



BRIEFING PAPER

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Asylum accommodation: the use of hotels and military barracks

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Many Members of Parliament are receiving correspondence from constituents asking about the use of hotels and former military barracks to accommodate people seeking asylum.

This short briefing is intended to help Members and their staff respond to common questions. It provides some background information about the policy on the use of hotels and former military barracks as asylum accommodation, the reasons why there has been an increase in their use, and the available data on how many people seeking asylum are being accommodated in this way.

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1. Why are some people seeking asylum being accommodated in hotels?

It is not typical for asylum seekers to be accommodated in hotels. Hotels are one kind of contingency accommodation which may be used by the Home Office's asylum accommodation providers when there is a good reason to do so.

It is worth noting that even when hotels are used as a form of accommodation, it is highly unlikely that asylum seekers are receiving the same quality of service that a paying guest would receive.

Over the past few years hotels have been used very infrequently, the exception being in 2016 during the European migrant crisis. In September 2019, there was another steep rise in their use. The number has remained higher than usual ever since.

Hotels are used as a form of *initial accommodation*, for people who have recently made an asylum claim. The Home Office aims to move people into longer-term accommodation after 35 days. This longer-term accommodation is also known as *dispersal accommodation* because asylum seekers are dispersed around the country, with no choice as to where they live.

There are various concerns about the suitability of hotels as asylum accommodation, many of which predate the coronavirus pandemic. Successive governments have taken the view that hotels should only be used as contingency accommodation.

Increasing use since September 2019

The rise in the use of hotels for initial accommodation in September was partly due to an increase in asylum applications in 2019, compared with the previous year. There was also a switchover to new contracts for the provision of asylum accommodation in September. While this did not cause problems in most parts of the country, the new contractor in the North East and Yorkshire and the Humber (Mears) was unable to agree a deal with the former housing provider and had to move around 2,500 asylum seekers into new properties. This also meant that there was a general shortage of dispersal accommodation in that region (which houses the most asylum seekers) so new entrants into the asylum system had to wait longer in initial accommodation, which included hotels.

Figures published by the National Audit Office show that at the end of March 2020, there were around 1,200 asylum seekers in contingency accommodation such as hotels across the UK.¹ This was out of around 48,000 housed asylum seekers in total.

Use during Covid-19 pandemic

Although the number of asylum applications received by the UK reduced during lockdown, the number of people in contingency accommodation such as hotels has risen since March 2020. This is because it has been necessary to move some new and pre-existing asylum applicants into hotels as part of measures to reduce the spread of Covid-19. It has not been widespread practice to move asylum seekers to reduce the risk of spreading Covid-19, although moves did take place at scale in Glasgow because the initial accommodation there was deemed unsuitable for social distancing.

A [Home Office factsheet](#) explains:

¹ NAO, [Asylum accommodation and support](#), HC 375, 3 July 2020, p.35

It has been necessary to temporarily house a proportion of asylum seekers in hotels to make sure they are able to follow social distancing guidelines.

Since March, the number of people within the asylum system has risen. This is because we temporarily ceased ending asylum support for those whose claims have been either granted or refused. This is to ensure people were not made homeless during lockdown and able to follow social distancing guidelines.

As a result, we have temporarily housed a number of people in hotels.

As well as ensuring that people could comply with the health guidance in place at the time, this avoided placing pressure on local authorities, who were also procuring hotel accommodation for UK rough sleepers.

This is a temporary measure and we are constantly reviewing this policy in line with public health guidance and have asked local authorities to support our efforts to procure sufficient Dispersed Accommodation so we can move people on from hotels quickly.²

The Home Office's contractors confirmed to the Home Affairs Committee in early May that new entrants into the system were primarily being housed in hotel accommodation.³

1.1 What involvement do local authorities have?

Local authorities have little direct involvement in decisions to accommodate asylum seekers in hotels.

The Government notified them earlier this year of the intention to procure contingency hotel accommodation for asylum seekers. Another measure it has introduced during the pandemic is to suspend the requirement for accommodation providers to seek prior agreement from local authorities before sourcing asylum accommodation in new dispersal areas.

2. What data is available about the use of hotels as asylum accommodation?

Recent figures

As of the start of October 2020, around 9,500 asylum seekers were being accommodated in 91 hotels across the UK.⁴ This was up from around 1,200 at the end of March, around 4,400 at the end of June, and around 8,000 towards the end of August.⁵

The increase in hotel use is partly the result of 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. In the first six months of 2020, 16,358 individuals applied for asylum: 10,569 from January to March and 5,789 from April to June.

² Home Office in the media blog, 'The use of temporary hotels to house asylum seekers during Covid-19', 8 August 2020

³ Home Affairs Committee, [Home Office preparedness for COVID-19 \(Coronavirus\): institutional accommodation](#), HC 562, 28 July 2020, para 92

⁴ Public Accounts Committee, [Oral evidence: Asylum Accommodation and Support Transformation Programme, HC 683](#), Q23-25).

⁵ Public Accounts Committee, [Letter from the Permanent Secretary for the Home Office to the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee](#), 4 September 2020; [HC 74659 \[on Asylum: Glasgow\]](#), answered on 21 July 2020

While the total number of new asylum applicants was 23% lower than during the same period in 2019, the number of enforced and voluntary returns was 57% lower than in the equivalent period in 2019.⁶

The Home Office has also [re-purposed Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre](#) into initial reception facilities for recently-arrived Channel migrants, and begun using [disused army barracks](#) as contingency accommodation (see section 4 below). It has said this will ease its reliance on hotels.

Local-level data

A list of the local authorities that were housing asylum seekers in hotels, as of 24 August 2020, was published in a [Letter from the Permanent Secretary for the Home Office to the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee](#) (4 September 2020). At that point, approximately 8,000 people were being accommodated in 80 hotels across 50 different local authority areas. The number has since risen to 9,500 in 91 hotels, in the same local authorities.⁷

The list, which has been copied below, includes the number by asylum contract region but not by local authority.

Table: Asylum seekers in hotels by contract region on 24 August 2020

Contract Region (Provider)	Hotels	People	Local Authorities
Scotland (Mears)	3	188	Glasgow
Northern Ireland (Mears)	1	13	Belfast
North East Yorkshire Humber (Mears)	12	1031	Bradford; Calderdale; Hull; York; Leeds; Kirklees; Newcastle upon Tyne; Rotherham; Stockton-on-Tees; Wakefield;
North West (Serco)	8	944	Liverpool; Halton; Sefton; Cheshire West and Chester; Cheshire East; Wirral; Didsbury;
Midlands East Of England (Serco)	11	1702	Birmingham; Broadland; Bromsgrove; Coventry; Derby; Leicester; Nottingham
Wales (CRH)	2	53	Cardiff
South (CRH)	43	4042	Barnet; Brent; Bristol; Camden; Croydon; Dacorum; Eastbourne; Epping Forest Hackney; Hammersmith and Fulham Harrow; Hertsmere; Hillingdon; Hounslow; Kensington and Chelsea; Lambeth; Lewisham; London; Luton; Merton; Reading; Slough; Southwark.

⁶ Home Office, [Immigration statistics quarterly year ending June 2020](#), tables Asy_D01 and Ret_D01.

⁷ Public Accounts Committee, [Oral evidence: Asylum Accommodation and Support Transformation Programme, HC 683](#), Q23-25).

The Home Office provides quarterly data on the number of asylum seekers in *dispersal accommodation* in local areas – the smallest area being the local authority ([Immigration statistics quarterly, June 2020](#), table Asy_D11). Dispersal accommodation is a form of longer-term accommodation that asylum seekers are supposed to move into after a brief stay (if necessary) in initial accommodation, which can include hotels.

These figures do not include asylum seekers in hotels because these are usually a form of initial accommodation. The latest figures show the population in dispersal accommodation in each local authority at the end of June 2020.

Constituency-level data

There is no available information about the number of asylum seekers being housed in hotels, or other forms of asylum accommodation, by constituency.

Similarly, there is no available data on the number of hotels by constituency, or the location of hotels in which asylum seekers are being housed. The Home Office does not release this data because it generally wishes the whereabouts of asylum seekers to remain private.

3. How long do asylum seekers stay in hotels?

There are no specific estimates of the length of time asylum seekers typically stay in contingency accommodation such as hotels. The National Audit Office has produced a recent estimate of the average length of time spent in initial accommodation (which can include hotels):

Between September 2019 and February 2020, on average people spent **26 days in initial accommodation** before leaving, in line with the Department’s expectation of up to 35 days for people with straightforward needs. Some people have stayed much longer. For example, 981 people who had arrived by the end of December 2019 were still in initial accommodation on 24 March 2020, a stay of at least 86 days.⁸

The average time spent in initial accommodation is likely to have been longer during lockdown. Between March and June the Home Office did not move people on from dispersal accommodation so new entrants to the asylum process will probably have spent longer than usual in initial accommodation, including hotels.

4. Re-purposed military barracks

Some former military barracks are also currently being used as contingency asylum accommodation, following an exercise within government to identify assets suitable to be used for this purpose. The Government has said that the use of military facilities is necessary because of the pressures caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and the “continued large number of arrivals in small boats from France”.⁹

Specifically, since late September 2020, some single adult males with pending asylum applications for asylum have been accommodated in Napier Barracks in Kent and Penally

⁸ NAO, [Asylum accommodation and support](#), HC 375, 3 July 2020, para 15

⁹ [PO UIN 93608](#) [on Asylum: Housing], answered on 2 October 2020

Barracks in Pembrokeshire. These sites have been loaned to the Home Office by the Ministry of Defence for 12 months, although the Home Office has emphasised that they are being used as a temporary measure and will be handed back sooner if no longer needed. The sites are being operated by Clearsprings Ready Homes (potentially with some sub-contractor involvement). It is possible that more former military sites could be used in the future.¹⁰

Useful official information sources about the Home Office's use of the two sites are:

- UKVI, '[Contingency Asylum Accommodation Ministry of Defence sites Factsheet](#)', October 2020
- Folkestone & Hythe District Council '[Community questions around Napier Barracks use](#)' (undated; accessed 20 November 2020)
- Pembrokeshire County Council, '[Penally community information](#)', 29 October 2020

Both sites are being used to accommodate single adult males who have been assessed as suitable for the accommodation. They sleep in shared rooms/dormitories and have shared bathroom facilities. The sites are not considered appropriate to accommodate women, children or vulnerable adult males. Penally has a maximum capacity of 234 places, and Napier around 400 places (under Covid-19 conditions).

Despite the sites' heavily secured external appearance, people are not being held under immigration detention powers. The Home Office describes the former barracks as accommodation centres rather than detention centres.¹¹ The Home Office has confirmed that people are free to leave the sites (although they are expected to be on-site overnight) and are subject to the same absconder policies as in other types of asylum accommodation.

Both sites provide full-board accommodation. Residents do not receive any cash support payments, because other essential needs (such as laundry and communication facilities) are also provided for in-kind. Healthcare arrangements include an on-site private nurse. The Home Office has said that televisions, wi-fi facilities, telephones, entertainment and pastoral support are to be provided for onsite (although reports suggest that not all of these were in place from the outset).

The Home Office has said that the accommodation is not used to accommodate people immediately after arrival in the UK (i.e. people are not moved to the sites within the two-week Covid-19 self-isolation period). It is otherwise unclear how long individuals should expect to stay at the sites whilst their asylum application is being processed, how stays at the barracks fit in with the usual processes for moving between initial and dispersal accommodation, or what factors might inform a decision to transfer a person to/from one of the locations.

The use of the former military barracks as asylum accommodation is controversial. There have been some anti-asylum demonstrations outside the barracks at both locations, and incidents of harassment of people seeking asylum and volunteers seeking entry to the premises. There have also been reports of protests and disturbances involving some residents, and some self-harm and suicide attempts. Events occurring at the sites, and [eyewitness reports](#) of conditions inside, are attracting regular local and national media attention.

¹⁰ [PO UIN 95106](#) [on Asylum: Housing], answered on 6 October 2020

¹¹ [PO UIN HL8504](#) [on Armed Forces: Disciplinary Proceedings], answered on 12 October 2020

Concerns

As with the use of hotels, the practice of accommodating people in former military premises has generated [many concerns](#) amongst [those being accommodated](#) on the sites, asylum rights advocates, and the local communities. Commonly-raised queries and concerns include:

- The appropriateness of military-style accommodation for any person seeking asylum, and the effectiveness of Home Office processes to identify people particularly ill-suited for the style of accommodation.
- The physical condition of the premises, the (in)adequacy of the shared facilities and on-site activities, and effectiveness of measures to safeguard residents' physical and mental safety and well-being.
- The effectiveness of mechanisms to facilitate residents' access to independent information, legal advice, and updates on the processing of their cases.
- The effectiveness of measures to ensure compliance with Covid-19 guidelines, and potential risks of transmission within the sites and in the surrounding local communities.
- The lack of transparency and independent oversight of policy and practice in relation to the accommodation, and events and conditions inside the premises.

4.1 Prior consultation with stakeholders and local community

The Home Office has recognised its failure to engage adequately with local stakeholders or provide timely advance notice of the decision to use the sites as asylum accommodation. It has attributed this to the urgency of the situation.

It has sought to reassure local residents that costs arising from the use of the sites will be borne by the Home Office rather than local communities, and that the availability of services on-site (e.g. private nurse) will minimise the impact of the accommodation on local public services.

5. Ending the use of hotels, military barracks, and other contingency accommodation

In outlining a [strategy](#) for ending the reliance on hotels, barracks and other forms of contingency asylum accommodation, Home Office officials have pointed to the anticipated effect of (as yet undetailed) wider reforms to the asylum process, expected to be unveiled in 2021, as well as attempts to procure additional accommodation.

6. Covid-19: Review of initial asylum seeker accommodation

The Home Office is currently undertaking a “rapid review” of initial asylum accommodation (including hotels and former military barracks), in consultation with relevant interested parties. The purpose of the review is “to assure ourselves of the health and safety of asylum seekers during the Covid 19 pandemic.” The review is due to be completed by the end of November and the Government has said that it will seek to publish a summary of the review’s recommendations.¹²

7. Accommodation and financial support for asylum seekers: a short overview

Asylum seekers are not eligible for mainstream welfare benefits. Instead, if they are destitute, they can apply for ‘asylum support’ from UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI, a Home Office directorate).¹³ The ‘[asylum support](#)’ pages on GOV.UK give a broad overview of what assistance is available to people waiting for a decision on their asylum claim.

Asylum seekers can apply for accommodation and/or financial (‘subsistence’) support to cover their ‘essential living needs’. Most apply for both.

People waiting for a decision on their asylum support application are provided with temporary full-board or self-catering accommodation (‘initial accommodation’) under section 98 of the *Immigration and Asylum Act 1999* (‘the 1999 Act’). If there is no available designated initial accommodation, hotels, hostels or B&B type accommodation might be used.

If the application for support is granted, asylum support is then provided under section 95 of the 1999 Act. Section 95 asylum support is usually provided in the form of furnished flats or houses (‘dispersal accommodation’) away from London and the South-East. Single adults are allocated shared accommodation; those of the same sex might be expected to share rooms.

Who is responsible for housing asylum seekers?

Asylum accommodation is sourced by private sector providers through contracts with the Home Office, rather than by local authorities.

The current ‘Asylum Accommodation and Support Services contracts’ (‘AASC’) began in September 2019. They have an overall approximate value of £4 billion and are due to last 10 years (with a break clause after seven years).

The AASC contracts spread responsibility for providing accommodation across the UK between three private sector companies:¹⁴

- Midlands and East of England; North West: [Serco Group Plc](#)

¹² [PO UIN 110852](#) [on Asylum: Hotels and Military Bases], answered on 3 November 2020

¹³ To satisfy the ‘destitution test’, initial applicants must not have adequate accommodation or money to meet their expenses within the next fortnight. *Asylum Support Regulations 2000*, SI 2000/704 (as amended)

¹⁴ Home Office, *News story*, ‘[New asylum accommodation contracts awarded](#)’, 8 January 2019

- North East, Yorkshire and Humberside; Northern Ireland; Scotland: [Mears Group Plc](#)
- South of England; Wales: [Clearsprings Ready Homes](#)

In turn, these companies have their own networks of contractors and sub-contractors.

Providing accommodation across the UK: the dispersal policy

Accommodation is offered on a no-choice basis. It can be located in any area of the UK, in accordance with the 'dispersal' policy, introduced by the 1999 Act.

The policy is intended to alleviate pressures on London and the South East, by spreading supported asylum seekers across different parts of the UK and ensuring that they are generally accommodated in areas where there is a bigger supply of suitable and cheaper accommodation.

Not all local authorities agree to have asylum seekers dispersed to their area – participation is voluntary. Within those do, asylum accommodation tends to be concentrated in "dispersal areas", in areas of the community where there is lower-cost and more readily available accommodation.

Pressures on the availability of dispersal accommodation can result in individuals first moving into initial accommodation within the dispersal area until other more suitable accommodation becomes available.

Subsistence support

The Government confirmed an increase in asylum support rates in late October. Each person (adult or child) in the asylum applicant's household is now eligible for a standard weekly payment of £39.63. This is intended to cover their essential living needs (namely, food, clothing, toiletries, non-prescription medication, household cleaning items, communications, travel, and the ability to access social, cultural and religious life).

Subsistence support rates also reflect that asylum accommodation is provided free from rent and utility bills, fully furnished and equipped with household goods and linens.

The subsistence support arrangements for people in receipt of full-board accommodation, such as initial accommodation centres or hotels, have been different. Following a recent review, people in these types of accommodation are now eligible for a weekly cash payment of £8. This is to cover their needs for clothes, non-prescription medicines and travel. The accommodation provider is responsible for providing for their needs related to food and toiletries. The Government considers that the package of cash and "in kind" support is of equivalent value to the subsistence payments for people in dispersal accommodation.

Support for refused asylum seekers

Refused asylum seekers generally stop being eligible for asylum support after they have completed the appeals process.

The Home Office would only continue to provide support to a refused asylum seeker until their departure from the UK if:

- the Home Office accepts that there is a temporary obstacle preventing the person's departure from the UK; or
- the household includes children under 18.

Refused asylum seekers in other scenarios are not eligible for continued support and are expected to leave the UK. If they don't they are liable to an enforced removal.

8. How much does it cost to house asylum seekers?

The cost of providing housing, advice and assistance, and the weekly subsistence allowance to asylum seekers is borne by the Home Office, rather than local authorities.

Housing, including contingency accommodation such as hotels, is provided via the Home Office's contractors. The value of contracts awarded to provide asylum accommodation and support is around £4.0 billion over the next ten years (2019 to 2029) or £400 million per year.

It is up to the contractor responsible for each specific area to determine how much to pay for asylum accommodation. However the NAO has estimated that the cost of accommodation and support is on average **around £560 per month, per asylum seeker**.