

# **Designed Into the System: Poverty Among People Seeking Asylum in the UK**

## **Introduction**

Each year, thousands of people arrive in the UK having fled conflict and human rights violations from countries such as Sudan, Syria, Eritrea, and Iran.<sup>1</sup> To them, the UK is seen as a sanctuary, and an escape from persecution. However, rather than finding safety and stability, many people seeking asylum are instead forced to navigate a bureaucratic system, receive inadequate provision for food and essentials, and are forced to live in poor quality housing.

The Refugee Council reports that *“Most people seeking asylum are living in poverty and experience poor health and hunger. Many families are not able to pay for the basics such as clothing, powdered milk and nappies,”* and that state support for people seeking asylum can work out to *“as little as £6.43 a day to live on.”*<sup>2</sup> Whilst people seeking asylum await a decision on their claim, it can be a struggle to afford food, clothing, hygiene products and other essentials, and reliance on support and donations from charities is common.

This often continues even after refugee status is granted. New refugees are forced to find private or social housing without references, a deposit, or a job, with many ending up homeless as a result.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, new refugees often lack the social network that would help them integrate into British society, due to the isolating nature of the asylum process. And while refugees are now given 56 days rather than 28 to move out of asylum accommodation, many of the same issues remain.

A broad range of literature has been produced on this topic of poverty amongst asylum seekers that seeks to understand the causes and effects of poverty within the asylum system, ranging from policy reports written by charities and think tanks, to government and party political publications. This report brings together 45 sources to understand the causes and effects of

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<sup>1</sup> Government of the United Kingdom (2024). *Immigration System Statistics: Year Ending December 2024*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-december-2024>

<sup>2</sup> Refugee Council (2024). *The Truth About Asylum*. Available at: <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/stay-informed/explainers/the-truth-about-asylum>

<sup>3</sup> BBC News (2024). *UK asylum system under scrutiny*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-68927101>

poverty within the asylum system. It also draws on Catholic Social Teaching to ensure that our understanding of poverty is grounded in the message of the Gospel. Overall, it shows that due to the low levels of state support, restrictions on the right to work, and poor quality accommodation, the asylum system is designed in a way that perpetuates and deepens poverty.

## **Food and Essentials**

### *Food*

People in the asylum system struggle to afford food and essentials like clothing and hygiene items. This begins with the level of support they receive whilst in the system under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. In 2022/23, a single person would need around £166 per week to be considered living above the poverty line.<sup>4</sup> But for people in the asylum system, the weekly rate per person is £49.18 for self-catered accommodation, or £8.86 in catered accommodation.<sup>5</sup> Considering the cost of living in Britain today, this is clearly an inadequate amount of money to support an adult and is an easily identifiable cause of poverty among people seeking asylum.

Sustain revealed that people seeking asylum in both catered and self-catered accommodation do not have their or their children's nutritional needs met. Further, the poor food provision they receive has a negative impact on physical health and has, in some cases, led to the "*development of nutrition-related diseases and hospitalisation.*"<sup>6</sup>

People seeking asylum also reported their experience of food as being "*degrading and dehumanising, which had a negative impact on mental health, including for mothers who were unable to feed their children.*" Shockingly, "*there were multiple complaints about the quality of the fruit available as snacks, which were poor quality and, in some cases, rotting and attracting flies.*"<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Trust for London (2024). *Poverty Thresholds*. Available at: <https://trustforlondon.org.uk/data/poverty-thresholds/>

<sup>5</sup> Parliamentary Research Briefing (2024). *People seeking asylum: The Right to Work*. Available at: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN01909/SN01909.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Sustain (2024). *Food Experiences of People Seeking Asylum in London*. Available at: <https://www.sustainweb.org/reports/mar24-food-experiences-of-people-seeking-asylum-in-london>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

People seeking asylum who are living in hotel settings are dependent on pre-prepared meals. Asylum Matters reported that many people's experiences of hotel food were "poor." Due to lack of a kitchen in hotel accommodation, "*they couldn't cook for themselves so would go without hot meals;*" also, "*many didn't have access to a fridge or freezer, meaning they couldn't store food.*" Buying appropriate food was not an option as 46% of people seeking asylum stated that they could not buy the food they needed, with only 9% reporting that they could. Additionally, 91% of surveyed individuals could not afford to buy enough food and 81% were regularly hungry. Many adults reported having to skip meals themselves to prioritise feeding their children.<sup>8</sup>

People seeking asylum are forced to rely on food banks to supplement the poor quality of accommodation food, and as a result they are overrepresented in food bank use. Trussell reported that whilst people seeking asylum make up only 0.5% of people in the UK, they account for 2% of people experiencing food insecurity and 5% of people referred to Trussell foodbanks.<sup>9</sup>

Sustain noted that whilst the people seeking asylum they spoke to were grateful for food banks, there are several issues with their use. Firstly, in many cases the food received is long-life and not nutritionally appropriate. Secondly, it can be difficult for people seeking asylum to travel between asylum accommodation and food banks. Thirdly, it was noted that many food banks do not understand the needs of people seeking asylum, "*which meant some people struggled to get food at food banks*" and communication issues and language barriers feed into a "*lack of dignity in reliance on charitable food provision.*"<sup>10</sup>

For people seeking asylum whose applications have been refused, the situation can be even more perilous. After 28 days, their state financial and housing support ends, and they are then only eligible for 'section 4' support, working out to £35 a week, and many people do not want to apply for this because there's a chance of removal from the UK if Section 4 support is denied and "*they are fearful of what will happen to them if they return home.*"

<sup>8</sup> Asylum Matters (2023). *Surviving in Poverty: Experiences of People Seeking Asylum in the UK*. Available at: <https://asylummatters.org/app/uploads/2023/12/Asylum-Matters-Surviving-in-Poverty-Report-A4-SINGLES-Dec-2023.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Trussell Trust (2023). *Hunger in the UK Report*. Available at: <https://hub.foodbank.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/2023-The-Trussell-Trust-Hunger-in-the-UK-report-web.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Sustain, *Food Experiences of People Seeking Asylum in London*.

As a result, they fall into destitution. Many find themselves street homeless or sofa surfing, relying on family, friends and community members for basic support such as food and shelter. Many, though certainly not all, find their way to a voluntary sector agency or faith group to ask for help.<sup>11</sup>

Food insecurity negatively affects both physical and mental health but also strips individuals of agency and dignity. Catholic Social Teaching recognises food as a basic human right, essential for sustaining life and fostering social inclusion. Increasing the level of support given by the state is an easy remedy to this, and would go a long way to restoring dignity of people in the system.

### *Clothing*

The UK government does not provide any standardised clothing allowance to people seeking asylum, so they must either spend their state financial support on clothing or turn to charities and donations. Many people seeking asylum arrive in the UK lacking proper coats or footwear appropriate for the British winter. Indeed, given the dangerous journey people seeking asylum make – in many cases travelling all the way from countries like Afghanistan, Iran and Syria without any money – they often arrive only with the clothes on their backs.

Asylum Matters reported that 97% of people seeking asylum cannot always afford the clothes they need. *“New clothing is not an option. Even buying from second hand shops requires people to save up over a long period of time and go without other essential items.”* This is a particular problem for families with children:

For parents, they spoke of the difficulty in clothing children as they grow out of clothes so quickly and children feel disappointed because they want to wear the same as their friends. Some spoke of concern for their children wearing ill-fitting shoes and clothes as they can’t always get the right sizes when relying on charities.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Red Cross (2013). *A Decade of Destitution: Time to Make a Change*. Available at: <https://www.redcross.org.uk/-/media/documents-indexed/greater-manchester-destitution-report.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Asylum Matters, *Surviving in Poverty*

Alarming, one individual said that *“If I happen to buy shoes or clothes, I will not be able to eat for that week.”*<sup>13</sup> Inability to afford the right clothes, and reliance on second-hand clothes is therefore both a practical issue for people seeking asylum but also impacts their dignity.

Whilst there were reports in 2020 of the Home Office giving Primark clothing to people seeking asylum who were inadequately clothed, Tim Naor-Hilton of Refugee Action said the charity was not *“aware of anyone seeking asylum who we have worked with who has been given clothes by the Home Office,”* and that furthermore people seeking asylum *“often arrive with no clothing appropriate for the weather here... on many occasions, Refugee Action has handed out clothing to people we work with who would otherwise be left freezing and unable to buy items they urgently need.”*<sup>14</sup>

### *Hygiene and Other Essentials*

Many people seeking asylum who responded to Asylum Matters’ survey reported struggling to afford hygiene essentials, including having to choose between toiletries and paying for food and other basic items. 85% of people seeking asylum they spoke to reported not or only sometimes being able to afford the cleaning products they needed, with reliance on charity being a recurring theme: one person said that *“if it wasn’t for the local church’s help, we wouldn’t be able to buy those products.”*<sup>15</sup>

Positive Action in Housing reports that this poses particular problems for women seeking asylum, with some unable to afford menstrual health products: *“One woman told us she had no money to buy sanitary protection, her bedsheets become bloodstained, and she felt too ashamed to leave them outside her hotel room as requested due to the shame of it plus being the only woman on that floor. She also reported feeling unsafe being left on a floor where there were mainly men.”*<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Byline Times (2021). *Primark for People seeking asylum Sparks Confusion*. Available at: <https://bylinetimes.com/2021/04/01/home-office-primark-asylum-seekers-confusion>

<sup>15</sup> Asylum Matters, *Surviving in Poverty*

<sup>16</sup> Positive Action in Housing (2020). *Deadly Accommodation Crisis for Glasgow’s Hotel People seeking asylum*. Available at: <https://www.paih.org/deadly-accommodation-crisis-for-glasgows-hotel-asylum-seekers>

Similarly, a report by Women for Refugee Women (WRW) and Bloody Good Period (BGP) shows that 75 per cent of women seeking asylum they surveyed “struggled to obtain period pads or tampons while destitute, forcing them to overuse a period product, improvise period wear or beg for money to buy a pad.” One woman stated that due to the low level of state support “I tried to save the little money I had for food, so often when I got my period I would have to go hungry.”<sup>17</sup>

The St Vincent de Paul Society (SVP) reported that people seeking asylum using their services shared their experiences of “not having enough money to buy essential items, such as toiletries, clothing, medicine, baby milk and bus tickets.”<sup>18</sup> According to Sustain new parents struggle: “Parents with infants not having access to facilities to appropriately sterilise, prepare and store infant formula, or store breastmilk.”<sup>19</sup>

Along with food, clothing and hygiene products, people seeking asylum struggle to afford other basic items. The Red Cross has argued that due to the large backlog of cases, people seeking asylum are much more at risk now of falling into destitution, evidenced by having to support 13,766 people facing destitution in 2023.<sup>20</sup> Analysis by Refugee Action shows that the value of support given to people seeking asylum has fallen in real terms by 27% between 2008-2022 due to the meagre rises being outstripped by inflation. The charity claims that it kept low to deter refugees, and “to portray people seeking asylum as enemies.”<sup>21</sup>

## Accommodation

The poor quality of housing provided to people in the asylum system has been criticised by charities and media in recent years. Asylum accommodation is often overcrowded, unhygienic, and unsafe. Initially meant to be short-term

<sup>17</sup> Refugee Women and Bloody Good Period (2019). *Period Poverty and Destitution*. Available at: [https://www.refugeewomen.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Report\\_BGP-x-WRW.pdf](https://www.refugeewomen.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Report_BGP-x-WRW.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> St Vincent de Paul Society (2024). *The use of temporary asylum accommodation in the UK*. Available at: <https://svp.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-08/SVP%20Policy%20briefing%20-%20Asylum%20temporary%20accommodation%20-%20April%202024.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> Sustain, *Food Experiences of People Seeking Asylum in London*.

<sup>20</sup> Red Cross (2023). *Ending Refugee Poverty*. Available at: <https://www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/we-speak-up-for-change/improving-the-lives-of-refugees/ending-refugee-poverty>

<sup>21</sup> Refugee Action (2023). *Asylum Support is Not Enough to Live On*. Available at: <https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/asylum-support-inflation/>



solutions, certain types of accommodation such as hotels, military barracks (such as the Napier barracks site), and barges have become long-term residences due to capacity issues, and the large backlog of asylum cases. The SVP reported that many residents stay in these settings for months, if not years, often without cooking facilities, private space, or adequate access to healthcare or legal advice.<sup>22</sup>

One of the most notorious examples, the Bibby Stockholm barge – now decommissioned – was particularly notorious, with the Guardian revealing that problems included *“the discovery of potentially deadly bacteria in the water supply; concerns about fire safety; rotten food; bedbugs; flooding; and accounts that, despite their right to leave the gigantic triple-decked structure during the day, people seeking asylum felt they were being held in prison-type conditions.”*<sup>23</sup>

Large-scale detainment sites like the Bibby Stockholm have been described by Reclaim the Sea as *“inhumane for people who have been traumatised by their experiences of war, conflict and persecution”* and that *“it amounts to quasi-detention.”*<sup>24</sup> Refugee Action went further, arguing that this style of accommodation is a system of ‘de-facto detention’ because it *“shares some of the features of other forms of detention in which people are detained indefinitely, segregated from communities, do not have access to legal or welfare services and have limited contact with the outside world due to restrictions and the cost of transport and communications.”*<sup>25</sup>

The Helen Bamber Foundation described the Wethersfield asylum accommodation centre as *“ghettoised”* and documented that the conditions people seeking asylum are forced to endure are inhumane, given that they have often fled war, persecution and in many cases prison camps. Residents who were detained in Egypt and Syria reported feeling that Wethersfield *“is another camp of a similar kind”*:

<sup>22</sup> St Vincent de Paul Society, *The use of temporary asylum accommodation in the UK*

<sup>23</sup> Guardian (2025). *Life and Death on the Bibby Stockholm*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/jan/08/life-and-death-on-the-bibby-stockholm-no-one-wanted-to-go-inside-but-we-had-no-choice>

<sup>24</sup> Reclaim the Sea (2024). *Detention at Sea: A Human Rights Analysis of the Bibby Stockholm*. Available at:

[https://www.reclaimthesea.org.uk/\\_files/ugd/4e7ff9\\_b86b690af5b941fd9a01acb127497cba.pdf](https://www.reclaimthesea.org.uk/_files/ugd/4e7ff9_b86b690af5b941fd9a01acb127497cba.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> Refugee Action (2023). *Hostile Accommodation*. Available at: <https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Hostile-Accommodation-Refugee-Action-report.pdf>

Residents describe Wethersfield as being “like a prison”, which is in part is due to the barbed wire fences and restrictions on their freedom of movement, but also the fact that it is visibly reminiscent of a form of prison camp or detention centre where many have previously been held either in their country of origin or during their journey to safety.<sup>26</sup>

In some cases accommodation was found to be unhygienic and unsafe: *“clients have reported rooms with mould; rotten carpets; unclean bedding; rooms smelling of sewage; broken beds; worn-out mattresses; mice and bed bugs.”*<sup>27</sup> The Institute for Public Policy Research noted that people seeking asylum were exposed to *“serious issues like pests, mould, and an overall lack of cleanliness and hygiene”* with one person stating that *“We will stay in the room [with] four in the room, just one room. No cleaning, no bedsheet, you will sleep on that bedsheet for a month.”*<sup>28</sup>

The Jesuit Refugee Foundation (JRF) has called asylum accommodation gruelling, dehumanising and unsafe, with one refugee saying they had to sleep three in a room. Overcrowding was particularly dangerous during the coronavirus pandemic; the JRF noted there was a *“major outbreak of COVID-19”* at the Napier barracks site.<sup>29</sup> It is clearly unsafe and detrimental to the health of vulnerable people seeking asylum to force them into overcrowded conditions, but in the context of a deadly global pandemic this is even more concerning.

Accommodation has purposefully been excluded from positive policy changes that benefit the rest of the population. Following the tragic death of two-year old Awaab Ishak from prolonged exposure to black mould, the government passed the Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 which mandates social landlords to address health hazards in rental properties, including damp and

<sup>26</sup> Helen Bamber Foundation (2023). *Ghettoised and Traumatized: Report on Wethersfield*. Available at: [https://www.helenbamber.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/HBF%20HRNF%20Ghettoised%20and%20traumatized\\_report%20on%20Wethersfield\\_December23.pdf](https://www.helenbamber.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/HBF%20HRNF%20Ghettoised%20and%20traumatized_report%20on%20Wethersfield_December23.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> Helen Bamber Foundation (2024). *Suffering and Squalor*. Available at: [https://helenbamber.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/Suffering%20and%20squalor\\_Final\\_June%202024.pdf](https://helenbamber.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/Suffering%20and%20squalor_Final_June%202024.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> Institute for Public Policy Research (2024). *Transforming Asylum Accommodation*. Available at: [https://ippr-org.files.svdcn.com/production/Downloads/Transforming\\_asylum\\_accommodation\\_October24\\_2024-10-23-110312\\_uryd.pdf](https://ippr-org.files.svdcn.com/production/Downloads/Transforming_asylum_accommodation_October24_2024-10-23-110312_uryd.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> Jesuit Refugee Service (2024). *Being Human in the Asylum System*. Available at: <https://www.jrsuk.net/being-human/>



mould, within specific timeframes. However, as reported by the Guardian, this law does not apply to asylum accommodation and has been criticised for creating a two-tier system.<sup>30</sup>

Refugee Action has noted that disabled people seeking asylum are often forced to live in inappropriate accommodation. *“Disabled people are often forced to live in non-accessible housing such as one wheelchair user who was trapped on the 11th floor of a block of flats, with no accessible lift.”*<sup>31</sup> Geography is also a problem, with the Migration Observatory noting that *“dispersal policies can contribute to social isolation by moving people seeking asylum away from others from similar backgrounds, making it harder for them to settle and integrate if they are granted asylum.”*<sup>32</sup>

Safety has been a concern, particularly for children seeking asylum. The IPPR’s report states that *“one woman described sharing a home with “six to eight women and children” and having two toilets between them – expressing fear for the health of her three-month-old baby.”*<sup>33</sup> Refugee Action found that 90% of asylum seeking families they surveyed found their hotel to be unsuitable for children and 61% reported safeguarding issues regarding their children. Problems included lack of areas to play or do homework, and low availability of nappies and sanitary products, and that toys, games, and books were generally not provided, and people seeking asylum could not afford to spend their state support on these items. It is deeply concerning that they report that accommodation conditions had been impacting the development of children:

One person describes how his young son’s development is affected. After a year in a hotel room, the child couldn’t talk or stand, and his father reported that although he was trying to crawl, due to lack of space in the room it was difficult for him to do this.<sup>34</sup>

Refugee Action’s report contains shocking picture of a child whose head is bleeding, as a result of an injury from a collapsing roof. The impact that poor-

<sup>30</sup> Guardian (2024). *Asylum Accommodation to Be Excluded from Social Housing Landlords Crackdown*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/jan/15/asylum-accommodation-to-be-excluded-from-social-housing-landlords-crackdown>

<sup>31</sup> Refugee Action, *Hostile Accommodation*.

<sup>32</sup> Migration Observatory (2025). *Asylum Accommodation in the UK*. Available at: <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/2025-Briefing-Asylum-accommodation-in-the-UK.pdf>

<sup>33</sup> Institute for Public Policy Research, *Transforming Asylum Accommodation*.

<sup>34</sup> Refugee Action, *Hostile Accommodation*.

quality accommodation is having on vulnerable women, disabled people and children is detrimental to the dignity of people seeking asylum. Catholic Social Teaching reminds us that all people are created in the image and likeness of God, and the current conditions that people seeking asylum are subjected to are undermining this. The JRS argues that *“to foster dignity at the borders, life in the asylum system must not be life trapped in stasis, or held apart from wider civic, economic and social life.”*<sup>35</sup>

## **The Right to Work**

A key structural driver of poverty among people seeking asylum is their exclusion from the regular labour market and receiving social security. As per government guidance, *“Those who claim asylum in the UK are not normally allowed to work whilst their claim is being considered. They are instead provided with accommodation and support to meet their essential living needs if they would otherwise be destitute.”*<sup>36</sup>

It is worth pointing out that the Home Office in a 2022 report acknowledged that banning people seeking asylum from working has created destitution and leads to poor integration even for people granted refugee status:

At the system level, certain factors inherent in the design of the asylum and support systems can contribute to exacerbating or creating vulnerabilities for people seeking asylum. The inability of the current processing system to adjudicate claims in a timely manner, for example, has created lengthy processing times that—when coupled with the prohibition on work for people seeking asylum— can create mental health vulnerabilities and negatively impact long-term integration outcomes in areas like health and employment. Very low levels of material and emotional support together with the inability to work can also expose people seeking asylum to destitution. This, in turn, hinders the ability of newly recognised refugees to build their life in the UK once leave to remain is granted – for instance, limited financial support during

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<sup>35</sup> Jesuit Refugee Service, *Being Human in the Asylum System*.

<sup>36</sup> Government of the United Kingdom (2024). *Permission to work and volunteering for people seeking asylum*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/handling-applications-for-permission-to-take-employment-instruction/permission-to-work-and-volunteering-for-asylum-seekers-accessible>

the asylum process means that many refugees can struggle to rent accommodation once status is granted.<sup>37</sup>

In the majority of cases, people seeking asylum are prohibited from working. However, the government states that, “*the Home Office may grant permission to work to people seeking asylum whose claim has been outstanding for more than 12 months through no fault of their own,*” but people in these cases are restricted to jobs listed on the Immigration Salary List, and are unlikely to have the qualifications needed to secure one of the jobs listed.<sup>38</sup> People seeking asylum are nonetheless encouraged to volunteer:

People seeking asylum are encouraged to volunteer whilst their claim is being considered. Volunteering involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment or someone (individuals or groups) other than, or in addition to, close relatives. By volunteering for a charity or public sector organisation, people seeking asylum can support their local community, and this will also assist with their integration if they are granted leave to remain in the UK.<sup>39</sup>

The policy is in place to ensure that the right to work does not become a pull factor which could encourage people to seek asylum in the UK rather than other safe countries. Government guidance states that the objective of refusing the right to work “*discourages those who do not need protection from claiming asylum to benefit from economic opportunities they would not otherwise be eligible for*” and aims to “*prevent illegal migration for economic reasons.*”<sup>40</sup>

However, a report by academics at the University of Warwick dispute the efficacy of the policy. According to their analysis, no evidence has ever been produced by the Home Office to support the government’s claims since the right to work was taken away in 2002. Furthermore, their review of existing research found no evidence that allowing people seeking asylum to work would lead to an increase in asylum applications to the UK. As a result, the

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<sup>37</sup> Government of the United Kingdom (2022). *Understanding Asylum Seeker and Asylum Route Refugee Vulnerabilities and Support*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/understanding-asylum-seeker-and-refugee-vulnerabilities-and-needs-2022>

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

report recommends expanding labour market access for people seeking asylum.<sup>41</sup>

The majority of people seeking asylum want to work and are aware that it would help lift them out of poverty. Ishmail, a Sierra Leonean refugee told the Mental Health Foundation that *“When I arrived, I wanted to work and to contribute, I wanted to help and give back. But instead, I was forced to rely on just £49.18 a week. My hands were tied because I wasn’t allowed to work. I struggled for food when I wasn’t working, I had to rely on charities and food banks. I wasn’t able to eat healthily - the doctors told me I wasn’t eating well enough, and my anxiety was getting worse.”*<sup>42</sup>

Asylum Matters argues in favour of allowing people seeking asylum to work, as it would help integration and restore their dignity: *“people seeking asylum want to work. Currently, they go to enormous lengths to volunteer and study, often walking hours every day to attend courses run by voluntary organisations... If they had the right to work earlier in their asylum process, people would be better able to live in dignity, fulfil their potential, and have the best possible chance of integration into their new communities.”*<sup>43</sup> Indeed, by the time people seeking asylum are recognised as refugees, many have been socially and economically inactive for years, which makes it much harder to integrate into society or the workforce.

The Red Cross notes that destitution can force people seeking asylum to use survival strategies such as rough sleeping, begging, illegal working and prostitution, all of which carry indirect costs for individuals and communities.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, a report by the APPG on Migration states that *“restrictions on the right to work leaves people seeking asylum dependent on inadequate Asylum*

<sup>41</sup> University of Warwick (2016). *Access to the labour market as a ‘pull factor’ for people seeking asylum: What the research shows*. Available at: <https://asylumwelfarework.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/is-access-to-the-labour-market-a-pull-factor-for-asylum-seekers-long.pdf>

<sup>42</sup> Mental Health Foundation (2025). *“My dream was to give back to the community” – how the ban on people seeking asylum working hurts us all*. Available at: <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/about-us/news/my-dream-was-give-back-community-how-ban-asylum-seekers-working-hurts-us-all>

<sup>43</sup> Asylum Matters (2020). *Common Sense: The Case for Lifting the Ban on People seeking asylum Working*. Available at: <https://asylummatters.org/app/uploads/2020/07/LTB-Common-Sense-Report-FINAL-LOWRES-1.pdf>

<sup>44</sup> Red Cross, *A Decade of Destitution*.

*Support payments and can also lead people to accept low-paid and exploitative employment in the informal economy.”<sup>45</sup>*

Banning people seeking asylum from working legally can make them vulnerable to exploitation and result in modern slavery. One woman told WRW that *“I remember I was introduced to some cash in hand jobs. But I became a slave to other people... I remember going to clean a woman’s house, I did six hours and she paid me just £10. People exploit you if they know your status.”<sup>46</sup>* The Human Trafficking Foundation found that there was *“evidence of failed people seeking asylum working unlawfully to meet this high demand and then being exploited as they lack the protections afforded to legal workers.”<sup>47</sup>*

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees published a report on the exploitation of people in the UK asylum system, with one interviewee responding:

I’ve seen lots of Eritrean young girls working as domestic workers for households and it is kind of [a] black market and sometimes they would even refuse to pay them after working for them [for] 3-4 months and they wouldn’t say anything because they themselves are not allowed to work in this country.<sup>48</sup>

Lift the Ban argues that allowing people seeking asylum to work could *“help in the fight against forced labour. Long periods spent in poverty, without the right to work, make people more vulnerable to exploitation, including exploitative labour.”<sup>49</sup>* Allowing people seeking asylum the right to work would therefore reduce instances of poverty by increasing their disposable income,

<sup>45</sup> All-Party Parliamentary Group on Migration & All-Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty (2024). *The Effects of UK Immigration, Asylum and Refugee Policy on Poverty: A Joint Inquiry by the APPG on Migration and the APPG on Poverty*. Available at: [https://appgmigration.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/MigrationandPoverty\\_Report2024\\_print1.pdf](https://appgmigration.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/MigrationandPoverty_Report2024_print1.pdf)

<sup>46</sup> Women for Refugee Women (2024). *Safety and Survival*. Available at: <https://www.refugeewomen.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/FINAL-DIGITAL-Safety-and-Survival-How-the-Work-Ban-Fuels-Violence-Against-Women-Seeking-Asylum.pdf>

<sup>47</sup> Respect International (2021). *Modern Day Slavery and the UK Border System*. Available at: <https://respect.international/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Taking-Back-Control-of-Our-Borders-The-Impact-On-Modern-Day-Slavery.pdf>

<sup>48</sup> UNHCR and British Red Cross (2023). *Risk of Exploitation in the UK Asylum System*. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/media/risk-exploitation-and-uk-asylum-system-report-unhcr-and-british-red-cross-pdf>

<sup>49</sup> Refugee Action (2020). *Lift the Ban: Common Sense Report*. Available at: <https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Lift-The-Ban-Common-Sense.pdf>



benefit their integration into British society, and help to tackle cases of modern slavery, unlawful employment and exploitation.

## **Physical and Mental Health**

### *Physical Health*

The UK's asylum system negatively impacts the mental and physical health of people seeking asylum. As noted earlier, the poor diet that many refugees have in catered accommodation often contributes to physical health problems, including in children. However, other physical health problems are evident. The Royal College of Psychiatrists says that many displaced people arrive with untreated injuries from their journey or chronic conditions from their home countries, and they are often exposed to communicable diseases.<sup>50</sup>

According to Refugee Action, poor accommodation quality is exacerbating health problems faced by people seeking asylum, including diabetes, anaemia, blood pressure and cholesterol. Furthermore, *“many people reported not being registered with a GP despite spending months in the UK. Some were forced to live in chronic pain due to injuries sustained in their countries of origin or on the journey, for years with no treatment, unable to buy medicine due to the low level of asylum support.”*<sup>51</sup> The SVP wrote that many people seeking asylum have *“physical health issues, including chronic pain, diabetes and disabilities, that are not treated nor catered for.”*<sup>52</sup>

Asylum Matters also reported that people seeking asylum had issues accessing healthcare, particularly general practice and dental care.<sup>53</sup> Human Rights Watch said that in asylum accommodation there have been *“outbreaks of diphtheria, norovirus, and scabies, as well as an alarming incidence of suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts.”*<sup>54</sup> According to the IPPR, one third of

<sup>50</sup> Royal College of Psychiatrists (2024). *Asylum Seeker and Refugee Mental Health*. Available at: <https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/international/humanitarian-resources/asylum-seeker-and-refugee-mental-health>

<sup>51</sup> Refugee Action, *Hostile Accommodation*.

<sup>52</sup> St Vincent de Paul Society, *The use of temporary asylum accommodation in the UK*.

<sup>53</sup> Asylum Matters (2021). *In a Place Like Prison: Voices from Asylum Hotels*. Available at: <https://asylummatters.org/app/uploads/2021/12/In-a-place-like-prison.pdf>

<sup>54</sup> Human Rights Watch (2023). *I Felt So Stuck: Inadequate Housing and Social Support for Families Seeking Asylum in the UK*. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/09/14/i-felt-so-stuck/inadequate-housing-and-social-support-families-seeking-asylum>

people seeking asylum “kept a ‘personal bucket’ in their room to avoid using the main bathroom. One woman, fearful of going to the bathroom in her shared accommodation, stopped drinking water regularly and developed a urine infection.”<sup>55</sup>

The APPG on migration noted that the low levels of state support meant that people seeking asylum often could not pay for travel to hospitals or health centres, and could not always afford medication.<sup>56</sup> Asylum Matters’ report stated that this also impacted the ability of people seeking asylum to communicate, and that - due to many being unable to pay for mobile data and phone credit - they missed important health appointments.<sup>57</sup> Pregnant women and their unborn children are at risk, as - although pregnant people seeking asylum are given an extra £3 per week - this is not enough to pay for the additional costs of pregnancy, including healthy food.<sup>58</sup>

Refugee Council noted that many people seeking asylum are wrongly refused registration at GP practices or are asked for documentation that is not legally required, or are not provided with interpreters during appointments. The charity also reported that the hostile environment policy eroded trust in healthcare services amongst people seeking asylum, with some fearing that visiting a hospital or clinic could lead to deportation.<sup>59</sup>

The UNHCR noted that restrictions to access on healthcare could lead to people seeking asylum trying to find alternative medical treatments, which could lead to exploitation or unsafe practices.<sup>60</sup> Human Rights Watch noted the case of David, a 5-year old boy with autism who had to sleep on the floor due to not having the special medical bed that he needed.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, Doctors of the World research shows that some accommodation does not accept refrigerated medication, and that during the COVID-19 pandemic some people seeking asylum could not access pandemic advice in their own

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<sup>55</sup> Institute for Public Policy Research, *Transforming Asylum Accommodation*.

<sup>56</sup> All-Party Parliamentary Group on Migration & All-Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty, *The Effects of UK Immigration, Asylum and Refugee Policy on Poverty*.

<sup>57</sup> Asylum Matters, *Surviving in Poverty*.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Refugee Council (2021). *A note on barriers experienced by refugees and people seeking asylum when accessing health services*. Available at: <https://www-media.refugeecouncil.org.uk/media/documents/A-note-on-barriers-experienced-by-refugees-and-people-seeking-asylum-when->

<sup>60</sup> UNHCR and British Red Cross, *Risk of Exploitation in the UK Asylum System*.

<sup>61</sup> Human Rights Watch, *I Felt So Stuck*.

language, or that the guidance given differed from the advice given to the rest of the UK population.<sup>62</sup>

### *Mental Health*

As well as physical health problems, people seeking asylum often suffer from poor mental health or are unable to access the mental health services they need. Many arrive with pre-existing mental health conditions, or conditions developed on their journey or develop conditions during their time in the asylum system.

According to the Royal College of Psychiatrists *“common mental illnesses in displaced adults include PTSD (31%), depression (31%), anxiety disorders (11%), and psychosis (1.5%). There are also high rates of distress, grief and PTSD in displaced people under the age of 18, especially in the context of war and trauma... Some displaced people will arrive already receiving treatment for mental illness, but most are unlikely to be able to provide medical documents or a clear outline of past treatments. Others can become unwell because of their recent experiences of displacement.”*<sup>63</sup>

Asylum accommodation can have severe negative impacts on mental health – not only for those with existing issues, but also by causing new issues due to the detention-style conditions. As documented by the Helen Bamber Foundation:

Placement in ex-military accommodation impacts on residents’ mental health in a similar harmful way to immigration detention, including by exacerbating depressive and anxiety symptoms and mental distress, including symptoms of PTSD, and by causing the mental health of people who had previously been well to deteriorate.<sup>64</sup>

Similarly, according to Refugee Action, some people reported *“not being able to sleep, experiencing chronic fear, anxiety, low mood, depression and suicidal ideation.”* Further, people seeking asylum with serious mental health

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<sup>62</sup> Doctors of the World (2022). *Access to Healthcare in Initial and Contingency Accommodation*. Available at: <https://www.doctorsoftheworld.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/DOTW-Access-to-healthcare-in-initial-and-contingency-accommodation-report-April-2022.pdf>

<sup>63</sup> Royal College of Psychiatrists, *Asylum Seeker and Refugee Mental Health*.

<sup>64</sup> Helen Bamber Foundation, *Ghettoised and Traumatized*.

conditions and those without are often living together, which has led to safety issues. The charity stated that there were “48 safeguarding cases in hotels recorded by Refugee Action between March 2021 and December 2022, half of which were related to acute mental health crises. Over 1 in 5 (22%) of respondents to our survey reported that they were afraid for their safety.”<sup>65</sup> They also noted that people with complex mental and physical health issues, who have no access to medical help or support, are forced to share rooms for long periods, which contributes to their feelings of fear, panic, and lack of privacy.<sup>66</sup>

Research has shown that the ban on the right to work has also led to mental health issues among people seeking asylum. Women for Refugee Women’s (WRW) survey revealed that 85% of women seeking asylum reported feeling anxious or depressed, and 43% felt suicidal, as a result of the ban on the right to work.<sup>67</sup> The Lift the Ban report corroborates this, noting that unemployed people in the asylum system were twice as likely to have a diagnosed mental health disorder.<sup>68</sup>

The SVP noted that many of the Afghan refugees they supported through their services had experienced mental health issues and isolation, and that the “barriers, difficulties and anxieties” were particularly harmful as they “were faced by individuals and families who had already experienced an unimaginable amount of premigration trauma, upheaval and distress.”<sup>69</sup>

Revealingly, the Home Office’s own review in 2022 acknowledged that large backlogs have “disproportionate effect on vulnerable people seeking asylum” by keeping them in emergency accommodations - such as crowded hotels - for extended periods and “upending efforts to address mental health or education needs.”<sup>70</sup> However, no clear policy changes were made as a result of this.

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<sup>65</sup> Refugee Action, *Hostile Accommodation*.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Women for Refugee Women (2023). *Safety and Survival*. Available at: <https://www.refugeewomen.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/FINAL-DIGITAL-Safety-and-Survival-How-the-Work-Ban-Fuels-Violence-Against-Women-Seeking-Asylum.pdf>

<sup>68</sup> Refugee Action, *Lift the Ban*.

<sup>69</sup> St Vincent de Paul Society (2023). *Reflections & Recommendations on resettlement: the SVP’s work welcoming Afghans*. Available at: <https://svp.org.uk/news/reflections-recommendations-resettlement-svps-work-welcoming-afghans>

<sup>70</sup> Government of the United Kingdom, *Understanding Asylum Seeker and Asylum Route Refugee Vulnerabilities and Support*.

## Solutions

This report demonstrates that poverty is designed into the asylum system due to the low level of state support. People seeking asylum are often living in poverty and are unable to afford adequate food, hygiene products, clothes, transport and entertainment, and across the board the state of temporary housing for displaced individuals in the UK is poor. This exacerbates existing poverty and creates new problems.

To address this urgent situation, organisations referenced in this report have made a variety of policy proposals. Given that the majority of issues discussed in this report – such as the inability to afford sufficient food, clothing, cleaning supplies, travel, and other essential items - comes down to the low levels of financial support they receive from the state, **the most obvious solution would be to increase the level of financial support that people seeking asylum receive, both for those in catered and self-catered accommodation.**

It is worth looking at why the level is so low in the first place. The Home Office published a report in 2021 explaining the rationale behind the amount people seeking asylum receive:

The Home Office's position remains that mainstream social security benefits are not set according to the "essential living needs" test and are generally required to cover a broader range of costs, including paying for utilities and travel and other expenses incurred in looking for work. For this reason, we do not consider that aligning asylum support allowances with the levels of universal credit or other mainstream benefits is appropriate.<sup>71</sup>

Indeed, whilst the amount of money received has risen nominally since its introduction in 2000, the Red Cross has calculated that the value of asylum support has dropped in real terms by 28%.<sup>72</sup> To remedy this, it has been argued

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<sup>71</sup> Government of the United Kingdom (2021). *Report on Review of Weekly Allowances Paid to People seeking asylum and Failed People seeking asylum*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/report-on-review-of-cash-allowance-paid-to-asylum-seekers/report-on-review-of-weekly-allowances-paid-to-asylum-seekers-and-failed-asylum-seekers-2021>

<sup>72</sup> Red Cross (2023). *State of the Nation: access to support in the asylum system*. Available at: <https://public.flourish.studio/story/1958766/>



by Asylum Matters that asylum support rates should rise to 70% of the value of Universal Credit, with further support for parents with young children.<sup>73</sup> Human Rights Watch also supports this rate, to ensure that people seeking asylum “*are able to afford all of the essentials needed for an adequate standard of living and a life of dignity.*”<sup>74</sup>

Another remedy to poverty among people seeking asylum could be the **introduction of targeted support**, such as a one-off grant for people seeking asylum to buy clothing once they have been assigned to dispersal accommodation. This was a recommendation from a 2023 Home Office review.<sup>75</sup> This could also be extended to cover hygiene, travel costs and other essentials, because as discussed in this report, many people seeking asylum cannot afford these items with the current level of support. Those with higher needs, such as parents with young children, pregnant women, and disabled people, and other vulnerable groups, should be given priority. Implementing targeted support could reduce reliance on overstretched charitable services and restore dignity to people in the asylum system.

**Reforming asylum accommodation** would also help reduce poverty. Research by organisations like the Jesuit Refugee Service, Refugee Action, and the Helen Bamber Foundation has found asylum accommodation to be overcrowded, unsafe, and detrimental to health. Reports of mould, bedbugs, fire hazards, or lack of accessibility are deeply alarming, and the impact on the mental health of people living in these conditions is clear from the literature. A solution could be extending the protections of the *Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023* to asylum accommodation to ensure minimum health and safety standards.

The Chancellor set out in the Spending Review in June that the use of asylum hotels would end in this Parliament “*by clearing the asylum backlog, increasing appeals capacity and continuing to return those with no right to be here.*”<sup>76</sup> As the government transitions away from the use of asylum hotels, the

<sup>73</sup> Asylum Matters, *Surviving in Poverty*.

<sup>74</sup> Human Rights Watch, *I Felt So Stuck*.

<sup>75</sup> Government of the United Kingdom (2023). *Report on review of weekly allowances paid to people seeking asylum and failed people seeking asylum: 2023*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/report-on-review-of-cash-allowance-paid-to-asylum-seekers/report-on-review-of-weekly-allowances-paid-to-asylum-seekers-and-failed-asylum-seekers-2023>

<sup>76</sup> Government of the United Kingdom (2025). *Spending Review 2025*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/spending-review-2025-document/spending-review-2025-html>

Home Office must ensure that the accommodation used in its place is good quality and begins the process of integration into wider society.

A further way to reduce poverty amongst people seeking asylum would be granting them the **right to work**. Asylum Matters have argued in favour of giving the right to work after 6 months, for jobs on the Shortage Occupation List.<sup>77</sup> The Lift the Ban campaign have also argued strongly in favour of the same reform, as it would help integration, afford people seeking asylum the opportunity to live in dignity, improve their mental health, and challenge forced labour and modern slavery. In addition, it is estimated that this policy change would raise an extra £97.8 million in taxes for the government.<sup>78</sup>

**Healthcare access must also be improved.** Many people seeking asylum struggle to access healthcare due to language barriers or the cost of transport. This affects pregnant women and children in particular, as while they receive extra support, it is simply not enough. Furthermore, as mentioned research from *Doctors of the World* and the *Mental Health Foundation* shows that the hostile environment policies have further eroded trust in public health services, leading some individuals to delay or avoid seeking necessary care. The Home Office must work with NHS to work on guidance in different languages, and to restore trust in the healthcare system.

These recommendations, backed by evidence, would help to address the material poverty that many people in the asylum system are facing. However, most importantly, any reform undertaken must be guided by a commitment to restoring the inherent dignity of people seeking asylum. A model rooted in compassion and integration should be preferred over one of deterrence and punishment.

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<sup>77</sup> Asylum Matters, *Surviving in Poverty*.

<sup>78</sup> Refugee Action, *Lift the Ban*.

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