies, while the Education Authority and Department of Health have clear responsibilities towards asylum seekers and their families.

Further, we know that the NI Strategic Migration Partnership [includes](#) the NIHE, DFC and Department of Health, alongside the Executive Office, with the overall aim to

foster collaboration between the Home Office, NI Executive & government departments ... to ensure that appropriate provisions on migration are understood and fully considered across all sectors in Northern Ireland.

So it is concerning that local duty bearers are not more forthcoming about their roles and the way in which they are fulfilling their responsibilities to these particularly vulnerable people.

We know -- as an organisation that works with people living with housing stress and homelessness -- that there is a severe housing shortage in Northern Ireland, and that its impact is being felt by a wide range of people. Mears Group's 9 March letter also clarified that

our aim is to use hotel accommodation for as short a time as possible. We are currently working to procure further housing stock to remedy this issue.

We look forward to hearing more about these efforts. From our end we will continue to highlight acute housing need and call for more homes to alleviate it.

III. What are the hotels like for the families placed there?

"We escaped from war. We have been running for years. We finally arrive here -- to this? It is not right. it is not fair." Asylum seeker parent, living with their children in hotel accommodation in Belfast over the past several months (March 2022)

People placed in hotels are deprived of interaction with local neighbours, lack indoor or outdoor communal space or play facilities, and in almost all cases are unable to store food or cook anything for themselves or their dependents. As the spaces are generally very small, families are often split up amongst several different rooms, at times even on different floors. The resulting blockages to normal family life, local interactions and integration, and the inability to do the most basic things for themselves and their families, violate a host of internationally recognised human rights. They also risk causing harm to people who may have already been traumatised on their journeys or by the events and environments from which they fled.

UK policy acknowledges that **hotels are wholly unsuitable for lengthy stays, particularly for families.** the UK government's [Homelessness code of guidance for local authorities](#), for instance, calls such accommodation "*particularly detrimental to the health and development of children*" (para. 17.32) and recommends it be used for families in particular "*only as a last resort and then only for a maximum of 6 weeks*" (para. 17.33).

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. [...]

Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution. [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), Articles 1, 2, 14 (UN General Assembly, 10 Dec 1948)

Children's right to develop to their fullest potential is a fundamental right guaranteed in the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (article 29), as is their right to enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health (article 24). **The fact that official UK guidance explicitly recognising the detrimental effect of hotel accommodation on these rights is being not just ignored but systematically flouted is a serious breach that cannot be allowed to continue.**

Key issues are outlined in more detail below.

"We need support to change Mears. A lot of people, they can't stand staying there one month more." Asylum seeker living in a NI hotel

With regard to **duration of stay**, the above UK government guidance to local authorities advising a 6-week limit on hotel accommodation for families is clearly not being followed here, with some families reporting stays of four to five months. Moreover there appears to be a lack of transparency around the criteria, rules and procedures for moving people on. Some families have reportedly been relocated far faster than others, without explanation, increasing the sense of frustration, powerlessness and distrust amongst those left behind.

Similarly, we understand that some households have refused to move unless they can be assured that it is to stable, permanent, single-family accommodation.

All children have the legal right to an education ([CRC](#) article 28), which is recognised as being [inter-related with promotion and protection](#) of a range of other rights -- but there are enormous concerns around **access to education** for children in the households placed in hotels. In 9 March 2022 correspondence with PPR Mears referred to 'Play to Learn' sessions and visits from the Education Authority. Parents' testimony indicates that some children have not been enrolled - or have been enrolled after significant delays -- in school. This is clearly harmful to the child's development and a breach of the right to an education.

There appear to be numerous blockages to people's **right to highest attainable standard of health**. [Children's health](#) was affected by lack of suitable food; lack of indoor and outdoor play facilities; and in some cases by factors such as insufficiently heated rooms. With regard to [people with disabilities](#), at least one hotel (Camera House) does not have a working lift, yet disabled or mobility-impaired people have been placed there, with serious fire safety and other ramifications. In other places, wheelchair-bound people have been placed in rooms where there is insufficient space for their chair to move properly.

"I am in a bad condition mentally and I really need to see a therapist urgently." Hotel resident

With regard to [existing health concerns](#), some people have not been given access to medicines or supplements to address issues such as iron deficiency. In terms of [health care provision](#), residents reported not having been given health cards or registered with GP services, so that the only available health care, even to address the above concerns, was A&E -- surely not the best use of resources. Finally people reported their [mental health](#) was impacted by prolonged stay in the hotel settings, given all of the factors highlighted here.

Everyone has a range of recognised [cultural rights](#), which again are inter-related and inter-dependent with human dignity and rights. One of the most difficult issues for hotel residents is **culturally inappropriate and inadequate food**. Only in one hotel -- Camera House in Belfast -- are people now given access to the kitchen to cook for themselves. In all other accommodation, set meals are provided three times a day. People are not allowed to cook for themselves; there is no food provided in between meals; and people are not allowed to have food in their rooms. (Some may have access to a kettle, but none have access to a microwave or refrigerator). People with [health or dietary issues](#) (such as anaemia, diabetes or dental issues) find the food insufficient. Parents with [babies](#) find themselves having to go repeatedly to ask for bottles to be heated in the kitchen, for instance. Those with [toddlers or older children](#) find that they do not necessarily like the prepared meals, which may include fried or spicy food; and they naturally are hungry between set meal times. Parents struggle to ensure that their diet is varied enough, given the lack of a supply of readily available fresh

fruit and other fresh food. Parents worry that their children's health and development are being affected.

"My kids are depressed - they are meant to be growing, they are kids, yet since living in the hotel they have lost weight." Hotel resident

Another area of concern is the **lack of indoor or outdoor recreational space**. This affects everyone but is particularly acute -- and potentially developmentally harmful -- for children. Hotel residents do not have access to communal areas other than the dining rooms during meal times. Parents report that children are not allowed to play in the corridors, and that there is no safe outdoor play space.

The hotel rooms are generally small, 2-person rooms. For families, this means that **parents are split up, each in a different room** with one or more children; in some cases, older children are reportedly in rooms on their own. The rooms may or may not be in the same area or on the same floor of the hotel. This is enormously problematic in terms of safeguarding amongst this vulnerable population, some of whom may have suffered trauma before, during or after their flight from their country of origin. It also substantially disrupts people's ability to enjoy the right to privacy and to a family life.

Moreover, hotel life impedes people's **integration** with the local community. They are not allowed visitors, and no access to lobby or communal areas outside of mealtimes (and no outdoor communal areas at all) their contact with others is limited.

With regard to **location**, decision-making does not appear to be person-centred. We received several different reports of people with significant physical or mental health issues being offered places in one location when the support network on which they rely is in another, for instance. Respecting people's dignity means avoiding 'offers' that effectively force people to choose to resolve one set of issues by creating another.

Families in particular are suffering the effects of **insufficient financial support**. While asylum seekers in other accommodation receive £40.85 per person per week for food, clothes and toiletries -- already a woefully inadequate sum for people denied the right to work to support themselves -- those placed in hotels reportedly receive only £8/week. From this they are expected to meet all of their needs -- including additional fresh food, toiletries, sundries and in one instance, taxi fare to hospital for a sick child after hotel staff said that they were unable to arrange transport.

IV. What are we asking for? The Kind Economy

"How do you tell your kids -- because of trauma you've have to quit your home, quit your wealth, and you can't provide for them?" Asylum seeker living in Northern Ireland

People seeking asylum in Northern Ireland are only able to apply for the right to work after they have been waiting for a decision on their asylum claim for over a year. Even then, the few people who are granted such permission are rarely able to work in practice because their employment is restricted to the narrow list of highly skilled professions included on the Government's Shortage Occupation List. This decision is also left up to the discretion of individual Home Office case workers and the Home Office do not release any figures on how many, if any, are successful in gaining the right to work. This means that people are essentially banned from working whilst they wait months, and often years, for a decision on their asylum claim.

What this means in practice is that people's **skills are wasted** -- neither they nor their host community get the benefit of their training and abilities, and the **wider economy** is deprived tax revenue and other proceeds from their work. Denying them the chance to work denies their **dignity** as a productive person, and makes them dependent on handouts. This has knock-on effects for their **mental health** and makes them **vulnerable to risky work and exploitation**.

There is another way. We are asking duty bearers, at a minimum, to immediately

- stop putting FAMILIES with kids, or disabled people, into hotels - if they must be there then respect the UK government's six week limit
- hotels must be TEMPORARY for everyone - no stays of over three months
- give all residents INFORMATION, with transparency around procedures and timelines
- let people COOK, even in turns. Provide access to fridges and microwaves, allow food in rooms
- send children to SCHOOL
- give people adequate financial SUPPORT
- end PERIOD POVERTY, give toiletries

In addition, over the short, medium and longer term we are asking duty bearers to

- support the KIND ECONOMY
- build HOMES