

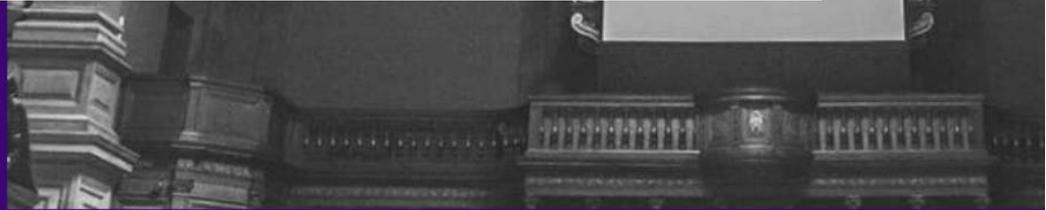


THE  
BUCHANAN  
INSTITUTE

# Structural Crisis: Asylum Seeker Housing in Scotland.

Through the Lens of COVID-19: A Call for a New Approach.

March 2021



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# 1. About the Researchers

## **Asha Trivedy**

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I am a final year history student passionate about social issues including migrant rights and housing, as well as ending the hostile environment. With this paper we hope to bring more attention to the problems that asylum seekers in Glasgow and across the UK who have been failed by the system are facing.

## **Mia L Forton**

MA (Hons) International Relations and International Law - [mia.l.forton@gmail.com](mailto:mia.l.forton@gmail.com)

This project has been created in the COVID-19 pandemic - a time where solidarity, respect and understanding are crucial in research to hold those accountable for their actions. It has combined my passion for using the student voice to advocate for those at disadvantage, with empathic practical solutions to begin the long path to ending the hostile environment in Scotland. I have been incredibly moved by the passion and bravery of all those we have spoken to, and I thank them very much.

## **Michael King**

MSc International Relations - [michaelking1012@outlook.com](mailto:michaelking1012@outlook.com)

I believe it is the responsibility of every individual to be a part of the solutions to the social injustices present in our society. In shining a light on this vital issue, I hope to have had a tangible role in the betterment of the circumstances of others.

## **Rachael Osgood**

MA (Hons) Sustainable Development and Social Anthropology - [rachael.osgood@gmail.com](mailto:rachael.osgood@gmail.com)

It is my hope that this work contributes, in some small way, to the sustained, multi-generational, multi-organizational commitments of our partners within Scotland who are concerned with the importance of the home. Their inspirational work is indicative of an orientation not just to deeply ingrained ethical principles of justice, but of a practical and powerful orientation towards the need for systemic immigration reform.

## **Sian McIlwaine**

MSc International Development - [sian-eve@hotmail.com](mailto:sian-eve@hotmail.com)

Asylum seekers and refugees have fled traumatic and horrific situations. It is our duty as human beings to stand with them, to overcome the injustices and inequalities they face and to ensure that they are given every opportunity to enjoy a happy life. I hope that this project, through our research and the voices of asylum seekers, contributes to improving the asylum system, challenges the 'hostile environment' and ensures that asylum seekers are protected and cared for in Scotland and the UK.

## **Zainab Hashmi**

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I believe strongly in our collective responsibility to advocate for those in our society who are most vulnerable, especially during challenging times such as these. Through this project, we hope to be part of the wider movement advocating for systematic immigration change and practical solutions to help asylum seekers in the UK to live safe and fulfilling lives.



## 2. Foreword and Acknowledgements

### 2.1 Foreword

The system for housing asylum seekers in the UK raises cause for considerable concern.

People are forbidden to work; forced, for months or years on end, to rely on private contractors for their accommodation and support while their asylum claim is waiting to be resolved. Glasgow has the biggest asylum seeker population in the UK, with over 5,000 individuals being accommodated in the city. The Home Office operates through the Mears Group, a company with little experience of housing human beings, let alone those from diverse backgrounds with multiple vulnerabilities.

Their business model is simple. The companies receive £560 per asylum seeker per month from the Home Office, and then try to find the cheapest accommodation possible from local landlords. Since the pandemic began, Mears Group has forced people to live in horrid accommodation, sharing with complete strangers, in order to generate a profit. They also moved asylum seekers out of their homes into hotels, at rock-bottom prices, and stopped their allowance of £5.39 a day.

Working alongside ourselves and other third-sector organisations, the authors have created a well-rounded, accurate, and in-depth report which will surely contribute to the efforts to bring about change. With asylum seeker accommodation in specific focus, they convey the inhumane conditions that vulnerable people are being subjected to; highlighting the abhorrent policies that permeate every aspect of the asylum system. Asylum seekers are amongst the most vulnerable populations in society. This vulnerability is both exacerbated by the Mears Group and the Home Office, and *created* through the unfair policies they enact. In utilising COVID-19 as a lens, the authors are able to further unravel the threads of cruelty embedded in the fabric of the system.

As a charity operating on the ground, we have an obligation to highlight these wrongs and push for people's human rights to be respected. We have witnessed unimaginable suffering with almost no scrutiny. A culture of fear ensures that complaints from the people affected are suppressed. The number of global refugees is increasing and will continue to do so. When people are left on the margins with no hope, it is not only 'them' who suffer, it affects "us" and the rest of society as well. Each of us has a duty to highlight these abuses of human rights. They must never become normalised.

The work of the authors has been inspiring and humbling. I reaffirm, to all readers - never underestimate the power of a small group to make change.

Robina Qureshi  
CEO

Positive Action in Housing

*Positive Action in Housing is an independent, anti-racist homelessness and human rights charity dedicated to supporting people from refugee, asylum seeking and migrant backgrounds to rebuild their lives. We believe in a society where everyone has the right to live safe and dignified lives, free from poverty, homelessness, or inequality.*

## 2.2 Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincerest gratitude to all those who have helped shape this report. Thank you to Robina Qureshi, Selina Hales, Tim Lehuraux, Grant McPhail, and Lynn Stevenson Hatayama for your continuous expertise and support - this work could not have been completed without you. Your dedication toward all that you undertake, along with the continuous support you give to all those around you, will never go unnoticed.

We would also like to thank in particular the anonymous asylum seekers who have shared in the formation of this project. You exhibit such bravery, not only in sharing your voice within a culture of fear that silences so many vulnerable individuals, but in your unending fight for a life worth the value you as a person so deeply hold. We have been profoundly moved by your words and humbled by your strength. We hope that this project demonstrates that there will always, always, be those who stand beside you.

## 3 Executive Summary

This policy report exposes the disastrous structures of asylum seeker housing and accommodation in Scotland. Asylum seeking in the UK is reserved under the remit of the Home Office<sup>1</sup>. In Glasgow - the only dispersal city in Scotland - the Home Office outsources the responsibility of housing asylum seekers<sup>2</sup> to private companies, currently the Mears Group. The proliferation of privatisation has fostered dehumanised priorities centred on cost-cutting and profiteering. As a result, purposeful managerial negligence, intimately intertwined with a lack of support provision, leaves asylum seekers to suffer in dilapidated and impoverished housing conditions. Third-sector organisations, who are underfunded and undervalued by the Home Office, have had to step into the role of supporting asylum seekers in light of such failings.

It is made deliberately unclear whether accountability lies with the Home Office or the Mears Group. In this, the overarching lack of checks and balances becomes mutually utilised by both parties as a method of *“suppressing asylum seeker complaints”* (McPhail 2021; Qureshi 2021).

The lack of clear accountability has also fostered the development of a dangerous and destructive culture of fear. The Home Office and the Mears Group engage in deliberate tactics of hostility and intimidation. This combines with the exploitation of asylum seekers’ dependence on the Home Office for both their application-status and their livelihood - preventing individuals from speaking out about the abuses they have endured. Corporate focus on cost-cutting has resulted in: inefficient accommodation services, the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, violations of human rights, and delayed accommodation provision.

This report utilises the current COVID-19 pandemic as a lens to expose both an array of structural failures, as well as the lack of protections in place to handle developing crises. In March of 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic, the Home Office issued guidelines for ‘protecting’ asylum

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<sup>1</sup> **Asylum as a reserved issue:** Currently, the issue of rights to asylum and immigration are reserved to the UK government (Home Office), meaning that the Scottish government does not have power to settle asylum seekers. Nonetheless, asylum seekers can be moved to Scotland (Glasgow) as part of the UK Government’s dispersal policy within the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, Provision 101, (1): “The Secretary of State may by order designate as reception zones - (b) areas in Scotland consisting of the areas of one or more local authorities.”

The issue of housing, however, is **devolved** to the Scottish parliament and therefore they have the power to negotiate with the UK government over the issue of asylum housing. It is for this reason **that we aim our policy proposal at both the Home Office and the Scottish Government** - both have responsibility for providing asylum seekers with safe and adequate housing.

<sup>2</sup> Asylum seekers will herein be defined as a person who has left their home country as a political refugee and is seeking asylum in another country. The UK has an external duty to assist asylum seekers via being party to international agreements: United Nations Refugee Convention 1951, The 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, and the 1953 European Convention on Human Rights. Asylum seekers are awaiting the government to grant them settled asylum status (as opposed to refugees, who have their right to asylum approved and have the right to work). The *1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* holds the UK Home Office accountable to international legislative bodies.

seekers. The majority of asylum seekers were moved from private community-based accommodation to hotels managed by the Mears Group. While characterised as a comprehensive public health strategy, this move ultimately resulted in severe and abhorrent abuses to service users' physical and mental wellbeing. However, it is important to note, that If the COVID-19 crisis had not developed, the inhumane, abject, and unsafe housing conditions relating to standard exacerbates the structural issues which were already deeply embedded within the fabric of the asylum-process.

Poor quality housing, overcrowding, a lack of risk and vulnerability assessments, and a general neglect in the duty of care has resulted in asylum seekers being placed in highly dangerous, harmful situations. These experiences are explored within the report through the use of case studies, interviews, and testimonials. Using these methods, we aim to highlight how deep such structural issues run. The sufferings, traumas, and even deaths speak to a culture of fear which both manufactures and sustains asylum seekers' vulnerability.

This culture of fear perpetuates and excuses the power to punish to mark a life as less valued, less human. However, rather than solely bearing witness to the lack of agency experienced by so many, we hope that the inclusion of such case studies illustrates the reverse: that the strength of their stories lies in the fundamental humanity they embody.

To that end, it is from the principles of dignity, care, and common humanity that this report attempts to address the current compounding crises found within asylum seeker housing and accommodation in Scotland.

## 3.1 Policy Recommendations

### Short Term Recommendations

We urge the Home Office to:

1. **Immediately implement vulnerability assessments and risk assessments** for all asylum seekers placed in temporary accommodation in Glasgow.
2. **Ensure that private accommodation providers are placed under the same legal obligations as landlords** to meet a certain standard of health and safety for their tenants, making sure asylum seekers know their rights within the system.
3. **Designate and expand further dispersal regions within Scotland**, beyond that of Glasgow for a sustained place to live.

### Long Term Recommendations

We urge the Scottish government to:

4. **Bring asylum seeker housing under public ownership**, by overhauling the asylum dispersal model and cancelling the contract with the Mears Group to **give control of Asylum Seeker housing to Glasgow City Council** by expanding the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy and based on a model similar to the Sheffield City Council model.
5. Implement a **single integrated system to forecast demand on Asylum Seeker housing in the UK**, in order to avoid the disgraceful failings of the Home Office that we have recently witnessed and ensure there is no opportunity for scapegoating.

## 4. Introduction

Scotland has a decades-long history of welcoming refugees and asylum seekers from all over the world, recognizing that it is a basic human right to seek asylum in another country. Although Scotland is often held up as an example of a welcoming country, there exist substantial structural problems with the ways that the care of asylum seekers has been handled. While the government has identified housing as an essential component in its refugee integration strategy, it is clear that there is still much progress to be made before accommodation for service users is up to an acceptable standard. Most recently, significant issues have developed including rising rates of homelessness and dangerous conditions in hotel accommodation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the overarching presence of blatant privatization, and the systematic production of a hostile environment through a culture of fear, serious neglect of those living in temporary accommodation has become the norm.

We are deeply concerned with the abuses of dignity, safety, and wellbeing of asylum seekers which foreground this situation. This report highlights why change to the current system is so vital, and how this change could be feasibly achieved over both the short and long term. Our aim, shared by non-profit organizations, political groups, and the wider community alike, is to create a *truly* welcoming and safe Scotland for refugees and asylum seekers; to end the hostile environment which undermines the safety and eventual flourishing of such vulnerable groups; and, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, to pay witness to the acute need for comprehensive reform of Scotland's response infrastructure. This crisis is but one of many which will come to define the 21st century, and it is our duty to ensure that Scotland will have the capacity to facilitate a practical and empathetic response.

### *Key Findings*

**The Issue:** We investigate the structural conditions of asylum housing in Scotland and give insight into the factors that have caused the crisis in Glasgow.

We aim to show:

- (i) The existence of structural issues
- (ii) How these have constructed a system unfit for purpose; that is unable to respond to crisis.

We argue that there has been a policy shift from community-based accommodation to institutional-based accommodation due to a sub-par dispersal policy, reliance on private contractors, hostile environment in political rhetoric, and little holistic resourcing of local authorities. We argue that these structural issues are the result of, and reinforce the COVID-19 response, which has been criticised widely after the harrowing events of 2020-2021 that can be seen throughout this report. Our use of COVID-19 as both a case and analytic of study, aims to illustrate the existence of wider structural issues that must be immediately addressed.

**Our Recommendations:** Our policy recommendations are a direct response to the issues identified in our report and have been crafted to place the wellbeing of the asylum seeker at the forefront of our legislation, and our cultural rhetoric.

**The Importance of this Research:** This research has attempted to collect the existing vulnerabilities prevalent in the current dispersal system of asylum seeker management. We argue that all such vulnerabilities compound, create, reinforce, and perpetuate a system that does not value human life, has not been sustainably designed, and is insufficient to withstand inevitable future crises. The conclusion of our paper pays reference to this final point. Looking toward the future, we argue that without critical structural change, the current dispersal system is not fit for purpose at moments of crises, which, inevitably, are likely to continue to occur throughout the 21st century.

## 5. Stakeholders

This project aims to target two main organisations. Firstly, we are directing our long-term recommendations at the **Home Office** in order to bring about much-needed structural change. In addition, we aim to target **the Mears Group** as their role and influence in the system is undeniable. Despite this approach, we believe that through targeting the Home Office, change will filter throughout the system, ultimately pressuring the Mears Group to follow suit. **We also recognise the following actors as having a key stake in both our work, and in the proposals, we are recommending:**

**Positive Action in Housing** is a Glasgow-based charity which aims to enable migrants and refugees' access to safe, good-quality homes. They do this by offering advice and support, running a casework service, and providing practical help (such as an emergency shelter and a hardship fund). They also aim to inform policy from a user-led perspective and highlight injustices in the asylum accommodation system.

**Scottish Refugee Council** is a Scottish-wide charity which assists refugees and asylum-seekers in issues such as housing, employment, poverty, and navigating the asylum process itself, as well as conducting policy and research work to highlight injustices in the UK asylum system. Their campaign on asylum accommodation aims to change the current situation through advocating to senior officials in the Home Office and Mears Group on key issues and reform, giving evidence to inquiries into asylum accommodation, and providing strategic advice to the Scottish government and local authorities.

**Refuweege** is a Glasgow-based charity which aims to welcome refugees to Glasgow 'in true Glaswegian style,' through distributing parcels of food, toiletries and toys, as well as working within the community to raise awareness of the situation for asylum-seekers and refugees and show solidarity with these communities.

It is important to acknowledge that, ultimately, our primary stakeholders are the **asylum seekers** themselves living in Glasgow. This project was crafted with empathetic and practical solutions to improve the situation they are forced to live in. As such, we are including them as stakeholders to highlight that they are not only victims but are also active agents fighting to illuminate their dire situations, and in turn promote improvements. Asylum seekers' voices are woven throughout this report to reflect their crucial contribution in this fight for change.

## 6. Research Methods

### 6.1 Secondary Research:

Due to the complex and emerging nature of the pandemic, this research initially occurred through use of secondary sources, allowing us to develop a greater understanding of the contextual landscape of the subject area, as well as compliment the primary research seen within the discussion sections.

The following governmental resources were utilised:

- Government reports from the Home Office and the Scottish Government: examining which policy frameworks were both currently and historically implemented.
- *New Scots: Refugee Integration Strategy 2018 to 2022* concerning the integration of asylum seekers in Scotland.
- *The Home Office Guide to Living in Asylum Accommodation*.
- The Home Affairs Committee report from May of 2020: *Understanding changes in government response to housing and accommodation during the COVID-19 pandemic*.

Media reports and newspaper articles from organisations such as ‘The Guardian’, ‘The National’, ‘Corporate Watch’, ‘Glasgow Live’ and the ‘BBC’ has been essential in scrutinising not only the events which have arisen over the course of 2020 and 2021, but also the level of coverage they have received at all, and the public’s reaction in response.

Third sector reports were vital towards gathering information on the current standards of care and the situations that asylum seekers were living in. Many of these reports, such as the Scottish Refugee Council’s “*A Housing Practitioners’ Guide to Integrating Asylum Seekers & Refugees*” provided us with invaluable initial information and formed a crucial component of the process of requesting interviews with such stakeholders later on.

Finally, our background research also utilised reports from both the Mears Group PLC and Serco Group PLC in order to understand the contours of the system of administering asylum accommodation through the control of private contractors.

## 6.2 Primary Research

To gain insights into the complex realities of the housing situation, gather evidence of the abuses at hand, understand the work of our gatekeepers and stakeholders, and eventually propose concrete policy recommendations, primary research was essential.

The following interviews were carried out:

- Robina Qureshi, CEO of the Glasgow-based Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) ‘Positive Action in Housing’ (PAIH): highlighted the urgent nature of the situation, provided key case study data towards the crisis, engaged in powerful commentary on the widespread culture of fear and the need for radical structural change, and greatly helped determine the **focus** of this policy report.
- Grant McPhail, Housing Development Officer from the ‘Scottish Refugee Council’ (SRC): provided a more structural approach towards understanding the system of asylum housing and accommodation, and as such, greatly helped in the development of this report’s specific **framing** around the structural nature of the crisis.
- Selina Hales, founder of the Glasgow based charity Refuweege: Reinforced arguments made by PAIH and SRC concerning the failures of the current system. Was key in developing the **direction** of our final recommendations concerning the abilities, accountabilities, and responsibilities of the Scottish and UK government, private companies, and third sector organizations in implementing a safe and effective asylum housing system.

In two cases we had the immense honour of speaking directly with asylum seekers who have experienced these conditions. Due to safety concerns which will be further discussed within the ethics section below, all reference towards these two individuals has been completely anonymised, with any and all identifying information removed. As such they will be referred to as Asylum Seeker Y and Asylum Seeker Z, respectively.

The interview with Asylum Seeker Z was deeply saddening, yet highly insightful. Their testimony operates as a potent example of the mutually conjoined problems of hotel accommodation and temporary housing to the overarching housing issues for asylum seekers in Scotland. Their experiences with the Mears Group and the facilities in which the company forced them to reside in will be specifically seen in light purple text boxes. In an attempt to share Asylum Seeker Z’s voice in the full value and power it holds, while these quotes will be woven throughout the report, they will stand isolated from our commentary. We are forever grateful for their courage, as a survivor and as an active agent fighting for the rights and dignity of all those around them.

Following our interview with Asylum Seeker Z, we identified an asylum seeker henceforth referred to as Asylum Seeker Y, who had taken the time to write about some of their experiences in the asylum system, especially the traumas experienced during Covid-19. After making contact with Asylum Seeker Y, the extent to which a culture of fear permeates through the lives of asylum seekers became abundantly clear. Asylum Seeker Y informed us that they would not feel comfortable engaging in direct conversation with us beyond the granting of permission to utilise their written materials in a case study - until all their ties had been cut with the Mears Group and the Home Office.

To that extent, we view their silence to be as revelatory for our work as even the best testimony. Precautionary steps to further anonymise all details of their written material has additionally been conducted in order to protect their identity. To that extent, Asylum Seeker Y's voice is included within this report as an illuminating example of the dire situations asylum seekers face, and will stand as a testament to the bravery they hold to share it.

### 6.3 Ethics and Positionality

We are aware that this project touches on themes of a sensitive and confidential nature, issues which could aptly be termed a humanitarian crisis. As a consequence, we have a rigorous ethics framework to protect all participants and the researchers themselves.

As part of the Buchanan Institute and connected to the University of Edinburgh, we have followed the research ethics guidelines as outlined by the [College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences](#), in turn informed by the [UK Research Integrity Office](#). Our ethical framework, as listed below, was approved by the Buchanan Institute as satisfactory for our research project.

In engaging with multiple third-sector organisations, campaigns and networks, our research methods were made in discussion with individuals heavily involved and knowledgeable in the research area prior to our report. As a result, our methods of engagement reflect these discussions and are in-line with research done by partner groups and their pre-existing strategies.

#### **Decolonising Research:**

As a group, we have made a concerted effort to conduct decolonised research. At the start of our project, we discussed our position as researchers: educated and living in the Global North, and gave due consideration to how this could affect our end result, especially when engaging with participants from a variety of different cultures and linguistic backgrounds. We acknowledged from the beginning that due to the culture of fear surrounding the asylum process many of these individuals may not be willing to talk to us or feel that they must redact sensitive information

during interview processes. We responded to these asymmetrical power relations to the best of our ability, however we are aware that our positionality may limit the results of our research. Our aim throughout was to listen to asylum seekers and third sector actors and learn from them in order to gain an understanding of the reality of the situation that they face.

### **COVID-19 Considerations:**

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there are clear health risks when conducting in-person interviews. Thus, all of our research was collected via COVID-19 safety and distancing measures in accordance with Scottish Government regulations. We also understand the limitation of digital communication as having the potential to lose valuable interpersonal information and its subsequent ramifications on our research.

### **Participant Considerations:**

This project deals with two discrete categories of participants: (a) stakeholders (primarily third-sector organisations); (b) asylum seekers. Due consideration of the differing needs of these participants have been given.

However, all participants were given access to an ethical framework and a consent form. We outlined here:

- All participation in this project was **voluntary**.
- **Informed consent** in both verbal participation and/or digital communications: the purpose of our research, the risks associated (please read below on strategy on Asylum Seeker participation), the purpose of their selection as key stakeholders in our research, and the procedure of study via interview format.
- **Privacy** and the right to **anonymity** if desired.
- The **right to retroactively retract** information post interview.
- All **data collected stored securely** and only accessible to researchers involved in the project, all data to be **deleted** on completion of the project.

These practices were adopted in full to ensure no risk is brought upon the participants and to ensure efficient research standards were maintained.

### *Asylum Seekers*

Due to the vulnerability of asylum seekers, and the precarious situations in which they find themselves in the UK, we took great care to ensure the protection of our participants. This was managed by adhering to the following steps:

- **Complete anonymity** of participants and all personal and **identifiable information redacted** in interview testimony to ensure no personal repercussions to the individual.
- The primary point of contact and researcher was a **PVG scheme member** and cleared to work specifically with vulnerable adults. They also had cultural knowledge and linguistic skills relevant to the participant(s) in order to ensure their comfort.
- All verbal interviews conducted in a **place of comfort and safety** for the participant to ensure no external fear or intimidation practices (by governmental or private bodies) could take place whilst the interview was conducted.
- Consideration of distressing and sensitive information was known by the researcher, and the participant was informed of the **right to breaks/stopping of the interview**. The researcher would thus follow the lead of the participant.
- There was no participation from **minors** due to safeguarding issues.

The safety, comfortability, and privacy of our vulnerable participants is our highest priority within this process.

### **Researcher Considerations:**

Due to the sensitive nature of this project, heavy consideration was simultaneously paid to the protection of researcher wellbeing. Clear mappings towards external support, in combination with compassionate interpersonal dynamics, was critical in the cultivation of a space where risk of distress or mental health repercussions was at its lowest possible level.

# 7. Background

## 7.1 History of UK Asylum

Prior to 1979 the UK maintained a lax “open door policy” towards asylum. Following the collapse of the USSR, the UK witnessed an influx in refugees, particularly from post-Soviet states previously isolated by the Iron Curtain (Rabben, 2016). Between 1979 and 1994 the UK had greater numbers of asylum seekers arriving for two main reasons (ibid, 2016):

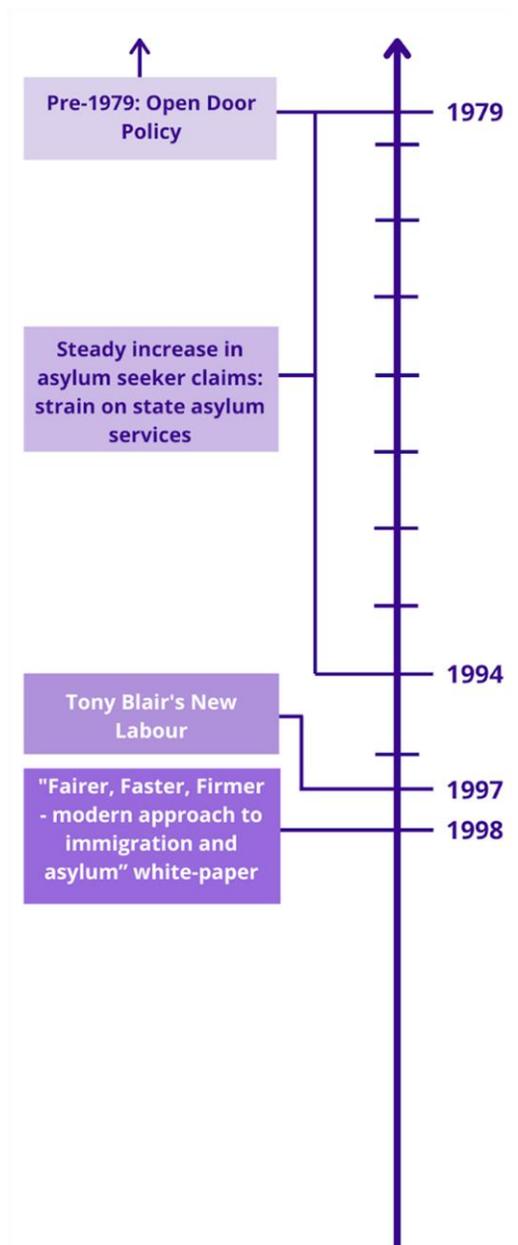
- (i) globalisation and the growth of international travel: made escaping persecution easier.
- (ii) the UK’s welcoming culture for those claiming asylum. The UK had relative economic prosperity compared to the rest of Europe and the world. Opportunities for work established immigrant community groups and generous Legal Aid opportunities for claimants.

Due to the increased pressure on asylum services, there was a significant burden on the state bureaucracy mechanism that processed claims, resulting in an inefficient system. This, combined with the exponential growth in human trafficking, forged documents for asylum, and an increase in international crime caused further strain (ibid, 2016). As a consequence, a more hostile approach was taken to asylum under Tony Blair’s New Labour.

The 1998, the “*Fairer, Faster, Firmer - modern approach to immigration and asylum*” white-paper and the 1999 updated *Immigration and Asylum Act* were released; a benchmark in how asylum was to be treated going into the new millennium.

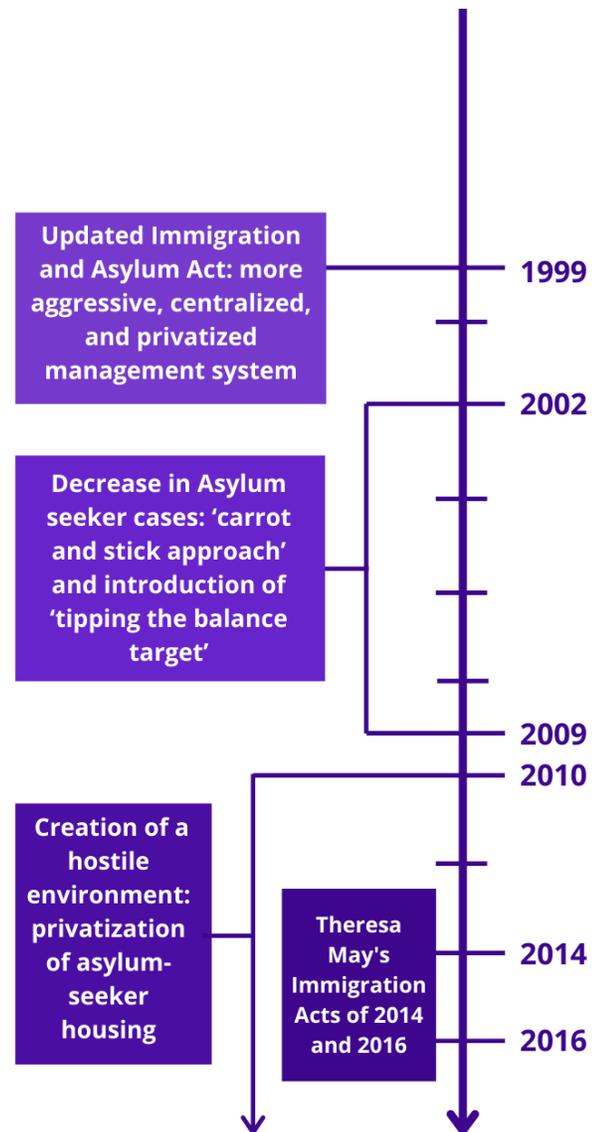
Its aim was to create new support arrangements (in order to ensure that asylum seekers were not left destitute), minimize the incentive to economic migration, remove access to social security benefits, minimize cash payments, and reduce the burden on local authorities (Parker, 2017: 85).

Figure 1: Timeline of UK’s History of Asylum



Here, a more aggressive, centralised, and privatised model of managing asylum was outlined and Labour party's overarching "dispersal policy" was launched (*ibid*, 2017). In 2002, the government announced further hostilities via the 'carrot and the stick approach," which aimed to discourage migration to the UK and reduce asylum applications" (*ibid*, 2017). There was also the introduction of the "Tipping the Balance Target" which aimed to have a ratio of more failed asylum applications than successful ones. This has become the dominant policy to this day and was further consolidated by Theresa May's "hostile environment" (*ibid*, 2017).

The 'hostile environment' is a set of policies introduced by former Home Secretary Theresa May during the Coalition government and is viewed as a turning point for the privatization of asylum seeker housing. It aimed to use access to public services and housing as a method of deterring undocumented migrants from staying in the UK, in addition, implemented a 'deport first, appeal later' appeals process. This was enacted primarily through the *Immigration Acts* of 2014 and 2016 (and associated administrative measures) which cut migrants off from essential services such as the NHS and the police by requiring individuals working in such sectors to both conduct immigration checks and report individuals to the Home Office.



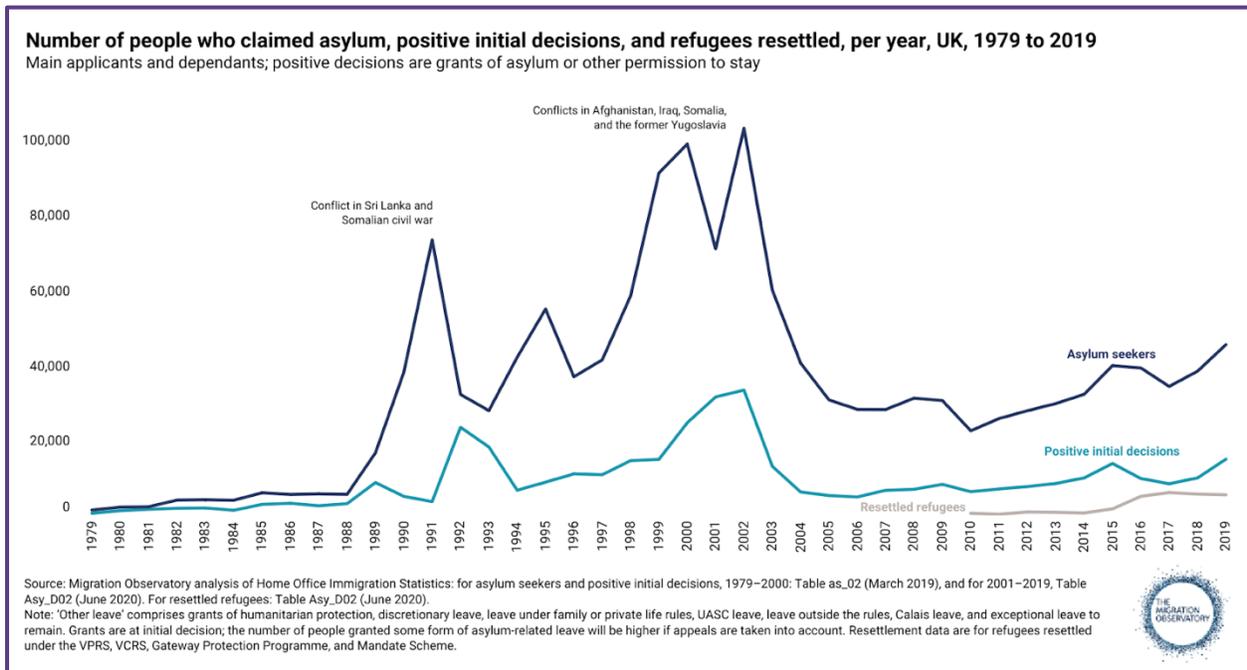


Figure 2: Graph showing UK asylum applications between 1979 and 2019. (Migration Observatory Analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, University of Oxford, 2020)

## 7.2 The New Labour Dispersal Policy Legacy

In this section, we explore the changes that took place in the asylum seeker dispersal scheme and how these have contributed to structural problems in the system.

Under New Labour, the overarching policy concerning asylum was put forward through the “dispersal” system. The endurance of its legacy has been solidified through its current use within the Boris Johnson administration. In conversations with the SRC we identified how the dispersal system, in practice, **produces two separate tiers of asylum seekers through the policy of destitution** as implemented under the New Labour Dispersal scheme. These can be split as such:

### *1: Asylum Seeker Destitution Policy*

Under the Dispersal scheme, the Home Office has the power to provide emergency support via the declaration of **destitution**<sup>3</sup> if asylum seekers arrive without the resources to find accommodation in the UK, or without adequate funds to support themselves.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Section 95(3) of the 1999 Act provides that a person is destitute if:

- they do not have adequate accommodation or any means of obtaining it (whether or not their other essential living needs are met) or
  - have adequate accommodation or the means of obtaining it but cannot meet their other essential living needs
- (Home Office, 2019)

<sup>4</sup> **Initial Accommodation:** Currently under the Dispersal Scheme, asylum seekers who have declared themselves destitute to the Department for Financial Assistance and need accommodation urgently are held - (see next page....)

Under *Section 98* the Home Office can grant government supported accommodation via initial and dispersal accommodation (which is outsourced by private contractors). Asylum seekers are not given a choice as to where they will be placed. There have been deliberate attempts in recent years to prevent concentration of asylum seekers in the south of England, subsequently separating communities and extended families on arrival in the UK. On top of providing housing, the Home Office also gives asylum seekers a monthly £140 (weekly £35) cash allowance to cover living needs, and free access to education and healthcare (UK Government, 2020).

**Consequently, in order to support themselves and fulfil their needs, people have been largely left at the hands of the UK state bureaucracy.**

## *2: Asylum Seeker Non-Destitution Policy*

However, if asylum seekers arrive with adequate funds for resettling in the UK, the Home Office will not supply them with initial and subsequent dispersal accommodation, and the applicant is left to source these themselves

However, there are identifiable issues with this. Firstly, the threshold for destitution is flawed; the Home Office will not provide support until the individual has run out of funding entirely and has evidential proof of destitution. This leaves people in a state of precarity.

Secondly, there are still stringent restrictions placed on the accommodation available to asylum seekers through the *'Right to Rent'* scheme. Here landlords "must not authorise an adult to occupy premises under a residential tenancy agreement if the adult is disqualified as a result of their immigration status" (*Immigration Act, 2016*). Under the 2016 *Immigration Act*, landlords who fail to carry out these checks could be charged with a criminal offence and subject to prison. This has faced much criticism from third sector and activist circles, and was ruled as lawful by the Court of Appeals, despite an initial ruling from the High Court in March 2019 that it breached the European Convention on Human Rights. As a result, options for private renting for asylum-seekers are limited, with many forced to live in poor-quality, dangerous accommodation, at the mercy of landlords.

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in **Initial Accommodation**. - They are held here whilst their support applications are assessed and longer-term accommodation can be arranged (Home Office Guide to Living in Asylum Accommodation, 2020). -- The Department allocates asylum seekers to one of seven regions in the UK where initial accommodation is available. (NAO report 2020). **Dispersal Accommodation:** When asylum seekers are allocated to a region, they will be placed in **Dispersal Accommodation**, which is longer-term temporary accommodation managed by accommodation providers on behalf of the Home Office (currently the Mears Group). Asylum seekers will normally be able to stay in dispersal accommodation until their asylum claim has been fully determined (Home Office Guide to Living in Asylum Accommodation, 2020).

The hostile environment under the destitution and non-destitution policy are important to recognise as it provides evidence that even outside of privatised Home Office supplied accommodation, a culture of neglect permeates throughout the UK asylum system.

### 7.3 Current Statistics on Asylum Seekers in the UK:

Through statistical analysis, this section outlines the current situation of asylum seekers in the UK, as well as how this situation has evolved. Figure 3 (below) shows the asylum applications lodged in the years ending December 2011 to December 2020 in the UK. This is useful in understanding recent trends (Home Office, 2020.).

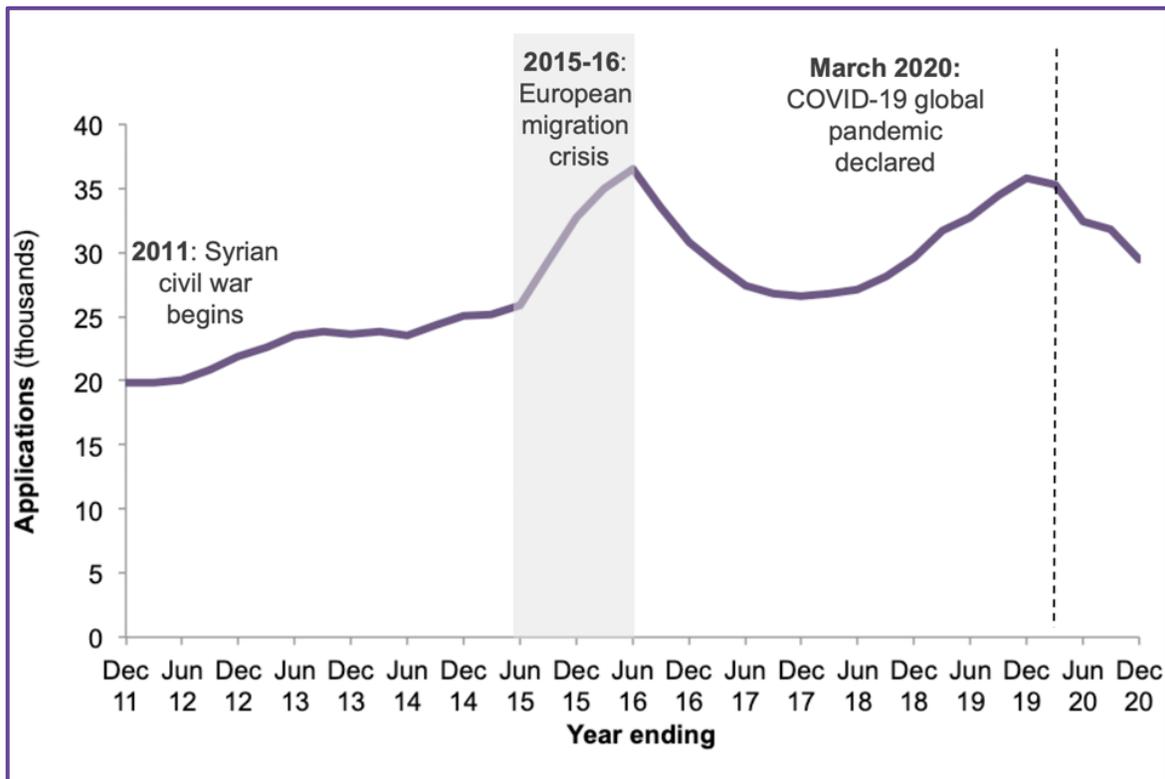


Figure 3: Asylum applications lodged in the UK between December 2011 and December 2020 (Home Office, 2021)

Figure 4 (below) shows the number of asylum seekers that received asylum support in the UK and how this has changed over time. The different types of accommodation are listed here, showing that dispersal accommodation is the most common type of support. (Refugee Council, 2020).

*Table 9: Asylum seekers in receipt of asylum support (incl. Dependants)*

	End of 2015	End of 2016	End of 2017	End of 2018	End of 2019
Dispersed accommodation	31,432	36,626	37,716	41,316	40,702
Subsistence only	2,931	2,763	3,020	2,949	2,847
Initial accommodation	1,985	1,990	1,802	2,129	2,738

Figure 4: Asylum seekers in receipt of asylum support (incl. Dependants) (Home Office, 2021).



However, while the above statistics display information concerning the United Kingdom as a whole, this report is more specifically focused on the Scottish context. As of 2020, studies show that Glasgow hosts roughly 10% of the 35,000 people who claim asylum in the UK each year. (*The Guardian*, 2020) This is a highly significant figure, and in conjunction with the fact that Glasgow exists as the only dispersal region in Scotland, places a considerable amount of strain on the city. The following sections of the report expound on this strain; exploring the problems with the asylum situation in Scotland, and why change is so urgently needed.

## 8. Discussion

### 8.1 Prior to COVID-19: The Glasgow Situation for Asylum Seekers

In this section, we explore the structures, and their related problems, that were in place prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### 8.1.1 Privatisation

Asylum seeker housing is currently privatised. **The Mears Group has been contracted by the Home Office to provide housing and support services to asylum seekers in Scotland** (The Mears Group, 2020). However, there have been two distinct contracts supplied by the Home Office: ‘**COMPASS**’ and ‘**AASC**’ contracts.

#### 8.1.1 Privatisation 8.1.2 ‘COMPASS’ Contracts (2012 – 2019)

##### **Glasgow Jurisdiction from Glasgow City Council to Serco Group:**

As a result of the government’s political focus on privatisation, companies replaced local councils in providing housing and support to asylum seekers. The Home Office gave ‘COMPASS’ (Commercial and Operating Managers Procuring Asylum Support) contracts to the following private companies: the Serco Group, G4S, and the Clearsprings Ready Homes (Perraudin, 2019).

Charities, such as the SRC, pointed out the clear focus of these contracts on profit, rather than the care and support of vulnerable people (Scottish Refugee Council, 2016). This resulted in ‘*squalid, unsafe, slum housing conditions*’ (Perraudin, 2019).

- (i) 2013-2018: The Serco Group failed to meet standards for good-quality housing and support services. As a consequence, they had to pay £6.8 million worth of ‘service credits.’<sup>5</sup> (Perraudin, 2019).
- (ii) (ii) 2016-2018: There were 454 complaints recorded against the Serco Group. Initially, the Home Office did not publicly release the data concerning the deductions, or their reasons for enforcement (Goodwin, 2019). As a consequence, the Home Office has been criticised by third-party organisations for knowing about and hiding these failings (Goodwin, 2019).

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<sup>5</sup> Service credit’ these are sums deducted from a company’s monthly invoice if it fails to meet performance indicators in a contract.

This evidence suggests there are obvious deficiencies within this system which can be broadly broken down into the following categories:

### **1: An Ineffective System of Fines:**

As a result of both the complaints and the inspections, the Home Office held the Serco Group to account: fining them £6.8 million.

However, the money deducted was not reinvested into improving the housing conditions and support services for asylum seekers (Goodwin, 2019). Instead, SRC Chief Executive Sabir Zazi explained, while the money was withheld from the original service, it was ultimately just shifted to “*somewhere else in the department or back to the Treasury’s coffers*” (Perraudin, 2019).

To that end, neither the third sector - forced to shoulder the responsibilities of such inadequacies - nor the asylum seekers themselves benefit from the reported complaints, nor the fining of private companies.

### **2: Systematic Neglect and Claims of Harassment:**

In addition to the flawed system of accountability, there has been a history of systematic neglect in the Serco Group’s duty of care towards service users.

Firstly, this can be seen through investigations into potentially illegal evictions of asylum seekers through the practice of ‘Lock Changes,’<sup>6</sup> which garnered a large amount of negative publicity (Scottish Housing News 2016).

Furthermore, there have been allegations of bullying and reported use of intimidation tactics against asylum seekers. Such allegations, as outlined by the Equalities and Human Rights Committee’s (EHRC) *Inquiry into Destitution and Asylum in Scotland 2017*, include:

- Arriving unannounced at the accommodation and advising the service user to ‘pack up.’
- Telephone calls telling the service user to leave followed by hand delivered ‘eviction notices’ (legality of these notices is not confirmed).
- The Serco Group staff telling service users that they will inform the Home Office that such individuals are refusing to leave their accommodation - implying that they may be taken into detention.

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<sup>6</sup> A common practice utilised by Orchard and Shipman it was continued under the Serco Group administration. Orchard and Shipman were subcontracted by the Serco Group to provide accommodation for asylum seekers in Glasgow. The Serco Group took formal control, and severed the contract with Orchard and Shipman in 2016 (Scottish Housing News, 2016).

- Not ‘topping up’ electricity or gas card meters, leaving people with no power or cooking facilities in their accommodation.

### 3: Accommodation Quality:

The accommodation itself was also found to be far below the expected standard, particularly of a company providing services for a highly vulnerable societal group.

In January 2017, The House of Commons Home Affairs Committee on Asylum Accommodation noted that: *“in too many cases, providers [were] placing people in accommodation that is substandard, poorly maintained and, at times, unsafe.”*

Despite this evidence, the Home Office’s response was to issue new contracts with little change. Such a response demonstrates the structural injustices that disgracefully foreground asylum housing and accommodation in Scotland; fortifying a legacy of insufficient change despite ample corporate ability - a process which has continued to this day.

#### 8.1.3 New AASC Contracts (2019 - 2029)

##### Glasgow Jurisdiction the Serco Group to the Mears Group:

In 2019, the COMPASS contracts were dissolved. The Home Office awarded New Asylum Accommodation and Support Service Contracts (AASC) following an open, fair, procurement exercise (Home Office et al. 2019). The AASC contracts have an approximate value of £4 billion and are for ten years (Home Office et al, 2019).

The Mears Group were awarded an AASC contract in 2019 and were henceforth responsible for providing asylum seekers housing and support services (The Mears Group, 2019). They promised to ensure that:

*‘asylum accommodation is safe, habitable and fit for purpose and will meet all contractual and regulatory standards’* (Mears, 2019).

**However, this promise, on a variety of levels, and at the detriment of asylum seekers, has failed to be fulfilled.**

The UK government outlined their *desired* contractual improvements after the COMPASS contracts were dissolved, including, but not limited to (Home Office et al. 2019):

- Ensuring vulnerable asylum seekers have access to the support they need and set clear requirements on both the standards and conditions of accommodations.

- Creating a proactive maintenance framework: property inspections, sufficient reports to Home Office, and time-scales for the resolution of identified issues)
- Maintaining close relationships with local authorities (e.g. consultation on the location of properties).
- Creating a new AIRE (The Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility Assistance) contract awarded to Migrant Help.<sup>7</sup>

However, as with the Serco Group case, any failure of the Mears Group to meet such targets is matched with an inadequate system of accountability. Additionally, when the Serco Group lost its contract in 2019, they returned “*all housing they [rented] in Glasgow to [their] owners*” (The Serco Group, 2019). This meant that all asylum seekers who were in accommodation administered by the Serco Group at that time, were once again displaced. This highlights a level of general neglect, lack of long-term planning, and complete disregard for the wellbeing of asylum seekers by the entire system of housing providers.

#### *8.1.4 Evolution of the System (2019 – June 2020)*

##### **The Continuation of Fines:**

The Mears Group was fined £3.1 million for not meeting a variety of aforementioned targets, with the inadequate system of accountability resulting only in the deduction of funds for services which directly impacted asylum seekers themselves (Findlay, 2020).

##### **An Independent Scrutiny Board of Mears:**

The Mears Group launched an independent scrutiny board to “*challenge the company*” (Scottish Construction Now, 2020). This board has the power to publish independent public reports and conduct research into the accommodation provided by the Mears Group. However, our discussions with third-party organisations and asylum seekers (detailed below) illuminate that conditions in Mears Group’s accommodation remain inadequate and asylum seekers continue to suffer.

When brought together, the continuation of an ineffective system of fines, along with the establishment of a problematic ‘independent’ scrutiny board, reinforce the following point: the system of accountability for asylum seeker accommodation in Scotland is highly flawed.

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<sup>7</sup> This single nationwide integrated service gives support to service users in the asylum process on their rights, and provides guidance on different services and a single point of contact.

Comprehensive structural change is required in order to address these issues. The implications for this understanding, as well as analysis of the changes which have been attempted as a result, is seen in the following section.

### **AIRE Deficiencies:**

The AIRE contract was an obvious attempt to bring greater accountability to the Mears Group, through the creation of a separate and comprehensive complaints system. Nonetheless, there have been concerns over the effectiveness of the AIRE contract, with many third-sector organisations (including PAIH and Refuweege) stating that asylum seekers are not provided with the essential information and rights as promised by this contract. Further research in this report will highlight how asylum seekers do not currently have the means to advocate for changes to their situation. It is possible to extrapolate from this that the AIRE contract is deficient and not fit for purpose.

## **8.2 A New Approach?**

In recent years, asylum seekers' precarious situations have been brought to the attention of the Scottish Government. It is our position that despite being fully aware of the intricacies of the problems at hand, little positive change has been made.

### **8.2.1 New Scots: Refugee Integration Strategy (2018-2022)**

One such attempt has been the [New Scots: Refugee Integration Strategy 2018-2022](#), which set out an approach to “*support the vision of a welcoming Scotland*” (Scottish Government, 2018). It attempts to ensure that Scotland is working towards an inclusive and safe environment for asylum seekers and refugees - allowing them to work and access education, providing them with support, and allowing them to build stronger community relationships (Scottish Government, 2018).

Section 8 of the report centres around housing. It lays out plans to “*ensure that all people, including refugees, receive fair access to their housing and housing services*” (Scottish Government, 2018). This is done through the establishment of a framework for landlord accountability, as well as a short-term ‘Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Group’ to tackle the problem of homelessness among asylum seekers and refugees. The government has supported this action group with a five year, £50 million ‘Ending Homelessness Together’ fund.

The report encouraged the Scottish government to take the following actions:

- Expanding partnerships with communities and third sector organizations through the promotion of the SRC’s ‘*Housing Practitioners’ Guide to Integrating Asylum Seekers and Refugees*’ with all Scottish housing providers.

- Creating safeguards and vulnerability assessments, as well as tackling hate crimes towards vulnerable groups, such as LGBTI+ peoples.
- Creating ‘toolkits’<sup>8</sup> for ensuring that newly arriving asylum seekers and refugees have a better understanding of their rights.
- Aiming to improve access to services: expanding dispersal areas beyond Glasgow, educating service users on how to set up utilities and access services, and promising to increase the provision of home furnishings and supplies.

### 8.2.2 Criticisms

Although all of these proposals are a step in the right direction and extremely promising, they lack a detailed analysis of the problem at hand. We identify the following issues with the New Scots Strategy and have taken this into account with our proposals:

#### 1: Concerns Over Crisis Response and Accommodation:

The situation has changed significantly since the emergence of COVID-19 and it is clear that **the Scottish Government must update, re-evaluate, and alter its response.**

#### 2: Responsibility to be extended to Home Office Contracts:

Social landlords are contractually obligated to maintain a specific level of care. However, the New Scots Integration Strategy does not extend this responsibility to private contractors such as the Mears Group (Scottish Government, 2018). Additionally, it fails to take into account the fact that many asylum seekers are not aware of their rights when they are placed in privately contracted hotels or in social housing. This allows the Mears Group to cut corners in their provision of safe, clean, and adequate accommodation.

#### 3: Concerns Over Full Implementation

Criticisms have arisen from a variety of third sector and public sector actors concerning the implementation of the New Scots Refugee Implementation Strategy. For example, during our interview with Selina Hales (Refuweege), she made clear that there has been a significant disconnect between the Scottish Government’s policy, and what was actually happening on the ground (Hales, 2021). While a nationally recognized piece of government legislation, the practical implementation of the integration strategy is mainly conducted by community funded, third-party

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that there is no specific detail to what these are in practice; posing the issue as to whether this was left deliberately vague.

organizations. Without a comprehensive model for bridging the divides which exist between these different sectors, the policy is at severe risk of falling short on many of the targets it established.

### *8.2.3 City of Sanctuary Model*

Through our interview with Robina Qureshi (PAIH) it was revealed that the ‘City of Sanctuary Scheme,’ adopted recently by Sheffield City Council, builds welcoming cultures in cities throughout the UK.

‘City of Sanctuary Sheffield’ is an independent charity. Through partnerships with the city council, more powers over the care of their asylum seeker population have been developed, and the Home Office’s decision to resume eviction proceedings for those who have been refused asylum during COVID-19 was challenged (Sheffield City of Sanctuary, 2021).

Attempts are currently being made to expand the City of Sanctuary model to [Glasgow](#), which would be an important step in allowing the Council to take more control over the asylum system. In conjunction to the policy recommendations which will be outlined at the end of this report, we advocate strongly for this model to be adapted in a Glaswegian context. Its adoption would be a crucial step, not only in the curation of a culture of hospitality and welcoming, but in strengthening the ability of asylum seekers and the third sector to hold the Home Office and the Mears Group accountable for the abuses of power they enact.

## 8.3 The Current Crisis: Through the Lens of COVID-19

This section looks at how the Home Office responded to COVID-19 in asylum seeker housing. It will show that **there have been system-wide failings in implementing a safe, humane, and ethically oriented response to the escalating crisis.**

In March 2020, the Home Office and private contractors, such as the Mears Group:

- suspended evictions from Home Office asylum accommodation
- moved many asylum processes online
- implemented contingency measures - moving asylum seekers from apartments into hotel accommodation (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee 2020:3).

### 8.3.1 Hotel Accommodation during COVID-19

The last of the aforementioned responses will be the subject of the following discussion. In March of 2020, the Mears Group moved approximately 370 service users out of dispersal apartments and into city centre hotels for the purpose of contingency accommodation. These hotels included:<sup>9</sup>

- Park Inn
- Tartan Lodge
- Hallmark Hotel
- Ibis Budget (Springfield quay)
- Ibis Hotel (city centre)
- Mercure Hotel
- Mclays Guest House

(Email Correspondence with PAIH, 2021)

The Home Office stated that the accommodation plan would be a temporary response to the public health emergency; it was undertaken to “*help stop the spread of the virus,*” and that asylum seekers would be safer in such spaces than in private accommodation (*The National*, 2020).

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<sup>9</sup> Official reports claim that all hotels, at the time of writing, are still active with the exception of Park Inn and Tartan Lodge, and subsequently concerns have been raised by our stakeholders that contingency accommodation has been repurposed by the Mears Group for longer-term use.

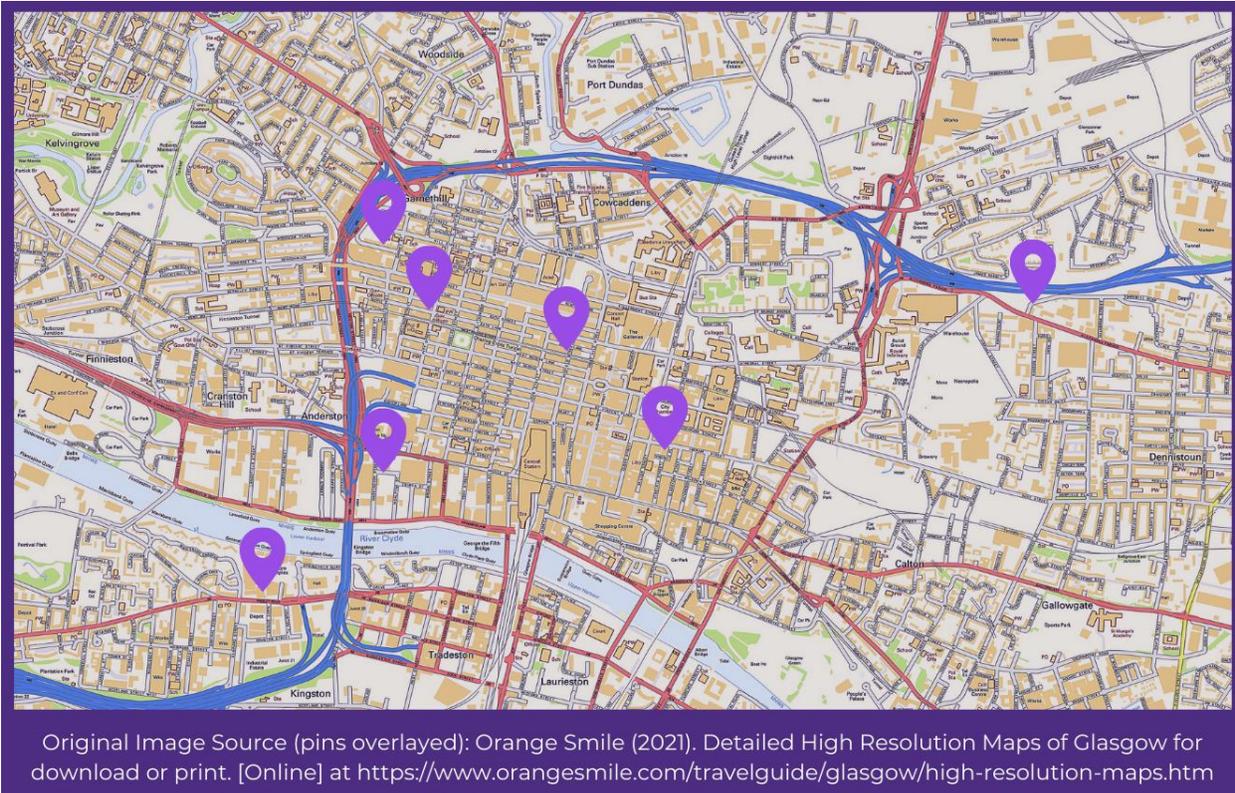


Figure 5: Map of Glasgow Hotel Accommodation (Orange Smile, 2021)

However, during the following months, not only were such claims seen to be blatantly false, but it became apparent that there was a stark contrast between actual governmental support towards the safety of asylum seekers from the virus, and their public statements which blamed service users when inevitable outbreaks did occur.

The numerous problems with the hotel accommodation system will be outlined below and is given extensive commentary due to the importance of understanding these challenges from a variety of relevant vantage points. **This will illustrate the overarching failures for asylum housing within both dispersal and hotel accommodation.**

## 8.4 The Problems with Hotel Accommodation During COVID-19

### 8.4.1 *The Move to Hotel Accommodation:*

**Key Findings:** Improper treatment during move including both asylum seekers and relevant third sector organizations not given any prior notice.

With regards to the move from dispersal accommodation itself, *The National* published the following notice on the Home Office’s decision:

*“All movement of the people concerned was undertaken in accordance with health authority guidance on social distancing and use of PPE. The safety and wellbeing of each person is paramount, and Mears are working hard to ensure we meet all obligations at this very difficult time.” (The National, 2020).*

However, there are numerous reports of improper treatment during this period, with asylum seekers being given less than an hour’s notice to pack their private accommodation before being transferred. This was all conducted without a proper explanation of the reasons for such a move, its duration, what would happen next, or even the address of such facilities (*The National*, 2020).

Such treatment further ostracises service users from an ability to maintain any semblance of agency within an already highly alienating process. In addition, the Scottish Refugee Council (SRC) reported to the House of Commons that they, along with many other crucial stakeholders<sup>10</sup> were only informed of the hotel moves after implementation had begun, and that attempts of contacting Mears Group for information were met with highly “*basic*” vague responses (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee 2020:26).

<sup>11</sup>*My bad experience and troubles started from the day I received the call from Mears. He did not identify himself properly, just said he was from Mears.*

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<sup>10</sup> Including the Asylum Health Bridging Team, the Glasgow Health and Social Care Partnership, and the Glasgow City Council.

<sup>11</sup> Light purple boxes are quotes from the testimonial of Asylum Seeker Z. For more information concerning this individual, and the reasonings behind the presentation format of his story, please refer to section 6.2: Primary Research.



*'The man said, "Tomorrow we will move you to another location'. I offered for him to contact me by email or WhatsApp, but he said no. He then said, 'Tomorrow we will send a taxi to take you to your new accommodation.'*

*'Can you tell me the address of my new accommodation?'*

*'No'*

*'Do I have a choice of accepting or refusing?'*

*'No.'*

*And that was it.*

*We were waiting at the entrance (to the hotel). There were 2/3 Mears housing officers who were registering the newly arrived asylum seekers and allocating them in the hostel rooms. As I was waiting for my turn to come, **I saw their behaviour was unprofessional when talking and interacting with asylum seekers. They were rude and kind of ignorant. They were behaving like we were criminals and prisoners. [...] I realised we were not welcome here.***

#### **8.4.2 Vulnerability Assessments**

**Key Findings:** No vulnerability assessments were carried out for hotel occupants despite many being children, pregnant women, or having significant mental health issues.

There is a critical gap in the understanding of whether vulnerability assessments and safeguarding frameworks by the Mears Group are a contractual requirement, or a non-binding 'principle' in which to follow. The Mears Group utilises this space to bypass their legal and moral obligations towards asylum seeker safeguarding.

As the transition of asylum seekers into hotel accommodation was a blanket decision on the authority of the Mears Group, there were no vulnerability assessments carried out.

Many charities, third sector organizations, and asylum seekers themselves protested this oversight, stating that it was inappropriate for vulnerable people, including pregnant women, or people who

had suffered trafficking, to be isolated in hotel rooms for days and weeks on end (*The Guardian*, 2020). Despite the insistence by Mear’s chief executive John Taylor that children, pregnant women, and those with significant mental health problems were “*swiftly relocated*” (*The National* 2020), it took at least four weeks for the Mears Group to respond and move some of these individuals to safer environments (Bulman 2020).

Additionally, Home Office contracts towards private entities (e.g. the Mears Group) includes an “*explicit requirement to adjust service where people are identified as vulnerable*” (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee 2020:29). However, this was then directly contrasted by a written response from Chris Philip MP, the Under-Secretary of State, in July of 2020, who said that such safeguarding frameworks were “*not a contract requirement,*” but rather an “*overarching set of principles*” (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee 2020:29).

In this, there is a clear disjuncture between claims concerning the contractual obligation towards the implementation of vulnerability assessments. **This gap has served as an operating space for the Mears Group, allowing them to bypass ethical and obligatory responsibilities towards service users in order to increase managerial efficiency (and thus profit).** This lack of vulnerability assessment has exacerbated the suffering of asylum seekers on many levels, as will be seen in more explicit detail within the case studies section of this report.

Furthermore, the lack of accountability measures faced by the Mears Group in relation to such critical aspects of asylum accommodation highlights a fundamental issue with the structural model of privatisation dominance at play within Scotland.

#### *8.4.3 Lack of Access to Testing:*

**Key Findings:** No coherent strategy for COVID-19 testing, plus a lack of available resources or care given to service users, results in inevitable and far-reaching outbreaks where individuals are unable to protect themselves.

Due to the lack of a comprehensive or even coherent testing strategy in either wave of the pandemic, combined with overcrowding and poor accommodation quality, virus exposure has been inevitable.

Here, residents who were exposed to COVID-19 were told that Mears Group would not test them unless they had explicit symptoms. Due to this fact, from the start of the pandemic there has been no recorded total of cases in the hotels despite continuing outbreaks.

Furthermore, despite the fact that mass testing has been available for the general public for an extensive period, including *“live translation services... in more than 200 languages,”* John Taylor of the Mears Group commented that such testing *“has not been made “readily available” for service users”* (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee 2020:54).

These facts indicate a lack of asylum seekers’ ability to protect themselves and mitigate the spread of the virus within such conditions. It is an example of how the dual issues of COVID-19 and the privatisation of the housing system become mutually reinforced. This exasperates existing vulnerabilities service users experience within asylum accommodation.

Furthermore, it reinstates a dehumanizing ideology that asylum seekers, despite being under the remit of the Home Office, are not worthy of testing and are to remain without adequate protection of their health.

#### *8.4.4 Severe Overcrowding:*

**Key Findings:** There is severe overcrowding and no social distancing measures in place in any of the hotels despite Mears public insistence on comprehensive safety strategies.

Due to the fact that service users are locked down in hotel rooms, social distancing has been physically impossible.

Robina Qureshi further stated that, in contrast to Home Office and Mears Group reports which emphasized the safety of asylum seekers through secure distancing strategies, no such measures were actually in place at all (*Scottish Housing News*, 2020). For example, the House of Commons report on *Home Office Preparedness for COVID-19 (Coronavirus): Institutional Accommodation* highlights the following:

*“A joint submission from nine refugee and asylum support organisations told us that... the majority of people in the asylum system “will be required to share accommodation with people they do not know, often from different countries, ethnicities and religions,” and that some vulnerable people were “by default” accommodated in shared bedrooms despite requests to the contrary”* (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee 2020:11-12).

This shows a clear strategy of misinformation by the Mears Group’s public relations team to cover up a key aspect of a situation which has been described by Positive Action in Housing’s Executive Director Robina Qureshi as a *“humanitarian crisis”* (Qureshi 2021).

What becomes clear from the House of Commons report is the direct and inhumane treatment of an incredibly vulnerable population during an unparalleled public health catastrophe. It is an intersection between multiple crises, a powerful example of the bigotry and hostility which remains deeply embedded within the institutions established to ensure asylum seekers' wellbeing and safety.

#### *8.4.5 Poor Accommodation Quality:*

**Key Findings:** Hotel residents live in rooms of incredibly poor physical condition and do not have access to basic necessary items or services (such as laundry facilities, soap, feminine hygiene products, or cleaning services).

The Mears Group has stated that all hotels have been in good physical condition, with MP Chris Philip reporting to the House of Commons on June 17th, 2020 that: *“translation, medical and laundry facilities were available and that there was full provision of items such as towels, soap, sanitiser, toiletries and feminine hygiene products”* (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee 2020:30).

However, the House of Commons proceeded to refute such assertions. They stated that they were unilaterally *“appalled”* by numerous reports *“that service users have not been universally”* given access to the aforementioned items or facilities, or even shown the *“financial support to enable them to access these essentials”* themselves (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee 2020:3).

In addition, one resident provided *The National* with visual proof of *“rainwater running through light fittings, from switches and through a crack in the ceiling”* (*The National*, 2020). Others have reported both an inability to open their bedroom windows, and that cleaning of rooms (including bedding) has occurred at an incredibly slow rate, sometimes with weeks or even months passing between services.

Such conditions, in partnership with extreme hostility, and a lack of information or wellbeing support services has fostered the creation of a stressful and institutionalising environment. The constraint, not only on their movements but also on their knowledge of the length of their stay, is further exacerbated by the acutely abject conditions of their accommodation.

*We were not allowed to use laundry; we were washing our clothes ourselves. [...] When we moved to the hotel, the Home Office was not paying us the 35 pounds. We have no money to buy detergent powder to wash our clothes with, so we were washing our clothes with plain water. So the laundry was locked, the kitchen was locked - apart from when the hotel staff or Mears officers wanted to use it. They were watching us on CCTV and would shout at us if we went towards the*

*kitchen. 'Why are you here?! What do you want?!'. They put a label saying we were not allowed to enter the kitchen.*

*Another issue in the hotel was bed bugs. I realised something was biting me [...]*

*I went to Mears housing officer and showed the bites on my hands, and I told her there were bed bugs in my room. She said 'No, no, this hotel is very clean.'*

*I said 'I am not commenting about the cleanliness. I am asking if you could provide me with insecticide to help me get rid of the bed bugs.'*

The asylum seeker had to repeatedly ask, and only after 4 days did she bring spray for disinfecting furniture instead of insecticide.

#### **8.4.6 Poor Quality of Food**

**Key Findings:** Food in many locations is served under highly regulated mealtimes, with very little variety and extremely poor quality. This has led to the prevalence of instances of malnourishment and religious discrimination.

One of the most dominant criticisms of hotel accommodation in multiple locations (with the Tartan Lodge and Park Inn under particular scrutiny) has been the poor quality of food.

At the Tartan Lodge, residents have spoken of being forced to eat cold food from “*plastic containers*,” as well as being made to eat many similar meals for extended time periods with minimal available variety (*The National*, 2020). Other issues, such as malnourishment, incredibly strict regulation of mealtimes, religious discrimination have come to the foreground (Qureshi 2021).

While the MP, Chris Philip, told the House of Commons: that the meals provided by Glasgow hotels would “*meet dietary requirements*,” that staggered meal times had been arranged to support social distancing, and that during Ramadan “*late evening and early morning food is provided for those who observe it*” - overarching trends within the primary and secondary evidence gathered for the purposes of this report strongly refute such claims (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee 2020:30).

*The food they were providing was low quality, low quantity, it was not enough for an adult, it was not cooked properly, not kept in the fridge. The food was kept in disposable boxes which is for one-time use, but they were using them until torn. We were asked to wash the boxes after we eat and give them back. We don't know where they were cooking [...] but they kept the food in the kitchen, and they were not kept inside the fridge. [...] **People felt sick.***



Figure 6: Examples of Standard Food Provided by Hotel Accommodation

#### **8.4.7 Lack of Asylum Support:**

**Key Findings:** £35-a-week asylum support has been taken away in hotels, leading to an inability of service users to purchase items such as personal protective equipment, extra food, or mobile phone plans.

The Home Office asserted that because asylum seekers were being given three meals a day within the hotels, that there was no reason to keep providing the crucial £35-a-week asylum support (*The National*, 2020).

However, beyond taking away the ability of service users to avoid overcrowded, non-distanced communal eating spaces, support workers and advocacy networks have pointed out that the lack of extra financial support equates to a lack of ability to purchase necessities - such as hand sanitiser or mobile phone plans for communicating with lawyers and family members - furthering isolation beyond what is necessary.

#### 8.4.8 Limited Access to Health and Support Services

**Key Findings:** The Mears Group pays insufficient attention to the critical issue of health and wellbeing for service users in hotels and fosters an environment in which any minimal number or resources signposted cannot practically be accessed.

Selina Hales (Refuweegee), stressed during an interview with the researchers that the appalling conditions of asylum seeker housing in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside the tragedies which occurred as a result, have led to drastic increases in mental health struggles for service users. Although the Mears Group is required to assist in providing mental health support, Hales said that the existing support structures for asylum seekers are very limited, and, once again, much of the responsibility falls on third-sector organisations (Hales, 2021).

The clear lack of sufficient wellbeing support is evident in John Taylor’s (Mears Chief Executive) celebration of a single leaflet about mental health support being passed out to service users (*The National*, 2020). Even discounting potential language barriers, or service users’ inability to communicate, reach out, or even leave accommodation to seek out such support (due to the hostile environment and strict security measures), a single leaflet represents a dismal replacement to the comprehensive health and support measures needed. Particularly as many asylum seekers are trauma survivors, Robina Qureshi has emphasized the crucial need for “*immediate psychological support*” (*The National*, 2020).

*They did not provide information about GP, or how to cope with mental health and their stresses. Most of us were complaining about their mental health issues. I myself was not able to sleep most nights. I was just having one or two hours sleep most nights and having nightmares every night.*

#### 8.4.9 Misinformation

**Key Findings:** There is a high degree of misinformation which keeps asylum seekers in the dark about the state of the global pandemic, and its impacts on their accommodation situation.

In addition to the fact that many asylum seekers were not told of the transition to hotels until the day of - itself illustrating a clear lack of care and respect towards the humanity of already vulnerable individuals - there have been numerous reports of hotel residents not receiving up-to-date or accurate information about the evolution of the pandemic, the availability of vaccinations, and the duration of their stay (Qureshi, 2021).

These conditions worsen experiences of confusion and fear for asylum seekers. The Scottish Refugee Council has publicly questioned this strategy of misinformation, stating that it raised “*serious concerns about how the Home Office communicates and shares vital information*” (The Guardian, 2020).

#### 8.4.10 Lack of ‘Exit Plan’

**Key Findings:** There has never been a plan in place for the termination of the hotel policy and the move of asylum seekers back into dispersal accommodation.

The ‘*Home Office preparedness for COVID-19 (Coronavirus): institutional accommodation*’ report recorded that there was a strong “*lack of detailed and targeted Government guidance on COVID-19*” for asylum accommodation strategies when “*lockdown restrictions are eased*” (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 2020:49).

At the time of publication of this report, the movement back into dispersal accommodation has been slow to non-existent. Indeed, a spokesman for the Mears Group told the BBC in August of 2020 that they: “*currently do not have sufficient accommodation to move all of the people accommodated in hotels out*” (Scottish Housing News, 2020).

Such a fact is greatly concerning and speaks to a lack of consideration for the wellbeing of service users within the precarity already abounding in the midst of the pandemic. To enact a policy without a plan of/for its relief at a later date speaks to **the infrastructural weakness of the asylum accommodation system, not simply to respond to the current threat of the pandemic, but the large-scale global challenges** (such as climate change) which will inevitably come to characterise the 21st century.

#### 8.4.11 Third Sector Shouldering Responsibility

**Key Findings:** The third sector has been burdened with the task of ensuring the basic needs of asylum seekers are met despite the Home Office’s and the Mears Group’s contractual obligation to do so themselves.

Both the House of Commons and a variety of on-the-ground charity networks have referenced how a huge number of service users must rely on the third sector to meet even their most basic needs. This occurrence is due to the failures of both the Mears Group and the COVID-19 hotels to carry out a function which they are contractually obligated to undertake (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee 2020:12; Qureshi 2021; Hales 2021).

*They are always fighting with us to not bring food inside. **They did not allow us to use the kitchen to warm up food.** We brought food from the mosque, from charities, from food banks, they were not even allowing us to use the kitchen to heat it. So, **we were always eating everything cold.***

#### *8.4.12 Hostile Environment*

**Key Findings:** The COVID-19 hotels are demonstrative of the culture of fear and intimidation that is perpetuated in order to prevent asylum seekers who are experiencing abuse of their human rights from speaking out.

The Mears Group has stated that the doors to the hotels are monitored by security guards, locked from the outside for the purposes of “*security and safety*” (*The National*, 2020). Despite this, they have claimed that “*service users [have been] able to leave the building and it is not correct to say they were prevented from doing so*” (*The National*, 2020).

However, the tactics of fear and intimidation used on asylum seekers to prevent them from stepping outside the Tartan Lodge to speak to the press reminded one service user of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the country which he himself fled from (*The National*, 2020). Two additional men said that in multiple instances security initially “*refused*” to allow them to leave, and that they were told explicitly not to talk with the press (*The National*, 2020). In a powerful statement, one of these men, a solicitor from Sierra Leone, said: “*they treat us as if we don’t matter, as if we are just slaves*” (*The National*, 2020).

The injustices of the systematic and intentional methods - which the Mears Group and Home Office have employed upon those who have already experienced the traumas of persecution, violence, and discrimination - is a fundamental abuse of human rights.

*It was like a person was entering a detention centre. [...] When someone wants to object, or ask something, or comment on anything, **they just try to shut them up.***

#### *Independent Responses to Accusations of Abuse and Neglect*

Due to the issues listed above, there is currently an investigation being conducted by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, focusing on the “*roles and responsibilities of the Home Office, of accommodation service providers, and of other parties*” in



the events surrounding accusations of abuse and neglect in hotel accommodation (ICBI, 2021). This further exemplifies our point concerning the presence of grave misconduct.

The events, conditions, and traumas seen above should not be disconnected from the larger systemic housing failures of the Home Office. They must be viewed clearly for what they are: the implementation of fear tactics, intimately intertwined with purposeful managerial negligence, which utilises the importance of the home as a tool in creating a hostile and profoundly dehumanising environment for some of the most vulnerable individuals within the UK.

## 8.5 COVID-19 Hotel Accommodation Case Studies

In this section we give examples of people who have been victims of the failings of the system. Please note that the following case studies are presented in full within Appendix 1. This is done in recognition of the complexities such stories hold, and the orientation of this policy report towards the value of their lives and their experiences.

### 8.5.1 Adnan Walid Elbi

On the 5th May 2020, 30 year-old Kurdish Syrian Adnan Walid Elbi was found dead in the Mclays Guest House, one of the hotels managed by the Mears Group for housing asylum-seekers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Adnan left Syria in 2012 and entered Libya to find work where he was captured and suffered mental and physical abuse, including torture. After years of navigating complex and often-times harrowing asylum seeker processes across Europe, he arrived in the United Kingdom. In December of 2019 he was placed in a Mears run temporary accommodation where he stayed for four months on the baseline monetary support provided by the Home Office. During an asylum hearing in January of 2020, he alerted the Home Office to his worsening mental health and was promised further support. However, this did not materialize. In April 2020, due to the Mears/Home Office pandemic response, Adnan was evicted from his temporary accommodation and taken to the Mclays Guest House.

Once arriving at Mclays Guest House, Adnan's mental health quickly and clearly continued to deteriorate. Lack of social distancing abilities, an inability to buy Ramadan supplies or even PPE, poor quality of food, isolation through an inability to stay connected with lawyers and family, and the aforementioned extreme negligence towards the provision of vulnerability support for the purposes of managing his PTSD were all powerful factors in this decline.

In late April of 2020, palpably fearing for his health, Adnan rang for an ambulance and was taken to hospital where he was offered medication and promptly returned to Mclays Guest House. However, 7 days later he was found dead in his room. UK media has widely circulated the explanation of an overdose as cause of death, however as of the publication of this report, due to COVID-19 related backlogs, the official cause of death is still unknown. While the Mears Group published a statement with claims that they did *“everything possible to support [Adnan] from when [they] first provided accommodation,”* multiple third sector organisations, such as the Glasgow No Evictions Campaign, directly contradicted this assertion - stating that: *“Individuals, racist policies and systems are directly to blame for this man’s death. This situation was entirely avoidable.”*

### *8.5.2 Badreddin Abdalla Adam<sup>12</sup>*

On the 26th of June 2020, 28-year-old Badreddin Abdalla Adam from Sudan was shot dead after attacking and injuring six individuals and a police officer at the Park Inn Hotel. Having been moved by the Mears Group into hotel accommodation, Badreddin was forced to remain in the Park Inn Hotel for approximately three months in a small room with no daylight, including a 20-day period of unsupported self-isolation due to suspected coronavirus, without being given access to COVID-19 testing.

While housing and welfare managers provided by the Mears Group were available to asylum seekers, as with Adnan Walid Elbi there was clear and obvious neglect in its actual provision. This, alongside the issues with hotel accommodation clearly demarcated in previous sections of this report, systematically contributed to a violent, traumatizing, and ultimately preventable event. As such, this case study is not an abdication of Badreddin's responsibility for the knife attack he carried out in the hotel reception but is presented as a clear and powerful example of the institutional failures of the asylum accommodation system within Scotland.

The extremity of the case should not be viewed as an outlier of such failures, but as deeply, inextricably tied to the vast array of struggles faced by an incredibly vulnerable group of individuals; a direct link to the current traumas they experience due to the housing and accommodation conditions in which they are forced to live.

## 8.6 Wider Analysis of Housing Accommodation

### *8.6.1 Asylum Housing Outside of COVID-19*

This section will emphasise the wider issues of housing accommodation through the utilisation of primary interview data gathered in conversations with key figures within the field of asylum seeker housing support.

*“More people have died in Home Office accommodation than have died crossing the channel”  
– Robina Qureshi, 2020*

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<sup>12</sup> All material for this case study has been gathered from the following sources (see Reference Section for full citations). Citation has been conducted in this format to allow the narratives to stand on their own. (Scotland Against Criminalising Communities, 2020); (Alba & Hamilton, 2020); (Police Investigations and Review Commission, 2020)

## *Conditions of Asylum Accommodation*

*I would like to tell you about when they moved me from the previous flat to the new one. They told us of a set date and time we have to be ready. [...] We packed everything and waited. No one came. We called the housing officer; she did not answer her phone until late afternoon. We kept calling her and around 4pm she answered and said the house is not ready, and she will move us tomorrow at 9am. This happened for 13 days. **We had packed everything and were just waiting for the move for 13 days. Lie after lie.***

In the conversation our team had with Qureshi, she highlighted the abysmal conditions found within accommodations.

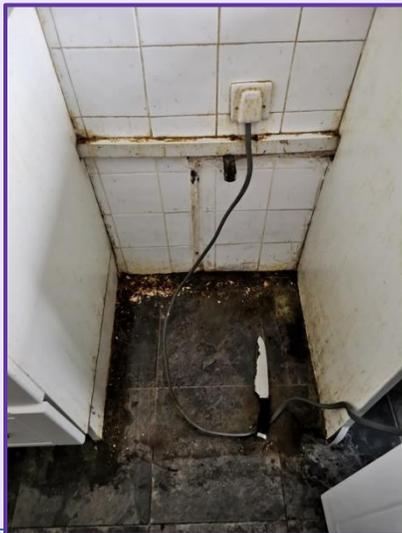
She also asserted that the Mears Group is not in any way meeting their contractual standards for housing asylum seekers. This can be seen in the lack of vulnerability assessments taken into consideration. Due to these factors, she has witnessed the escalation of a large number of dangerous situations, such as people being housed with individuals who require extra support (such as torture or PTSD victims). She further referenced an example of an asylum seeker with officially documented mobility issues being placed on the third floor of their accommodation, revealing that even if vulnerability assessments did occur, in practice they are routinely ignored.

*We don't have a constant shower, so we just use a bucket.*

***When I got into the house, it was so dirty.** There was mould everywhere, on the window, bathroom, kitchen. The floor carpet was very dirty. The whole house stunk. She showed me the bedroom, the kitchen. They were all very dirty. My bed was not ready - **there was no duvet, no pillow, no bedding.** There was no utensil and cutlery.*

*I spent three weeks cleaning the house. The toilet was leaking, the smell was so bad, the shower was leaking, there was mould around the kitchen and the bathroom. **I requested for repair and some cleaning supplies and tools - it never came. Luckily [a charity] sent some detergent and cleaning materials.***

Figure 7: Example Images of Housing Conditions - Provided by Asylum Seeker Z



### *Case Study: Mercy Baguma*

On the 22nd August 2020, the Glasgow Police received a report of the death of Mercy Baguma; her malnourished infant son lying next to her. They had been alerted after repeated infant crying was heard from the flat (*BBC News*, 2020).

Mercy, aged 34, originally from Uganda, had moved to Glasgow two months prior to her death (McEvoy, 2020). After being left effectively destitute (although not officially declared so), she was left stranded in a precarious situation with little support from governing authorities. To that end, Mercy and her baby son were reliant on third sector organisations and friends to survive. However, despite receiving support from Positive Action in Housing (PAIH) and the African Challenge Fund, she was found dead on the floor of her apartment (*BBC News*, 2020). After days of silence her friends and family tried multiple times to contact her. However, because the Mears Group engages in intentional, inhumane misinformation practices, and did not disclose her address for an extensive period, they were ultimately too late. Her baby, traumatized, on the brink of starvation, his mother dead at the hands of the British state, was rushed to the hospital for life-saving treatment (McEvoy, 2020). The child now lives with his father, also an asylum seeker (*BBC News*, 2020).

In a powerful statement about the death, Robina Qureshi questioned “*why mothers and babies are being left to go hungry in [Glasgow], why is it being left to charities and volunteers to pick up the pieces? Does [the public] have anything to say, other than call [asylum seekers] a drain on society? Would this mother be alive if she was not forced out of her job by a cruel system that stops you from working and paying your way, all because a piece of paper says your leave to remain has expired? I’m sure Mercy’s son will want to ask this and other questions once he is old enough* (PAIH, 2020).”

### *Pressures on Housing Sector:*

There exists a [wider issue](#) within the housing sector in Glasgow; namely a lack of existing housing with acceptable standards for many different demographic groups (a point highlighted by Grant McPhail during his interview).

**However, such a crisis does not negate the subsequent responsibility of the Mears Group towards its service users.** On the contrary, it presents a necessity: it highlights the compounding issues of privatisation and lack of accountability towards the safe and humane treatment of vulnerable populations with the asylum process.

## *Accountability*

The subject of accountability was jointly discussed by both Grant McPhail and Robina Qureshi. McPhail emphasised the nature of the contract between the Home Office and the Mears Group as a central issue; expressing the importance of holding the Home Office to account as they ultimately are the gatekeepers to privatised contracts.

This was supplemented by Qureshi, who stated that **it is made deliberately unclear whether accountability lies with the Home Office or the Mears Group**; that the Mears Group can blame the Home Office, and vice-versa. As such, the Mears Group can maintain their interest in the “contract supplier” (the Home Office) as opposed to “wider stakeholders,” while the overarching lack of checks and balances becomes mutually utilised by both parties as a method of “suppressing asylum seeker complaints” (McPhail 2021; Qureshi 2021).

*I was trying to keep quiet and accept all these things, but sometimes it was beyond acceptance and patience.*

*Once I used a chair for cleaning, it collapsed and I fell off it, and I hurt my leg and my back - I reported this to Mears, nothing happened.*

*She forced me to sign the occupancy agreement without letting me read it. I insisted on reading the agreement before I signed it. She was in a hurry and said she had no time to be there. **She threatened not to give me the 40-pound weekly food allowance if I do not sign the agreement. She also threatened to send me out of the house, and I had to find my own place to live.** Everything I was asking; she was being very rude and acting as though she did not like me.*

### *Case Study: Asylum Seeker Y*

This case study centres on an individual who exemplifies the complexities of navigating the culture of fear present in the UK asylum system.

This asylum seeker, hereafter referred to as Asylum Seeker Y, spoke to us about the practices of silencing that the Mears Group and the Home Office enact to sweep under the rug the *“tragedies and traumas [asylum seekers] have gone through in Glasgow”* (digital communication, March 5th, 2021). As Asylum Seeker Y had not yet obtained their leave to remain status, they disclosed they could only safely talk to us more once they had finally *“cut [themselves] loose”* from these institutions (digital communication, March 5th, 2021).

However, this person did allow us access to written material in which they documented their stay at one of the hotels in Glasgow during COVID-19. It also contained information pertaining to their experience within further accommodation. Such material powerfully illuminated the dire conditions of hotels, lack of ventilation, inadequate access to washing facilities, poor quality of food, and lack of financial resources.

Of central importance to their testimony was the experience of deeply rooted uncertainty. This experience of uncertainty was strongly connected to the feeling of internment, as Asylum Seeker Y described being perpetually stuck within a system designed to break down agency and render individuals dependent on the very institutions which promoted such hostility against them.

The result was the beginning of a mental and physical deterioration; a diminishing - a process which left many individuals, including Asylum Seeker Y, contemplating the boundaries of the only thing left in their control: their own life.

This person, however, survived their time in a COVID-19 hotel. They have since moved on to further accommodation provided by the Mears Group. But their struggle did not end there. They have reported sharing their accommodation building with numerous local occupants who do not hide severe drug or alcohol addictions. They write that they have had to cover the entirety of their furniture with plastic wrapping to prevent it smelling of the fumes. This is not just unsafe: for an asthmatic, for someone with children, for any human being - this is simply, fundamentally, unacceptable.

### *8.6.2 Culture of Fear*

Asylum seekers rely on the Home Office to legitimise their refugee status. This, in combination with: (a) the preceding accountability issues, (b) and the lack of a clear, unbiased, and objective entity which service users can turn to, disconnected from the Home Office, discourages them from filing complaints.

**All interviewees were highly adamant about the use of fear as a systemic approach by the Home Office and the Mears Group to silence asylum seekers.**

McPhail pointed out the Home Office's ideological opposition to immigration, which has manifested in what has subsequently been termed a 'hostile environment.' McPhail stressed the clear connection a culture of fear has to the power imbalances between asylum seekers and the Home Office - how people most negatively affected by the Home Office's actions hold the least influence to change such policies. This point is of great importance. It can be exemplified within the case study of Asylum Seeker Y, where direct, sustained communication proved dangerous and impossible.

Despite key reference being paid by our team towards fostering a safe and secure environment for asylum seeker testimonies, the unequal power dynamics between these individuals, the Mears Group, and the Home Office, speaks to the difficulty in receiving primary evidence in this manner. Many people who may have wished to share, experience distress and dread at the possibility that even when completely anonymised, such acts may substantially increase the danger of their or their family's deportation. When faced with such continuous precarity, these silences have been as illuminating as the best testimony.

To that end, this culture of fear both manufactures and sustains asylum seeker vulnerability. It has led us to conclude that: **The Mears Group can be accused of a systematic failure in their duty of care.** This occurs in both (a) physical dimensions (i.e. appalling accommodation conditions) and (b) social dimensions (cultures of fear, intimidation, and loss of agency).

#### *The Mears Group in Focus*

Despite intense scrutiny from a plethora of third sector organizations, **the Mears Group has failed to rectify or change the abhorrent violations being made in asylum seeker housing.**

In her interview, Hales (Refuweege) commented on the fact that it takes little more than a simple internet search to uncover both the truth of these inadequacies, as well as the excellent job their public relations team does of masking them - emphasising how effective their communication services are to divert attention away from their systemic failures (Hales 2021). In light of these facts, and through a desire to conduct a comprehensive survey, we attempted to reach out to the

Mears Group for comment, but as of the publication of this report, those calls have been explicitly ignored.

It is important to note, however, that this is not solely a characteristic of the Mears Group; the larger system within which it takes occupancy must be held equally accountable. In short, the game is at fault, not simply the player. **The Mears Group is a symptom of a much wider structure of systemic injustices.**

### *8.6.3 Issues of Privatization*

Hales stressed within her interview the harmful consequences that privatising asylum-seeker accommodation has had. She specifically discussed that using a private company for a matter which inherently requires a human-centred approach can result in a culture which places profit over peoples' lives (Hales, 2021). Corners are cut. Companies aim to find housing for people quickly and with low cost. Service users are treated more as digits than human beings; their housing is inadequate; and its quality forgoes a plethora of contractual standards (Qureshi 2021).

What results is the “*idea [developed by the Mears Group] that you can house and support [asylum seekers] on a budget that is less than that of people who are held in our prisons*” (Hales, 2021).

*They (the Mears Group) are treating asylum seekers worse than prisoners. Even [prisoners] have rights and access to things.*

While she admitted that Glasgow City Council have not been perfect in their treatment of service users - she said that having worked closely with both them and the privately operated Mears Group, she would choose the former “*in a heartbeat*” to have control over asylum seeker accommodation (Hales, 2021).

### *8.6.4 The Nuances of Structural Change*

Paying respect to these structural difficulties, the following section will comparatively discuss the nuances of implementing systemic change within the area of asylum housing and accommodation in Scotland.

*Mears is a disaster. The Home Office should get rid of this company - they are not the right company to work with asylum seekers. They need to change to treating asylum seekers with dignity and respect.*

Qureshi emphasized a need for radical change in the asylum system, specifically in the governmental responsibility to “*get rid of privatisation*” (Qureshi 2021). She stated that the privatised elements contained within the forced dispersal scheme used over the past 20 years has grown increasingly disastrous, with third party organisations continually having to step in to

protect and support asylum seekers in light of the catastrophic failures of the Mears Group to do so. To that end she called for an end towards the system of privatisation and a substantial increase in funding for local councils and third-sector organisations in its place (Qureshi, 2021).

Hales also emphasized the role third sector organisations have played to help Glasgow asylum seekers left vulnerable by the Mears Group. However, despite the great importance of the services they provide, she was explicit to point out that these organisations do not necessarily possess the breadth of public sector knowledge required to deal with the complex and varied cases which are presented (Hales 2021). Once again, more public sector assistance could significantly improve the situation.

To that extent her commentary aligned with Qureshi's in the need to increase the utilisation of governmental management but was wary of the boundaries of how much responsibility could effectively be carried out by the third sector if it took on the roles that organisations like the Mears Group currently hold.

Hales and McPhail also advocated for the idea of extending the dispersal areas in Scotland to go beyond Glasgow as a way of distributing responsibility more effectively within the public sector - but only as long as local authorities received a large level of increased support compared to the amount they currently receive (McPhail, 2021; Hales, 2021).

Finally, in a middle-ground view to the proposals offered by Qureshi and Hales, McPhail began by noting the extreme degree to which privatisation is structurally entrenched within the UK's approach to asylum, and the difficulties of enacting systemic change as a result. Consequently, he expressed that the Scottish Refugee Council would like to see the Mears Group improve through "*shared partnership*," working more closely with local charities and government. However, he recognized the "*negative associations from the Serco legacy*" that have thus far prevented this from happening (McPhail, 2021).

## 8.7 Connections Between COVID-19 Hotels and Wider Accommodation

The preceding case studies highlight the strong correlation between issues faced by service users in COVID-19 hotels, and those in dispersal accommodation more widely. These correlations are discussed in depth in the table on the following page.

### 8.7.1 Similarities between COVID-19 Hotels and Dispersal Accommodation

<p><b>Quality of Accommodation</b></p>	<p>The dilapidated apartments many asylum seekers are placed in, which often have not been cleaned before their arrival nor supplied with the necessary housing items (e.g. furniture, bedding, kitchen equipment), can be directly compared to the inhospitable accommodation quality found in section 8.4.5 (Qureshi 2021).</p>
<p><b>Support and Maintenance</b></p>	<p>The limited access to support services seen in hotels (8.4.8) faces an equivalence within distribution housing in regard to access towards maintenance services (Qureshi, 2021).</p>
<p><b>Third Sector Shouldering Responsibility</b></p>	<p>The ways in which asylum seekers must rely on third sector organizations to meet some of their most basic needs is visibly seen in both types of accommodation and has even witnessed a stark increase overall during the pandemic.</p>
<p><b>Vulnerability and Risk Assessments</b></p>	<p>Lack of vulnerability and risk assessments can be plainly seen within both sectors of accommodation provision and has exacerbated the suffering of asylum seekers on many levels. This can be seen throughout many sections of the report, including 8.4.2 and 8.6.1.</p>
<p><b>Misinformation</b></p>	<p>Patterns of misinformation can be found within a variety of circumstances: The lack of notice given to both asylum seekers and third sector organisations in advance of the move to Covid-19 hotels; service users not being granted access to information about the length of their stay or changes to the pandemic situation within Glasgow and the UK; and the failures of the Mears Group to disclose address information to asylum seekers and their families - which directly caused the deplorable events outlined in the case study of Mercy Baguma.</p>
<p><b>Hostile Environment</b></p>	<p>The culture of fear works as an intentional, overarching tactic of both the Home Office and the Mears Group to perpetuate asylum seekers' silence and loss of agency. Reprehensibly operating within all areas of the asylum process, its presence cannot be understood as just a series of independent moments or events. It is a pervasive force established against populations forced to live in vulnerability by the very institutions charged with their care; their safety; their wellbeing.</p>



*Back in my country I was the one helping people, and then here, I feel ashamed and embarrassed, having to fight for food.*

### *The Crux of the Issue - Mutual Reinforcement of Crises*

To that end, one thing becomes abundantly clear: the problems that exist between COVID-19 hotels and dispersal accommodation become mutually reinforced. They intensify the ramifications towards not only the functioning of the asylum system as a whole, but for the lived experiences of service users themselves.

**If the COVID-19 crisis had not developed, the inhumane, abject, and unsafe housing conditions relating to standard dispersal accommodation would still have existed. However, its current presence within the United Kingdom both highlights and exacerbates the structural issues which were already deeply embedded within the fabric of the asylum process.**

## 9. Recommendations

**This publication aims to expose the disastrous and inadequate system in place for asylum housing and accommodation and calls for urgent structural adjustment.** In the sections above, we have shown that the current system in which the Home Office contracts out the responsibility of asylum seeker care to private companies, whose main aim is profit, is not only inadequate in fulfilling contractual duties, but utterly detrimental to the health and the wellbeing of asylum seekers.

We urgently press the Home Office to implement the changes below in order to address and take responsibility for the current failings of the asylum seeker system. We are campaigning for an **end to the hostile environment** towards asylum seekers in the UK. We aim to hold the Scottish government to account and encourage them to deliver on their promise of implementing the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy by taking into account the policies stated below. This will ensure a more inclusive and safer environment for asylum seekers and refugees.

### 9.1 Short Term Recommendations

Firstly, we would call for the Home Office to **immediately implement vulnerability assessments and risk assessments** for all asylum seekers placed in temporary accommodation in Glasgow. As stated in the above sections, there are already (some) risk assessment rules in place, but they have not been adequately followed or adhered to. We recommend that the Home Office take a strong stance on this and stop being complicit in a system which puts the wellbeing and safety of asylum seekers at risk.

Secondly, we propose that **the Home Office ensures that private accommodation providers are placed under the same legal obligations as landlords** to meet a certain standard of health and safety for their tenants, making sure that asylum seekers know their rights within the system. This is essential in order to safeguard and protect the most vulnerable. Asylum seekers can enter the system with many different traumas. In many cases, the poor quality of housing provided by the private accommodation companies has worsened issues of trauma, fear, and lack of support.

Thirdly, we call for **the designation and expansion of further dispersal regions in Scotland**, beyond that of Glasgow, for a sustained place to live.

This is important as it would allow for reduced pressure on the housing community and facilities in Glasgow. We understand that this comes with its own challenges, for example, there must be adequate support from community organisations in order for this recommendation to be implemented. However, we believe that the extensions of the dispersal area beyond Glasgow would reduce the burden on asylum services and reduce problems such as overcrowding and lack of available housing.

## 9.2 Long Term Recommendations

We urge the government to **bring asylum seeker housing under public ownership**. This will be done by overhauling the asylum dispersal model and cancelling the contract with the Mears Group. We must **give control of asylum seeker housing to Glasgow City Council** by expanding the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy. This should be based on a model similar to the one developed by Sheffield City Council.

This step would require approval from the Home Office and would also necessitate the Scottish Government to push for implementation. However, a move to public ownership would allow for the system of asylum seeker housing to be maintained by people directly employed by the council, who, as opposed to a private company, will hold knowledge on all areas of asylum seeker care and wellbeing. It would also reduce the responsibility that has been unfairly placed on the third sector to pick-up-the-pieces of damage caused by private contractors.

We also argue for a **single integrated system to forecast demand on asylum seeker housing in the UK**, in order to avoid the disgraceful failings of the Home Office that we have recently witnessed:

Currently, the Home Office does not have a centralised system of forecasting to indicate future demand on services which rely upon private service providers (Home Office, 2020). As a consequence, these providers, such as the Mears Group, face difficulty in acquiring property as they have no means of knowing the demand on their services from asylum seekers (*Ibid.*). We are proposing for the Home Office to adopt a centralised system in order to facilitate more accountability to service providers in order to house asylum seekers in appropriate accommodation for appropriate lengths of time.

## 10. Next Steps

This section examines the aims and vision for our project going forward, and the problems which may arise in their implementation. Firstly, we are pushing for short term solutions to be immediately enacted and conditions for asylum seekers to be radically improved. Long-term solutions will result in structural change.

### 10.1 The Report Onwards

#### Main Challenges to Idea Implementation:

1: For the Home Office to transition the responsibility of housing and supporting asylum seekers from the private companies to Glasgow City Council, **major structural reform in Government will be required**. However, this is essential to pull focus away from profit and back on the care and support of asylum seekers.

- In Sheffield, the responsibility for asylum seekers has been given to the local councils. To that end, in-depth research and analysis should be conducted into the Sheffield Model to understand the ways in which implementation can be made more effective.

2: Furthermore, there exists in the UK a **wider issue of service privatization** that should be dealt with by the public sector across the board. As such, it will be challenging to convince the Home Office to go against the grain and contract to Glasgow City Council. The past few decades has seen a major transition from public to private sector in order to cut-costs. Therefore, the challenge is to convince the Scottish Government to move away from utilizing a cost-benefit lense for providing asylum seeker protection, and instead stress their legal and humanitarian obligation to protect the vulnerable individuals who seek refuge in the UK.

- Moreover, refugees can become net fiscal contributors if given the opportunity (Orjuela, 2008). Therefore, the Scottish government should perceive the protection of asylum seekers as an investment, not a cost (Orjuela, 2008).

The challenge is highlighting these issues and the urgency with which change must be implemented to the Home Office. In cooperation with Positive Action in Housing, the Scottish Refugee Council and Refuweegee, we are raising this issue and exposing the horrific conditions asylum seekers are subject to.

### 10.2 Systematic Changes and Challenges

Going forward, further research should be done in Glasgow to investigate how to mitigate the impact of these negative effects on people more widely. To that end, we have identified subsections of research to be taken on by our team or other individuals interested in building on our research:

- 1: **Housing as a Wider Issue in Glasgow:** Integration of asylum seekers into Scottish society is hindered as a consequence of the widespread lack of high-quality and well-maintained accommodation for Glasgow residents.
2. **The Issue of Homelessness in Glasgow:** The fragmentation of services by private housing companies means that many asylum seekers and/or refugees have become homeless at differing points of the housing and integration process.
3. **The Hostile Environment and Entrenched Racism:** The Home Office and accommodation providers such as the Mears Group manipulate a culture of fear to ensure compliance and suppression of legitimate complaints concerning the quality of housing and the wider system of asylum. This issue cannot be disconnected from conversations on race, and actions to rectify the compounding crises extend well beyond Glasgow.
4. **Wider Considerations of Dispersal Policy:** The Dispersal Policy does not deal exclusively with the issue of housing and is very much interlinked with work and financial arrangements. We have identified these to be intrinsically related to housing but beyond the scope of our research. Further research should be done on replacing the Dispersal Policy with an empathetic and empowering system. This should fundamentally include the right to work, access to benefit arrangements, and contributions to UK taxation policy. This would allow for the establishment of a more secure, dynamic, and rewarding life whilst waiting for immigration decision results. The benefits of this increased quality of life extend well beyond the individual asylum seeker and would be beneficial for UK society as a whole.
5. **The Constitutional Arrangement of the UK and Scotland:** We have identified that the constitutional arrangement between Scotland and the UK has fundamental flaws in its ability to improve the condition for asylum seekers in Glasgow. Although the Scottish Government has shown general support and a lukewarm sentiment for adopting a more robust immigration system, the constitutional framework has allowed the government to avoid answering difficult yet important questions around the existence of housing as a devolved issue. Further research should be conducted on the current constitutional arrangement to investigate the extent to which Scottish governing bodies can:
  - Take a more proactive approach towards structural reform,
  - Implement more affirmative action towards an improved system for asylum seekers.

## 11. Conclusion

This policy report exposes the disastrous structures of asylum seeker housing and accommodation in Scotland.

The Home Office outsources the responsibility of housing asylum seekers to private companies, currently the Mears Group. The **proliferation of privatisation** has fostered dehumanised priorities centred on cost-cutting and profiteering. As a result, purposeful managerial negligence, intimately intertwined with a lack of support provision, leaves asylum seekers to suffer in dilapidated and impoverished housing conditions. Third-sector organisations, who are underfunded and undervalued by the Home Office, have had to step into the role of supporting asylum seekers in light of such failings. Placing increased responsibility (and funding) on public institutions can help to mitigate these crises, rebalancing focus on the fundamental rights and dignities which *must* foreground asylum accommodation.

Within the current system, the Home Office and the Mears Group deflect responsibility to each other for the management, response, and suppression of complaints. This creates a powerful **gap in accountability structures**. Moreover, if the Mears Group does not uphold their contractual obligations, the Home Office withholds funds; funds which would have been channelled directly into housing and support services. To that end, companies continue to operate with impunity, and it is, once again, asylum seekers who are swept up in the powerful currents of structural violence. To mitigate these failures in accountability, and to ensure that accommodation providers uphold their contractual obligations, we have suggested that such companies be placed under that same legal requirements as landlords.

The lack of clear accountability has also fostered the development of a dangerous and **destructive culture of fear**. The Home Office and the Mears Group engage in deliberate tactics of hostility and intimidation. This combines with the exploitation of asylum seekers' dependence on the Home Office for *both* their application-status and their livelihood - preventing individuals from speaking out about the abuses they have endured. In this culture of fear, their status as vulnerable populations become entrenched by the very institutions charged with their care; their safety; their wellbeing.

This report has intentionally used the current COVID-19 pandemic as a lens to expose both an array of structural failures, as well as the lack of protections in place to handle developing crises. Corporate focus on cost-cutting has resulted in; inefficient accommodation services, the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, violations of human rights, and delayed accommodation provision. To this extent, we see the problems which exist between COVID-19 hotels and dispersal accommodation to be mutually reinforcing. If the COVID-19 crisis had not developed, the

inhumane, abject, and unsafe housing conditions relating to standard dispersal accommodation would still have existed. However, the presence of the pandemic highlights and exacerbates the structural issues which were already deeply embedded within the fabric of the asylum process. It is inevitable that the 21st century will hold more catastrophes that will result in drastic increases in international displacement. Because of this, we *must* develop a single integrated system to forecast demand on asylum seeker housing in the UK. Furthermore, we must develop policies which centrally focus on the value of human life; and which support peoples' journeys to rebuild them.

Privatisation, lack of accountability, and a culture of fear - along with the COVID-19 crisis - have exposed the need for radical structural change. But they have also revealed the necessity of short-term developments: namely, the implementation of assessments to protect and safeguard service users. Despite claims made by the Mears Group that they are providing vulnerability and risk assessments, the House of Commons, third-sector organisations, and many asylum seekers have highlighted the failures in both the provision and implementation of such measures. Whether abject conditions, overcrowding, or a clear disregard of vulnerabilities - these oversights have resulted in physical suffering, re-traumatisation, mental health degradation, and even deaths. These deaths should not be viewed as distressing outliers, but as deeply, inextricably, tied to the vast array of struggles faced by an incredibly vulnerable group of individuals. For those whose voices have been suppressed, whose lives have been cut short: we take their silence to be as revelatory as the best testimony. For those who have had the courage to speak, we are forever grateful for your bravery. We hope this work will stand as a testament to the strength you hold as a survivor; as an active agent fighting for the rights and dignities of all those around you.

This report has shown that borders, that the demarcation between citizen and non-citizen, is not only physical. Privatisation, lack of accountability, and a culture of fear perpetuates and excuses the power to punish; to mark a life as less valued, less human. Here, the words spoken by Robina Qureshi in the foreword to this report ring true: *“Each of us has a duty to highlight these abuses of human rights. They must never become normalised.”* To that extent, we face not one singular crisis, but multiple, compounding issues, which speak to the necessity of our sustained, unceasing support of one another.

**We need solutions. We need justice. We need change.**

## 12. Appendix

### *12.1 Adnan Walid Elbi*

On the 5th May 2020, 30 year-old Kurdish Syrian Adnan Walid Elbi was found dead in the Mclays Guest House, one of the hotels managed by the Mears Group for housing asylum-seekers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Adnan left Syria in 2012 and entered Libya to find work where he was captured and suffered mental and physical abuse including torture. Finally, after a year, he left Libya to enter Europe where he was able to gain Danish temporary residency for five years until 2019. He decided to travel to London after deportation rules changed in 2015 and his application for family reunification for his wife to join him was rejected and



he was asked to sign a voluntary return to Syria by the Danish authorities. Thus, he left for the UK where he was detained in the Scottish detention centre ‘Dungavel’ where his mental health rapidly deteriorated and he was put on suicide watch and released six weeks later.

In October 2019 he was given night shelter in Glasgow, and in December 2019 he was placed in Mears run temporary accommodation where he stayed for four months on the baseline monetary support provided by the Home Office. In January 2020, in an asylum hearing he alerted the Home Office of his mental health situation and was promised further support, which did not materialise. However, in April 2020 due to the Mears-Home Office pandemic response, Adnan was evicted from his temporary accommodation and taken to the Mclays Guest House where he was forced to stay for the duration of the covid-pandemic.

Once arriving at Mclays Guest House, Adnan’s mental health quickly and clearly deteriorated. Concerns over the lack of social distancing, poor quality and inedible food, the upheaval of changing living situations, and no vulnerability support to manage his PTSD due to his prior journey escaping Syria and isolation were all factors in his deterioration. Furthermore, he was stripped of his allowance to top up mobile phones to keep connected to lawyers and family, to buy Ramadan supplies or basic toiletries over concerns that “handling coins and bank notes is thought to spread Covid-19 and Mears believe that by switching to a fully catered service this will further reduce the likelihood of asylum-seekers becoming infected in this way” (TFN Scot, 2020).

Adnan, concerned about his health, rang for an ambulance and was taken to hospital where he was offered medication and promptly returned to Mclays Guest House. A week later, Adnan was found dead in room 50 at the Mclays Guest House, with the media widely reporting death by

overdose. It is still currently unknown what his cause of death was due to COVID related backlogs.

In response to Adnan's death, the Mears Group said:

*"We have internally reviewed the actions of Mears staff and we believe that they did everything possible to support the service user from when Mears first provided accommodation. This includes the provision of a good standard of accommodation, food and essentials, access to health and welfare services, and daily check-ins from the Mears team..."* (Mears, 2020).

Conversely, No Evictions Network emphasised the lack of support available commenting:

*"Individuals, racist policies and systems are directly to blame for this man's death. This situation was entirely avoidable,"* (Grayson, 2020).

The National comments on this case:

*"None of our lives run in straight lines. Adnan's life reveals the multiple pressures on one human being trying to flee war and persecution, resettle safely in an increasingly hostile world, while trying to honour his family obligations. He was desperate to be reunited with his wife and worried about his mother....*

*He was hounded out by Denmark's racist policies, and the terror of being returned to Syria. In the U.K., he was subjected to a further torture test, detained indefinitely, forbidden to work, and struggling with his mental health. He was then uprooted from the only "home" he had before being forcibly dumped at short notice in a guest house during Lockdown, with not a penny to live on, relying on the state for his food and shelter,"* (Qureshi, 2020).

## 12.2 Badreddin Abadlla Adam

On the 26th of June 2020, 28-year-old Badreddin Abadlla Adam from Sudan was shot dead after attacking and injuring six people and police officer David Whyte, at Park Inn Hotel. He too was moved out of his initial temporary accommodation provided by the Mears Group into hotel accommodation due to COVID-19 fears.



Badreddin had been staying in Park Inn Hotel for around three months in a small room with no daylight and after a 20-day period of unsupported self-isolation due to suspected coronavirus, without access to covid-testing provisions. Combined with poor quality food and no contact to friends and family due to stripped back finances, Badreddin's mental health began to "unravel". Housing and

welfare managers were available to asylum seekers provided by the Mears Group but there was obvious neglect resulting in his knife attack at the hotel's reception.

Reports of asylum seekers being handcuffed and investigated after the incident only added to the trauma they must have faced. Home Secretary Priti Patel in response said:

*"Accommodation has been allocated in this particular way because of the Covid-19 crisis, so of course, we constantly review the methods around asylum, the accommodation, the provision, the support. All of which is in line with law" (Trilling, 2020).*

While housing and welfare managers provided by the Mears Group were available to asylum seekers, as with Adnan Walid Elbi there was clear and obvious neglect in its actual provision. This, alongside the issues with hotel accommodation clearly demarcated in previous sections of this report, systematically contributed to a violent, traumatizing, and ultimately preventable event. As such, this case study is not an abdication of Badreddin's responsibility for the knife attack he carried out in the hotel reception, but is presented as a clear and powerful example of the institutional failures of the asylum accommodation system within Scotland. The extremity of the case should not be viewed as an outlier of such failures, but as deeply, inextricably tied to the vast array of struggles faced by an incredibly vulnerable group of individuals; a direct link to the current traumas they experience due to the housing and accommodation conditions in which they are forced to live.

### 12.3 Mercy Baguma

On the 22nd of August 2020, the Glasgow Police received a report of the death of Mercy Baguma with her malnourished son next to her. They had been alerted after repeated infant crying coming from the flat Mercy lived in.

Mercy, aged 34, originally from Uganda, had moved to Glasgow 2 months prior to her death. She had been granted 'limited leave to remain' allowing her to work legally in the UK, however this had expired, and she was left in a precarious situation with her son.

Mercy had contacted Positive Action in Housing asking for help to support herself financially as she was unable to care for herself and her child. PAIH gave her crucial financial support through the 'Emergency Relief Fund', at this time her only source of support which otherwise would have left her destitute. Further support was also given by African Challenge Scotland, who provided her food parcels in order to eat. Mercy and her baby son were reliant on 3rd sector organisations and friends to survive.



Mercy was due to move into an apartment operated by the Mears Group on August 19th, however friends of Mercy had not heard from her on August 18th. She was ultimately left stranded in a precarious situation with little support from governing authorities. As a consequence, she was found dead, and her baby was rushed to hospital for life-saving treatment. Her child now lives with his father, an asylum seeker from a different country also trying to gain refugee status; serious concerns are raised about the implications on the child who is living in precarity with his father, and his mother dead at the hands of the British state.

In a powerful statement about the death, Robina Qureshi questioned:

*“Why are mothers and babies being left to go hungry in this city, why is it being left to charities and volunteers to pick up the pieces? Does society have anything to say about that other than call them a drain on society? “The fact is there is no safety net if you’re a refugee or migrant. You are left destitute and without resources. “Would this mother be alive if she was not forced out of her job by this cruel system that stops you from working and paying your way because a piece of paper says your leave to remain has expired? I’m sure Mercy’s son will want to ask this and other questions once he is old enough” (PAIH 2020).*

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