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## **Briefing paper for the Economic and Social Research Institute and the Shared Island Unit at the Department of the Taoiseach on child and family poverty and the asylum system in NI**

[Anaka Women's Collective](#) are a group of women who use our collective skills to educate, support, advocate and celebrate each other. We are based in Belfast and are led predominantly by women with direct experience of the UK's hostile immigration system. We support a network of over 150 women and families with 20 different nationalities.

### **Legal underpinnings of poverty**

Poverty is a defining factor in the lives of children in the UK asylum system and their families. That poverty is the product of decades of deliberately hostile policies constructed and enacted by a succession of both Labour and Tory governments. To give just a partial overview: the 1996 and 1999 **Immigration and Asylum Acts** restricted access to benefits and support amongst people subject to immigration control, and imposed a 'No Recourse to Public Funds' status on some, including asylum seekers whose initial application was refused. In 2002, the **Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act** extended the previous six-month wait for permission to work imposed on people in the asylum system to one year, and restricted their access to social care. The 2006 **Immigration, Asylum and Nationality Act** provided for prosecution of employers who flouted the work ban. In 2010 the Home Office imposed further restrictions on the right to work, limiting asylum seekers' employment options after 12 months in the system solely to positions on its bespoke, highly specialised 'Shortage Occupation List'. Self-employment, and employment in any position not among the handful of professions listed, was not permitted. (The Home Office replaced its 'shortage occupation list' with a [skilled worker visa](#) immigration salary list in April 2024).

In 2012 then-Prime Minister Theresa May publicly announced the government's intent to create a 'hostile environment' in the UK -- ostensibly for 'illegal immigrants', but in actual fact also for people in the asylum system and other immigrants. Via **Immigration Acts** in 2014 and 2016 the government stiffened penalties for and imposed new requirements for internal checks by private employers and landlords potentially in contact with immigrants.

Tory governments of more recent years continued the trend. In 2020, changes to the **Immigration Rules** mandated deportation of rough sleepers, even those with leave to remain. The 2022 **Nationality and Borders Act** established different pathways and entitlements to asylum seekers arriving 'directly' to the UK (ie by non-stop flight) as opposed to those having crossed other countries' borders during their journeys. The UK

government signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the government of Rwanda for off-shore processing of asylum claims – and off-shore fulfilment of protection duties in the event of successful claims – which ultimately was not implemented following legal challenges. The 2023 **Illegal Migration Act** denied access to international protection and criminalised anyone arriving by any means other than designated ‘safe and regular routes’ (which the government had – and still for that matter has to this day -- neglected to establish save for a very small and restricted number of people fleeing Afghanistan and Ukraine.

### **Pre-Covid work with asylum-seeking families**

In November 2018, a group of refugees and people seeking asylum in NI designed and carried out a survey amongst 70 asylum seekers in Belfast, with the support of Participation and the Practice of Rights. The [findings](#) revealed that nearly four out of ten adults seeking safety were accompanied by their children.

The legal measures described above barred people seeking international protection from any economic activity, forcing them to be completely dependent on a state that had openly declared its intent to create a ‘hostile environment’ for them. Not surprisingly, 88% of the parents surveyed stated they could not afford the costs -- basic items such as food and clothing along with transport, recreational activities, and school trips -- associated with raising a family.

Three quarters of the parents surveyed reported they experienced anxiety, isolation, and depression or felt they could not cope with daily activities. In part, they reported, this was because they struggled with being unable to afford things for their children like extracurricular activities, sports and learning musical instruments. Parents said they believed that being able to participate equally in school and out of school activities was vital to their child’s education, development, and integration into their new community; and they felt that their children did not respect them as they were unable to afford even basic things like school uniforms or bus fare. Additional sources reveal particular problems faced by older children and youths -- for instance in accessing funding for the higher education places they had won, due to their status as asylum seekers.

### **2021: the emerging use of hotels as 'contingency accommodation'**

At the time of the 2018 research, asylum seekers were generally living in 'dispersal accommodation' in houses and flats, mostly in Belfast. This began to change in mid-2021, when the Home Office (through its contracted asylum accommodation provider Mears Group) began placing people in hostels set up in hotels. In June 2021, according to Home Office information obtained by Freedom of Information request, there were 14 people in this 'contingency accommodation'; six months later this had risen to over 800. Anaka Women’s Collective and PPR began working with people placed in these hostels in late 2021 / early 2022.

[Official figures](#) (see table ASY\_D09) for people seeking international protection and placed by the Home Office in contingency accommodation in NI hotels remained high in 2022 and rose to more than 1,000 people for much of 2023. However, following then Prime Minister Rishi Sunak’s promise to ‘clear the backlog’ of asylum applications by end 2023, people

began to receive asylum decisions at an unprecedented rate, and by mid-2024 there were around 300 people seeking protection still in contingency accommodation in hotels here.

Contact with families [revealed](#) that people placed in hotels, in addition to being denied the right to work and earn any money, were receiving minimal financial support ([£8/week](#) per person, as of November 2022; currently [£8.86/week](#) per person.) People in hotels were (and remain today) largely deprived of interaction with local neighbours; lacked indoor or outdoor communal space or play facilities for their children; and in almost all cases were unable to store food or cook anything for themselves or their children. As the spaces are generally very small, families were often split up amongst several different rooms, at times even on different floors. Many children were not enrolled in school and felt acutely the lack of that comforting daily routine and structure. PPR and Anaka recognised that 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, violated a host of internationally recognised human rights. The conditions -- which for some families continued for up to a year and more -- also risked causing additional harm to people who already traumatised on their journeys or by the events and environments from which they fled.

The financial constraints were particularly keenly felt during Ramadan, when hotel meals were offered at times of day that people could not eat them for religious reasons, yet people were unable to buy sufficient food on their own to break their fast at the appropriate time. In spring 2022, campaigners and civil society allies hosted a series of weekly Iftar meals for fasting Muslims and their children in contingency accommodation. The last of the weekly meals was open by invitation, and elected officials, representatives from the Departments of Justice and Finance and people from a range of organisations heard first hand asylum seekers' accounts of the difficulties they were facing. These accounts helped to inform the important [work by Children's Law Centre and South Tyrone Empowerment Programme](#) drawing international attention to the issue. For its part PPR published a series of [reports](#) highlighting the emerging use of hotels as asylum hostels and the rights breaches reported by people placed there.

Over the summer of 2022 the emerging Kind Economy network of civil society groups worked to offer alternatives to the hostile environment fostered by the Home Office, engaging with asylum seekers in the hostels through art, [outings](#), [food](#) and other activities. By autumn 2022 residents felt it important to begin systematically documenting the range of human rights breaches they were facing in the hostels. Over 150 people took part in biweekly meetings collating and prioritising issues. A number of individuals wrote and submitted formal complaints about their experiences -- including the poverty and acute need facing their families -- to the relevant authorities and oversight bodies.

On 14 October asylum seekers hosted a [meeting](#) of supporters as well as duty bearers including the Departments of Education, Health and Infrastructure and the Executive Office, as well as elected officials from Belfast City Council and the NI Assembly and representatives of oversight bodies. Residents explained the main issues they were confronting and proposed recommendations for change. They described the impact of overcrowded, cramped and inappropriate [living conditions](#). People described their [health concerns](#),

including weight loss and failure to thrive amongst children due to the inappropriate food on offer, the set meal times (with children often being hungry outside of meal times) and the lack of funds to buy anything else. As a result, parents said they struggled to ensure a varied diet for their children due to lack of readily available fresh fruit and other fresh food. Diets were not adapted to the needs of disabled children.

[Poverty](#) was identified as an acute issue for parents frustrated at being unable to meet their children's basic needs on their weekly stipend. The organisations worked with pregnant women and women with newborns to access basic supplies of clothing. Parents also worried about the impact on children's physical and mental wellbeing and development of isolation and not having anywhere to play together in the hotels, inside or out; this was compounded by their extremely limited finances and their inability to afford transport or activities such as entry to leisure centres or indoor play areas in inclement weather.

A [follow up meeting](#) on 22 February 2023 highlighted some progress in some areas -- but new information on deeply concerning issues emerged, including on failures in information sharing by the Home Office and Mears that has left local health and education authorities unaware of who exactly was being placed in their areas, when and where, hamstringing their ability to safeguard children and meet vulnerable people's needs.

### **The political decision to clear the backlog of asylum cases and its aftermath**

As previously mentioned, Rishi Sunak's December 2022 [pledge](#) to "abolish the backlog of initial asylum decisions" by end 2023 led to a unprecedented number of positive decisions being issued in a short time. the Home Office made changes to its guidance around 'discontinuing' asylum support and moving newly recognised refugees on from asylum accommodation.

Under new Home Office guidance (as contained in its 'Discontinuations FAQ' of 23 August 2023, obtained by Freedom of Information), The Home Office is meant to issue simultaneous letters informing of its asylum decision to the individual concerned and to its Asylum Accommodation and Services Contract holder company (in Northern Ireland, Mears Group. Those letters are meant to inform of the end date (by law, 28 days later) for the person's asylum accommodation and support). The FAQ acknowledged that this may result in people "appearing to have a shorter notification period to vacate properties" than before.

While having their asylum claim validated and being granted refugee status is clearly a positive step for parents and families, under the new system the Home Office letters simultaneously notify people of their imminent eviction and cessation of support. For parents who have been denied the right to work and support themselves and who as a result have no savings or financial cushion of any kind, being told that their and their family's asylum support has been or is about to be cut constitutes a very real threat to their wellbeing.

### **The precarious situation facing newly recognised refugee families**

In terms of income support, with the grant of refugee status, families do become eligible for the UK's Universal Credit benefit system. However, due to the five-week wait for the first Universal Credit payment – a feature built into the UC system – there is no way, even if

people somehow in practice received the full 28-day notice from the Home Office, that UC could be accessed before asylum support stops. The authorities' decisions – both on the Home Office side and the UC side -- to impose the timeframes that they have made this impossible. Structurally, even assuming maximum efficiency and no mistakes, delays or obstacles in the transfer from one support system to another, people are made to suffer a new period of enforced destitution – a deliberate gap between when one form of support ends and another begins. What this means practically is that people – including children – go hungry and suffer extreme hardship and distress. This obviously compounds the trauma that the vast majority have already undergone in their country of origin, in transit to the UK and within the Home Office's deliberately hostile and punitive asylum system.

In terms of accommodation, responsibility for housing people with refugee status passes to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, which is already labouring under a [social housing waiting list](#) of nearly 47,000 households (more than six out of ten of them officially recognised as homeless). Because people have been unable to work, they have no savings. This means that the private rental sector is closed to them; even if they had been able to find a property and secure employment which would cover their rent, they would be required to make significant deposits and/or have someone act as guarantor, meaning that this option is essentially unavailable.

In these circumstances, both NIHE and Mears literally advise people to turn up at NIHE offices on the day of their eviction, with their families and belongings, and wait for NIHE to arrange something for them. People have done so only to wait the entire day, and then be moved to a new, often far-flung hotel.

This is because in practice, due to the housing shortage the Housing Executive is lodging new refugees in “non-standard / emergency temporary accommodation”, most often in different hotel rooms dispersed around the north. These hotel rooms are frequently very far from the hotel rooms where families had been living before – so far from schools, GPs, churches, friends and other supports families may have built up. In these new hotel settings, families have no access to laundry or cooking facilities and, due to asylum support being cut off before Universal Credit payments have a hope of being received, no money with which to buy hotel meals – or anything else.

### **Barriers to accessing work**

Being displaced to a new and unfamiliar area is one barrier to people finding and being able to access work to support themselves and their children. Another is the temporary nature of their accommodation – they are told by the Housing Executive that they will be moved somewhere permanent as soon as possible, but they have no idea when this will be, or even where it might be. People are literally being moved right across the north, from one day to the next. As such they are in no position to apply for work, even if an employer was willing to hire them in such uncertain circumstances.

A third barrier is transport. Northern Ireland is a car-dependent place; people did have public transport passes provided by the Department for Infrastructure on a pilot scheme (this is now reportedly coming to a close, without plans to continue it), but the public transport here is very limited in scope and reach. Simply put, many people are being placed

in hotels without access to public transport and without the resources to pay taxis to even get to one-off interviews, much less regular work.

Finally, parents face an additional obstacle in childcare. Families are moved out of area, away from their children's schools. They are told that the new placement is temporary; at any rate, the Education Authority has in the last week announced a new policy of not offering school places to children in temporary accommodation, until such time as they have been allocated a permanent place to live – something wholly out of their and their parents' control. The result is that children are now 'home' during the day instead of in school, meaning that parents are not free to look for work.

In another example of how this issue impacts families, a [BBC press report](#) from earlier this week (3 September 2024) related in detail how one newly recognised refugee family has been forced into debt, having had to borrow money to buy and run a car so that the children can maintain their existing places at their school in Belfast after the family were moved to temporary accommodation in a hotel in Newry 35 miles (56 km) away.

## **Conclusion**

Decades of successive governments' 'hostile environment' policies eroded the supports and options available to families seeking international protection, denying them the ability to support themselves and making them wholly dependent on a hostile system while they waited for a decision on their claim.

In the past year, an unprecedented number of asylum decisions have been issued by the Home Office – many of them positive grants of refugee or humanitarian status. However, the combination of an acute housing crisis here and a flawed and limited welfare system means that parents' new status allows for very little change to their impoverished and dependent situation. Many families now find themselves just as deeply entrenched in need as before – with new and unexpected barriers to finding work, making a permanent home and finally being able to provide the life they want for their families.

The issues they face are not particular to them – disadvantaged families throughout the north face the same unwanted, relentless struggle with unemployment and homelessness – but they are new to families who understandably believed that the long-awaited grant of legal status and the right to work would open the door to change.