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ASYLUM HOUSING IN YORKSHIRE

A case study of two dispersal areas

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We would like to acknowledge the support of the following organisations:



COVER IMAGE: Housing in Park Ward, Halifax

BACK COVER IMAGE: The People's Park, Halifax, with Calderdale College in the background:
'The first local park that everyone goes there and always waiting to register at college' (Hedi).

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Executive Summary

The UK asylum accommodation and support system is complex, fragmented, and privatised and separate from the mainstream welfare and benefits system. People seeking asylum are generally not allowed to work and financial support is substantively less than mainstream benefit support. Those seeking asylum are dispersed on a no-choice basis, to areas of cheap and available accommodation.

The Home Office has been criticised for its handling of asylum applications, including a substantial backlog, and a growing number of people waiting for a decision on their asylum application for longer than six months. There are also long-standing issues around the quality and adequacy of asylum accommodation, including contingency accommodation, a lack of adequate and timely support to those seeking asylum, and poor communication and stakeholder engagement. People in asylum properties feel they are not being listened to when they report issues or problems in their accommodation. They are struggling to survive on the financial support they are given.

This report is based on primary, qualitative research carried out from April 2021 to April 2022 and focuses on experiences of asylum housing in two dispersal towns in Yorkshire, namely Halifax and Doncaster. Third sector organisations in both towns provide support of different types and fill the gaps of the systems.

We found that dispersal housing in Halifax in particular was often of poor quality. It was difficult for people in the asylum system to report issues, and it often took a long time for repairs to be carried out. In Doncaster, asylum dispersal housing is increasingly procured in outlying villages, creating a fragmented geography of micro-dispersal, which makes it difficult for people in the system to access support and for support organisations to provide support to them.

Based on our research, we make the following recommendations: Firstly, we recommend that support for those seeking asylum should be incorporated into the mainstream welfare system rather than provided through the current separate system. Alongside this, priority should be given to reducing asylum application

processing times and enhancing decision-making. The Home Office should also improve coordination and communication with all stakeholders in the asylum system. People in the asylum system should be allowed to work across the board, not just in jobs on the shortage occupation list. This would enable people to live dignified lives free from destitution. It would help decrease social isolation and mean that people can contribute in meaningful ways to their local communities.

Meanwhile, our research suggests that conditions for people while they are waiting for the outcome of their asylum applications could be significantly improved in the following ways:

- 1. Those seeking asylum should have a choice of accommodation and location, e.g. to enable them to settle close to co-ethnic networks, friends, and families;**
- 2. Inclusion and sustainable communities should be a key priority in the accommodation procurement process. This would mean consultation with local authorities and communities, and careful consideration of availability of services, support, and local transport;**
- 3. There should be consistent provision of adequate, localised induction for people when they are moved to dispersal accommodation;**
- 4. Accommodation should be adequately furnished with minimum standards to include Wi-Fi, televisions, and vacuum cleaners;**
- 5. Reporting of issues in asylum properties should be straightforward and the system should be responsive so that disrepair and infestation issues are tackled promptly.**



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Introduction

Asylum is a contentious and politicised issue in the UK and often linked to reports about small boats crossing the English Channel. It is worth remembering that of the world's 82.4 million forcibly displaced people (including internally displaced people), the vast majority, or 86%, are hosted in developing countries, most often neighbouring countries.¹ Turkey (population: 84 million) hosts 3.7 million refugees, more refugees than any other country.² By comparison, in 2020, a total of just over 214,00 refugees, people who had pending asylum cases, and stateless persons lived in the UK.³ In the year ending September 2021, the UK (population: 67 million) received 37,562 asylum applications, equating to 8% of asylum applications across the EU+.

Since the 1990s, people seeking asylum in the UK, and who are destitute and need accommodation and subsistence support, have been subject to 'dispersal' to areas outside of London and the Southeast of England.⁴ This means that those receiving asylum support have no choice over where they live during the processing of their asylum case.

Asylum application processing is under-resourced and complex with a large backlog of unresolved cases,⁵ and a growing number of people who have been waiting for longer than six months on a decision on their asylum application.⁶ This means that in many cases, people will spend months or even years living in dispersal accommodation, while they wait for the outcome of their asylum claim. During this period, most people seeking asylum are not allowed to work.⁷ They are also not allowed to open a bank account and are excluded from the mainstream welfare and benefits system. There is limited state provision in the form of cash and accommodation for those who are deemed 'destitute' or at risk of desti-

tion. It is in this context that those caught in the 'limbo' created by the UK's asylum system nevertheless endeavour to build their lives and find a sense of belonging.

This report is specifically about dispersal housing and place-based experiences of people in the UK asylum system, with a focus on Doncaster and Halifax in Yorkshire. The report is based on research conducted between April 2021 and April 2022. We were interested in learning about the experiences of housing and housing support that people in the asylum system in Yorkshire have; their experiences of the areas they live in; and the perspectives of those who support them.

During the research, we worked with a group of co-researchers, and two local organisations: Doncaster Conversation Club and [St Augustine's Centre in Halifax](#). The research was conducted as part of a larger international study called [Migrants and Solidarities: Negotiating deservingness in welfare micropublics](#), funded by [Nordforsk](#), and with additional funding from the [UCL Grand Challenges](#).

This report first outlines the methods we used in our research, before providing a brief overview of the asylum support system. We then examine access to and adequacy of asylum support with a focus on housing, and the place-based experiences of people dispersed to Halifax and Doncaster. Lastly, we make recommendations for changes to the asylum system.



Market in central Doncaster



Methodology

This report is based on primary, qualitative research. Research was conducted between April 2021 and April 2022 in Halifax and Doncaster and included different methods detailed below.

✂ Participatory co-research process

We conducted collaborative research in Halifax with a group of six co-researchers with lived experience of the asylum system. The co-researchers were recruited through our partner organisation in Halifax, St Augustine's Centre. They came from five different countries across Africa, Asia / the Middle East, and Latin America. There was an even gender balance in the co-researcher group, and all co-researchers spoke English as well as other languages. The co-researchers produced ethnographic data through photography, video, audios, and writing. We also conducted semi-structured interviews. The co-research process took place over a five-month period with weekly or bi-weekly virtual meetings, which included training in research ethics and methods, as well as individual discussion and follow-up between the report authors and the co-researchers, and independent research conducted by co-researchers in-between the meetings.

None of the co-researchers had prior training in ethnography, but they were quick learners and determined that the research should be meaningful and impactful. They enriched the research in so many ways through their commitment, ideas, insights, astute analysis, and lived experience. They also took the research in new directions – e.g., they organised a stall at an Open Day event at St Augustine's Centre.

✂ Virtual and face-to-face participant observation

We conducted virtual participant observation for a significant part of the research due to COVID-19 restrictions. Researchers attended online organisational meetings in both locations, including also meetings with other stakeholders, e.g. the local council, and others.

This was followed by short periods of face-to-face participant observation when restrictions were lifted, including participation in drop-in and social events organized by the two organisations.

✂ Semi-structured interviews

We conducted online and face-to-face semi-structured individual interviews with 21 people and one focus group interview with 7 people in the asylum system. We interviewed 19 third sector workers/volunteers, 2 members of local authority staff, 1 local Councillor, and 1 Migrant Help team member. Interviewees were recruited through existing networks via the co-research group, St Augustine's Centre, and Doncaster Conversation Club. We made several attempts to interview Mears' staff, but they declined.

✂ Document analysis

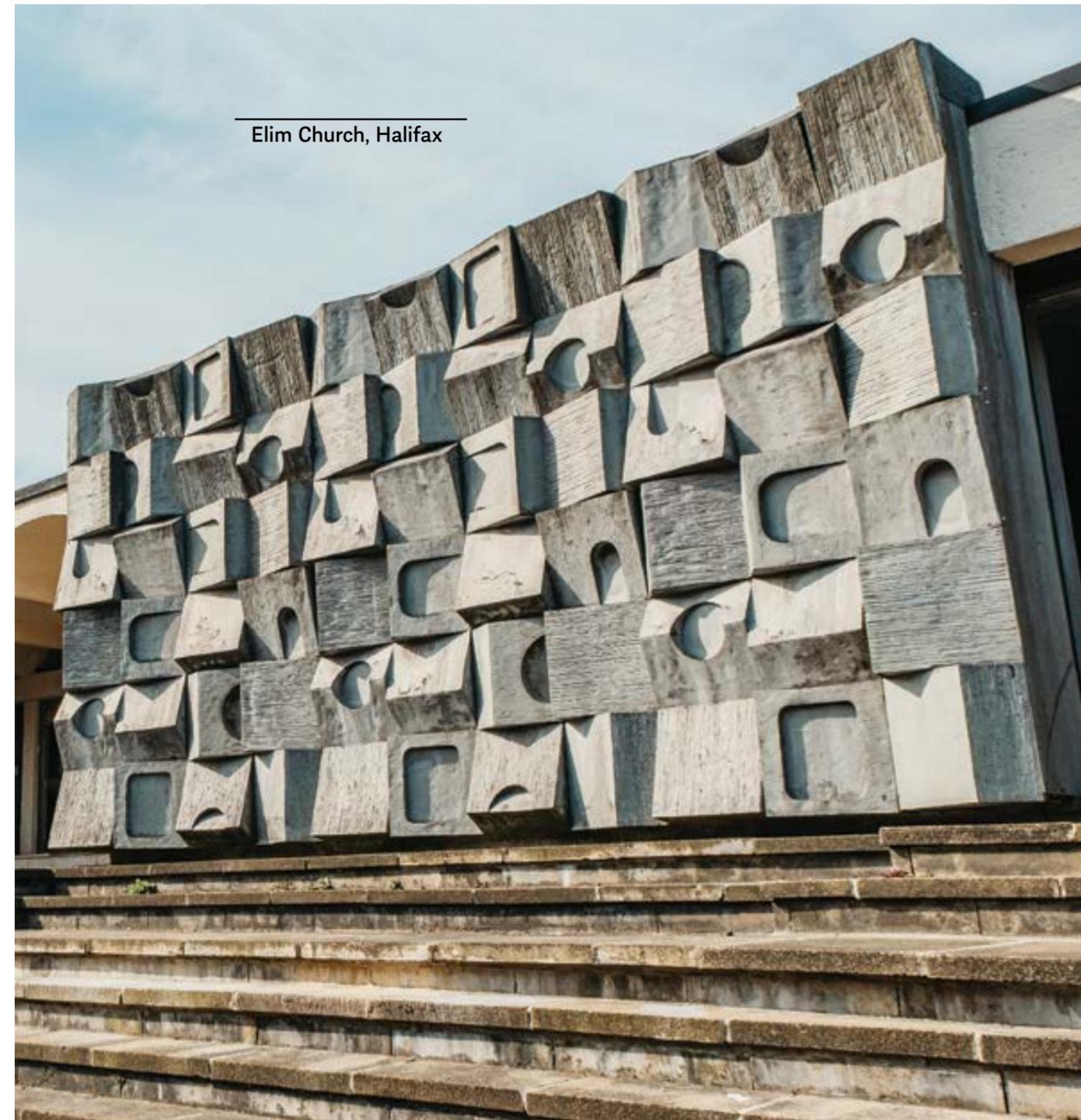
We read and analysed internal organisational documents, as well as publicly available reports and documents detailing the national and local situation regarding asylum accommodation.

✂ Ethics

All names of research participants, and in some cases other details as well, have been changed to protect confidentiality and anonymity.

During the period in which we conducted our research, hotels were in use as contingency accommodation for people seeking asylum in both Doncaster and Halifax. We decided **not** to include people in hotel accommodation in the research. This was a difficult decision, and we recognise that the research questions were highly relevant and timely for this group of people, but we were concerned that some people in hotels were in such desperate situations that it would not be ethical to ask them to participate in the research.

The research received approval from the UCL IOE Research Ethics Committee, REC1467.



Elim Church, Halifax

Asylum dispersal, accommodation, and support

People seeking asylum in the UK are subject to 'dispersal' on a no-choice basis. Less than half of all local authorities in the UK, 180 of 382, have agreed to become 'dispersal areas'⁸ and the policy is interpreted differently in different local areas, as we also show in this report.⁹ Dispersal areas are places where 'there is a greater supply of suitable accommodation',¹⁰ which in practice means cheap or hard-to-let housing, often in deprived small towns and rural areas in decline, with few services and poor public transport. The quality of accommodation has been repeatedly criticised.¹¹ Concerns have been raised about the policy potentially 'undermining the support and consent of local communities'.¹²



Home Office figures show that at the end of June 2021, there were 62,871 people in receipt of asylum support across the UK. Of these, three quarters (74%) were receiving Section 95 support (see the Glossary at the end of the report), while 17% were receiving Section 98 support, and 9% were receiving Section 4 support.³³ There were 5,914 people receiving Section 95 support in Yorkshire at the end of June 2021.

≈ A complex system

The asylum support system is both highly centralized and fragmented, and involves a number of different organisations and companies, including:

- The **Home Office**, who oversee the system and make decisions on individual asylum cases;
- **Private housing providers**, namely **Serco, Mears and Clearsprings Ready Homes**, who are contracted by the Home Office to supply accommodation services to people in receipt of asylum support;

- **Subcontractors and private landlords**, which are used by the housing providers to procure accommodation;
- **Aspen card provider**, currently **Prepaid Financial Services**, who are contracted by the Home Office to issue Aspen cards to people in the asylum system. The contractor until May 2021 was Sodexo. The Aspen card is akin to a prepaid debit card but cannot be used for online payments. It has been termed 'an insidious surveillance tool' by Privacy International, who have highlighted the ways in which the Home Office have used the cards to monitor individuals' spending and take punitive action;¹³
- **Migrant Help**, a third sector organisation contracted by the Home Office to provide free guidance and advice to people in the asylum system around asylum support and the asylum process. They also serve as the point of contact for accommodation issues, problems with payments, complaints, and feedback;
- **Local authorities**, who opt-in voluntarily to the dispersal scheme. They can refuse proposals for accommodation in their area to be used to house people in the asylum system if they are concerned about the 'cluster limit', the private provider's failure to consider the impact on local services, or the level of risk of increased social tension. However, private providers can, and often do, request permission from the Home Office to override local authority decisions;¹⁴
- **Third sector organisations**, who provide advocacy and support to people seeking asylum.

≈ Privatisation

Since 2012, asylum accommodation has been entirely provided by for-profit companies via contracts with the Home Office.¹⁵ Under the then Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government, the UK Border Agency (UKBA) signed six contracts with private providers – G4S, Serco, and Clearrel¹⁶ – to supply accommodation services to people in receipt of asylum support. Many issues were reported early on in the contracts, including poor housing conditions, lack of clear communication with those in asylum support, complex systems of subcontracting, and moves at short notice.¹⁷ The Public Accounts Committee also raised concerns about the Home Office's failure to ensure the safety and security of 'vulnerable people' in the asylum system.¹⁸

New Home Office contracts of approximately £4 billion were issued in 2019, which run until 31 August 2029.¹⁹ The contracts include 'Asylum Accommodation and Support Contracts' (AASC) and 'Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility' (AIRE) services. The AASC contracts were awarded to Serco, Mears, and Clearsprings Ready Homes, while the AIRE contract was awarded to the third sector organisation Migrant Help. The stated aim of the AIRE contract is to 'provide impartial and independent information, advice, guidance and assistance to help Service Users to understand and navigate the Asylum Support System effectively'.²⁰ With the new contracts, the private housing provider in Yorkshire and Humberside changed from G4S to Mears.

The transition from one set of contracts to another was strongly criticised by 42 organisations supporting people seeking asylum and the Public Accounts Committee.²¹ Migrant Help's phoneline was unable to cope with the demand and callers frequently had to wait on hold for several hours at a time. Between September 2019 and January 2020, only one-fifth of calls were answered.²² Complex sub-contracting arrangements are still being used, and complaints of poor housing conditions have continued.²³ In a 2020 report on asylum accommodation and support, the Public Accounts Committee stated that '[t]he Department [the Home Office] is unacceptably vague about its plans to improve services, and lacks an effective line of sight into how services are delivered locally'.²⁴

≈ 'Contingency' accommodation

With the introduction of the new asylum support contracts, there was a significant increase in the use of 'contingency accommodation', such as hotels and hostels, to accommodate people.²⁵ The use of hotels, and other forms of 'contingency accommodation' such as disused military barracks, to house those seeking asylum has further increased since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although Home Office guidance states that people will usually be housed in initial accommodation for three to four weeks,²⁶ some people have spent 6-12 months in hotels during the pandemic. At the end of March 2020 there were approximately 1,200 people seeking asylum in hotels.²⁷ This number had risen to 9,500 by October 2020.²⁸

At first, with hotel accommodation generally being 'full board', those in hotels were not provided with any financial support. However, in October 2020 the Home Office agreed to provide a weekly payment of £8 with which to cover personal expenses including clothing, mobile phone usage, non-prescription medicines, and local travel.

People seeking asylum and organisations supporting them have criticised the long-term use of hotels and former military barracks as asylum accommodation, reporting them as unsuitable for people fleeing war and conflict. More specific issues include poor and unsanitary conditions, lack of access to health and support services, deterioration in mental health and inedible food.²⁹ Those living in hotels and former military barracks have also been targeted by far-right groups and subjected to abuse, including in Yorkshire where our research took place.³⁰

≈ Fragmentation and the role of third sector organisations

There is a high level of fragmentation and complexity in the asylum dispersal and support system, which makes it difficult for people to understand and navigate it, and there is much confusion on the ground about the different functions and responsibilities of the various actors involved in the system. This is exacerbated by inadequate and sometimes non-existent induction processes, which mean that those dispersed are often not provided with essential information, assistance, or induction packs, as Home Office guidance states they should be.³¹



Mery and Rudolph arrived in Halifax on the eve of the first COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020. They spent all day travelling from London where they were in initial accommodation. When they arrived in Halifax, they were taken to their flat and shown around. Then, the housing officer left. Rudolph and Mery went to the nearest supermarket to buy some food only to discover that their Aspen card didn't work. They tried calling the helpline but were told it would take several days before the card would work. They had no cash, they didn't know anyone, they hardly spoke any English, and they had no food. They went back to the flat and had a little bit of cereal that they had taken with them. The next day, they went out again. They were lucky to run into another couple from their country who offered them a meal and took them to St Augustine's Centre for support and advice.

In the absence of the state and state contractors fulfilling their contractual and legal responsibilities, third sector organizations are stepping in to 'fill the gaps'. As others have shown,³² this has become normalised and widespread, something we found further blurred distinctions between different actors and their respective responsibilities.

Advocacy organisations also struggle to navigate the asylum support system. Rachel, a caseworker at a charity supporting people seeking asylum, told us: 'It is a very complex system for us to navigate, never mind someone going through it themselves.' Support organisations we spoke to across Yorkshire described growing concerns over gaps in the system, including vulnerable people left with inadequate support and in unsuitable housing, issues that were exacerbated by the rippling impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.



Housing in Park Ward, Halifax

Dispersal housing conditions

Adequate housing is one of the most basic human needs and the right to housing is included in the universal declaration of human rights by the UN.³⁴ The right to housing encompasses not just the right to 'basic shelter' but adequate housing, defined in terms of 'legal security of tenure; availability of services, materials, facilities, and infrastructure; affordability; habitability; accessibility; location and cultural adequacy'.³⁵

The private rented sector in the UK is recognised to have a high incidence of inadequate or 'bad' housing, and this is also reflected in dispersal accommodation. 'Bad' or inadequate housing refers not only to physical factors such as damp, infestations, or disrepair issues, but can also refer to over-crowding, the wider environment of housing including neighbourhood factors, and environmental pollution. Social and psychological factors can also contribute to the experience of housing, including 'tenure, the status people attach to housing and the levels of community safety and cohesion in an area are all important features'.³⁶ As such, housing impacts directly and indirectly on people's physical health as well as mental health and well-being.³⁷

Recent research in Yorkshire has found that poor quality housing was a significant concern for people. This includes concerns around the dominance of the private rented sector and insecure tenancies.³⁸ Long-standing and systemic problems with asylum dispersal accommodation specifically mean that many properties are dirty, unsafe, and uninhabitable, issues that have been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁹ Dispersal houses are often inadequately furnished and equipped, and housing providers are *not* required to supply even basic items or amenities such as WiFi, vacuum cleaners, or TVs.⁴⁰

Asylum housing conditions were poor especially in Halifax, something that came up repeatedly in our interviews with people seeking asylum and those supporting them in third sector organisations, and which echoes what has been found in other research.⁴¹ Common issues included:

- Collapsed ceilings and leaks
- Broken boilers and cookers
- Dirty conditions upon arrival; Pest infestations, including rats, cockroaches, and bed bugs
- Inadequate furnishings, e.g., no TV or Hoover, insufficient crockery and cutlery for the number of people accommodated, cooking utensils not adequate, e.g., only very small pots and pans provided
- Lack of privacy for residents and disrespectful behaviour by housing provider staff
- Lack of rubbish bins and poor garden maintenance

In Doncaster, dispersal housing is increasingly procured in outlying villages, which makes it difficult for people in the asylum system to access support, co-ethnic networks, appropriate food, and opportunities for socialising (see also section on Dispersal in Doncaster below).



People in asylum accommodation often struggle to access basic amenities. Hedi had no TV in his house during the pandemic; he was stuck at home for long periods of time and said he would have liked a TV to help him learn English. Mery and Rudolph were provided with crockery and cutlery for just one person in their flat

for couples. Noor had holes in the floor of her kitchen in the house where she lived with young children. In Doncaster, volunteers in the Conversation Club spent considerable energy and time to resolve ongoing issues about lack of adequate rubbish bin provision for asylum accommodation properties.

Housing in Stainforth



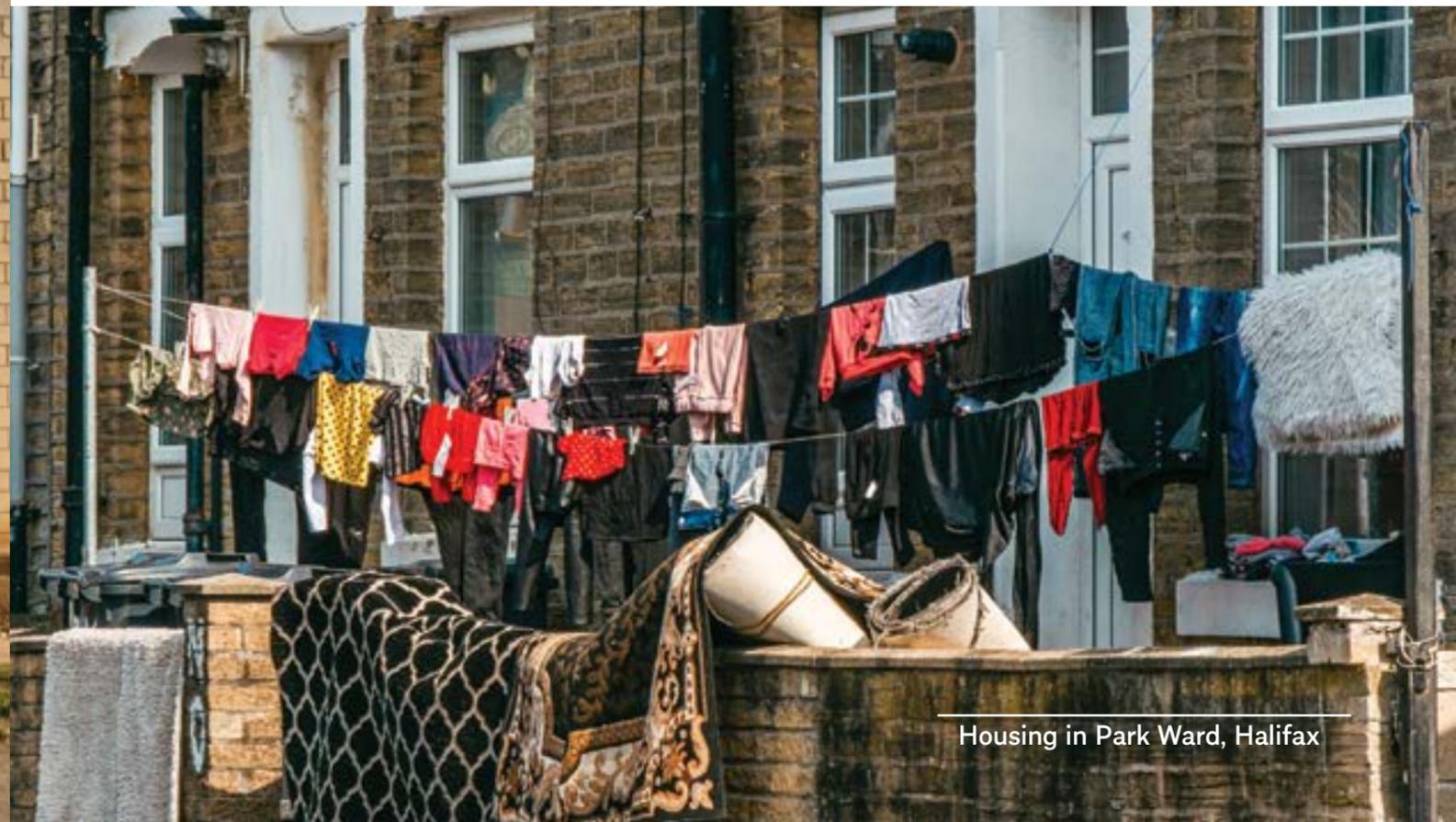
Case study: When Hedi arrived at his shared accommodation, there was only a very small fridge, which didn't have enough room for everyone's food. He had to call Migrant Help and Mears many times over three months until a new fridge was provided. Months later the house had no heating. They reported the issue and someone from Mears came to the house. The person from Mears turned the gas off, but didn't tell Hedi or his housemates. They were left with no gas in the house for heating, hot water, or cooking, and it was really cold. A week went by and it got so bad that Hedi had to stay with a friend outside of Halifax. Only after Hedi sought support at St Augustine's did Mears fix the issue.

Issues were often cumulative and the result of long-term neglect. For example, a leak that was repeatedly reported but not addressed eventually resulted in a ceiling collapsing. Similarly, there was a perception amongst participants that private housing providers used 'quick fixes', which meant that problems recurred and had to be reported time and time again.

Participants also talked to us about difficulties they experienced in maintaining their accommodation themselves without cleaning equipment such as a vacuum cleaner. Many of the people we interviewed

therefore had no way of cleaning the carpets in their properties; one interviewee told us that her housing officer had told her to buy a vacuum cleaner with her own money, something well beyond her means.

💡 'They've had – for about a year – problems with their boiler, which is where Mears will come out, they'll fix it, but then it breaks again. [...] And also rats they're having ... So, we've reported this on a number of occasions to Mears ... And also, most recently, I also got in touch with Environmental Health from Calderdale Council because this issue that Mears said that they've sorted ... I mean the rats, I was looking the other day, I think I first reported that, or definitely reported that [8 months ago], and they've still got rats.' *Rachel, caseworker at charity supporting people seeking asylum.*



Housing in Park Ward, Halifax

Adelola's experience.

Adelola contacted her housing officer at Mears when the boiler in her house stopped working. When she woke up the next day, she was terrified to find an unknown man in her house. She told us, "I opened my eyes and I saw him right in front of my door, my bedroom, and I was really scared." The man turned out to be a maintenance worker from Mears. No one had informed Adelola that he would be coming, and he had let himself in, unannounced, while she was asleep. The maintenance worker claimed that Adelola hadn't answered the door when he knocked. Adelola had previously experienced trauma and found the incident extremely distressing. After the maintenance worker left, Adelola reported the issue to her housing officer. When the boiler broke down again a few months later, Adeola informed her housing officer once again, and the same maintenance worker turned up at her house again. Although COVID-19 restrictions were in place at the time, the maintenance worker wasn't wearing a mask and refused to use the hand gel Adelola asked him to use. He told Adelola that he didn't have to wear a mask because he had already done a risk assessment. Adelola tried to maintain social distancing between them and explained to the main that she had a health condition and was trying to be careful, but he started shouting at her, "Do you want me to fix your boiler?... If you don't want me to do anything, then I will go." She later raised the issue with her housing officer and Migrant Help. Despite the housing officer telling Adelola that Mears would investigate the issue, the same maintenance worker returned to her house again, without a mask, a few days later. Many months had passed when we spoke to Adelola and, as far as she was aware, no action had yet been taken by Mears.

House share issues and lack of privacy

Alongside systemic disrepair issues, participants expressed concerns about tenants' lack of privacy and the difficulties in sharing houses with people they did not know and who might speak a different language or have mental health issues from the situation they had fled in their homeland. Participants talked about the difficulties of sharing a house with others who might have different standards of cleanliness than them, or who might leave dirty crockery in the kitchen. One participant described the difficulty of sharing a house with someone who would lock themselves in the only bathroom for hours and play loud music.

Asylum properties in the area all have a small key-safe outside. Maintenance workers and Mears staff visiting properties were therefore able to let themselves in, and in many cases, did so without prior warning. This issue had been a focal point of work by Sisters United (a mutual support group) and others to develop a 'Residents Charter' in Halifax shortly before the contracts changed in 2019.⁴² Participants expressed disappointment that the change in providers – from G4S to Mears – had not put an end to the practice.

Reporting issues

To report issues, people in dispersal accommodation are required to call the Migrant Help phonenumber. Many people in asylum support who we spoke to told us that it would be easier for them to report an issue to their local housing officer, rather than wait on the phone to Migrant Help – often for several hours.⁴³ However, direct contact with the private housing provider was also perceived to be ineffective, with almost all interviewees reporting delays and particular difficulties resolving problems where the responsibility lay between landlords and private housing providers. Participants described repeatedly attempting to get accommodation issues resolved, including leaks and boiler break-downs, through calling Migrant Help and contacting their housing officer, but said they were 'ignored' and forced to resort to approaching a third sector organisation for advocacy support. Our co-research group felt strongly that private housing providers were more likely to respond to third sector organisations than those seeking asylum themselves. This tended to be understood by co-researchers as being a consequence of their position as 'asylum seekers'. They felt they were not deemed to be 'deserving' of the same respect or rights as other residents in the UK, often being treated like they did not 'matter'.

 **Asylum seekers are human, they are not a statistic...you ring Migrant Help, they want a number, a reference number....no I'm Ollie, I am a face before I am a number, I am not a statistic.' Ollie, co-researcher.**

Access to and adequacy of support

Financial support: 'just enough that we don't die'

The rate of asylum support (£40.85 /week) has been intentionally set lower than welfare benefit rates and is significantly lower than the minimum income standard. Yet people seeking asylum need to cover all non-accommodation costs, such as food, clothing, toiletries, and mobile phone credit with the allowance. The money, as Hedi, one of the co-researchers, put it, is 'just enough that we don't die'. Like other low-income groups, people in the asylum system pay a 'poverty premium' because they are unable to buy goods in bulk or online; they can only access pay as you go mobile packages because they are not allowed to open bank accounts. The poverty premium serves to reinforce financial exclusion, the adverse effects of which have been further exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴⁴

Concretely, participants talked to us about the difficulties of living on such a low level of support, which forced them to make careful calculations about what food, clothing, or toiletries they could afford each week, and what they would have to go without. Some

described having to choose between spending money on transport to go to Doncaster from outlying villages or buying food. This is especially difficult for those following a halal diet as none of the local supermarkets in the area stock halal food. The limited support left individuals reliant on local charities and foodbanks, not all of which accept people in the asylum system. Parents described skipping meals to ensure that their children could eat, while others talked about having to choose between buying data to access the internet or going hungry.

 **'[The financial support is] really bad. For some of us that got children, particularly teenagers, it's really bad ... and you can't obviously watch them not eating well. You know we've had lockdowns upon lockdowns, and when they are home it's just about food, about I want this, I want that, and when you don't have enough, so it's really difficult.' Adelola**



The Job Centre: 'It is a place that when you could access to it, it means you have leave to remain or at least you have permission to work' (Faith).



For several weeks, the Aspen card issues dominated the work of Doncaster Conversation Club with volunteers putting in many, many hours of work to support people locally. At a meeting 20 May 2021, the Conversation Club volunteers were bracing themselves for a busy weekend ahead as the old Aspen cards would be switched off. The Home Office said Mears would have extra people on the ground, but local Mears staff in Doncaster seemed unaware. At a meeting the following week, the Conversation Club was aware of 30 asylum seekers locally [of a population of about 240] without a working Aspen card, including people who were going hungry. The Home Office advised contacting Migrant Help but the phone line was down for several days. There was a sense of desperation and anger. A volunteer who had spent their weekend 'stuck to my computer' trying to access support for people, called the Home Office advice 'a joke'. The Conversation Club was able to distribute food parcels and provide small cash loans. Volunteers also lent out over £1,000 of their own cash to help people during the transition, and got all but £40 back in the following weeks. The challenge of supporting everyone in need was exacerbated by the dispersal to outlying villages, especially in the case of those who were newly arrived and unaware of local points of support.

Issues with Aspen cards

In May 2021, the contract for the Aspen card was changed from one provider to another. During the transition period, thousands of people in the asylum system were left without access to their allowance.⁴⁵ Issues included missing Aspen cards, non-functional cards, no funds on the cards, and wrong names on cards. This led to destitution and distress for people in the asylum system and put huge pressure on asylum seeker and refugee support organisations, that were already over-stretched due to the added pressures of the pandemic.

Wifi access

Dispersal accommodation is not generally provided with WiFi, which makes it very difficult for people in the asylum system to remain in contact with loved ones or professionals, such as solicitors who support their asylum application, and means they cannot access Google translate, which is otherwise a very helpful tool. Digital exclusion means that people in dispersal accommodation were unable to find out how to get to appointments, and they could not stay in touch with support networks.⁴⁶ These issues became particularly urgent during the Covid-19 pandemic, as public buildings and organisations providing free WiFi closed and people in the asylum system became more isolated and excluded.

'Obviously everything now happens online, you know, there are a lot of information you access online. There are some activities I want to get involved in, you know, just to get by and keep my mind off certain things. But when I think of the fact that I do not have enough data, I am not just able to go through with it. ... So, I don't know ... it's just a lot, it's a lot if you think about it, it's a challenge, it's a huge challenge.' *Esther*

Waiting and living in enforced destitution

The impossibilities of building a life in a new place while being barred from working or owning a bank account, having little control over one's life and being suspended in time while waiting for a decision on their asylum application were felt acutely by those involved in our research. They also described the difficulties of living on very limited financial support, having no access to WiFi, and experiencing long-term accommodation problems. Participants described the cumulative negative impact of these conditions on their mental health and sense of self-value, as well as the constraints imposed on making and maintaining relationships and meaningful lives. Poor accommodation conditions meant many interviewees were unable to invite friends round. This was exacerbated by having to subsist on very low financial support.

Many participants described volunteering at local food banks and organisations as something that gave them a sense of purpose and helped to distract them from the uncertainty of their cases and the 'empty time' that resulted from not being allowed to work – a strategy to defend against the 'limbo' of asylum policy.⁴⁷

'I haven't been in the cinema for four years because it's very expensive. And I never afford myself to bring my friend, or make friends because I'm afraid, because you are not allowed to work and you have not enough money to pay for a cup of coffee or a bottle of beer or something – it's just like discrimination towards asylum seekers who are waiting more than three years, four years, or I don't know how many [...] if you are asylum seeker, you are not a person, you are nothing, because you have no [national] insurance number.' *Ravrov*

'It really helps people to do volunteering and be involved [in] some activity. It helps people with mental problems. Here at home, I'm doing nothing, because I'm not allowed to work. I am asylum seeker – I'm getting crazy.' *Ravrov*

Halifax Community Fridge welcomes people in the asylum system: 'We have to go to those places to have something to eat and manage our week' (Hedi)



A case-study of two dispersal towns

HALIFAX

Halifax, a former mill town within Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council, became an asylum dispersal area in the early 2000s, when the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) was first introduced. Asylum accommodation in Halifax includes: houses in multiple occupation (HMOs); self-contained accommodation for families and couples; mother and baby units; and, since the COVID-19 pandemic, a small hotel. Home Office data shows that there were 358 people in receipt of section 95 support in Calderdale at the end of December 2021.⁴⁸

According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS) 2020 mid-year population estimates, there were 211,400 people living in Calderdale. In these statistics, the largest ethnic group recorded was 'White British' (86.7%) and the second largest ethnic group was 'Asian/Asian British' (8.3%), the majority of whom are British Pakistani or Pakistani.⁴⁹

In the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) 2019, Calderdale was ranked the 76th most deprived local authority district out of 317.⁵⁰ Park Ward in Halifax, an ethnically diverse and densely populated area in HX1 where most asylum accommodation is concentrated, was ranked as among the 10% most deprived neighbourhoods in the country. The ONS reported that Calderdale's unemployment rate was 4.9% in 2020 as compared to the national average of 4.5%.⁵¹ Life

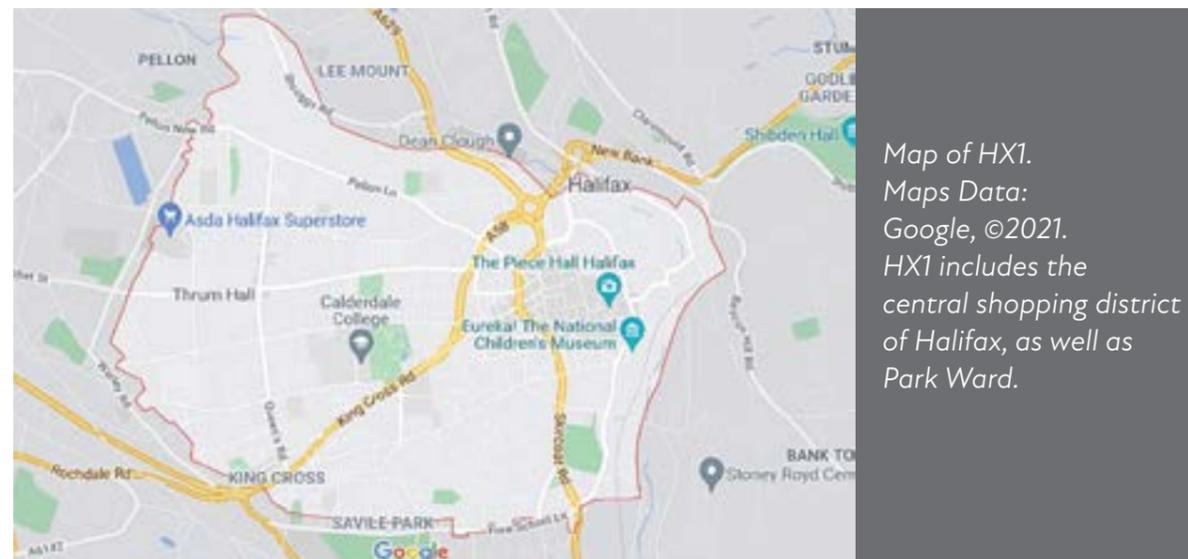
expectancy for men and women in the area is lower than the national average.⁵²

St Augustine's Centre

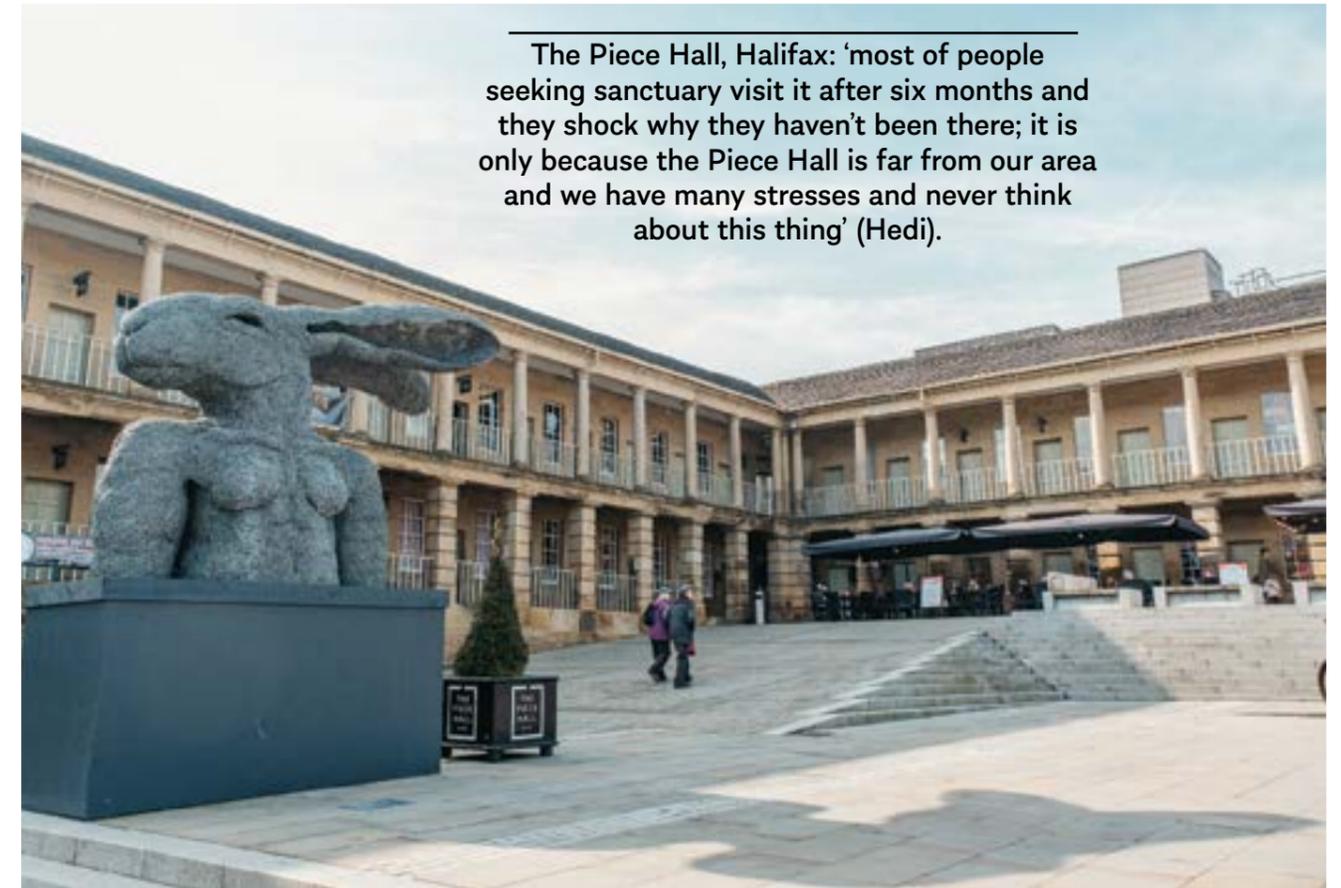
St Augustine's Centre is a specialist charity located in Park Ward and offers support to refugees and people seeking asylum. St Augustine's offers a range of services from hot meals and English language classes to welfare, housing, health, and other types of support and advice, as well as a pre-school nursery, cultural activities, training, and campaigning. The Centre has 16 staff members and 177 volunteers. People with personal experience of the asylum system participate in the running of St Augustine's as trustees, staff, and volunteers.



St Augustine's Centre organises a range of activities and groups



Map of HX1. Maps Data: Google, ©2021. HX1 includes the central shopping district of Halifax, as well as Park Ward.



The Piece Hall, Halifax: 'most of people seeking sanctuary visit it after six months and they shock why they haven't been there; it is only because the Piece Hall is far from our area and we have many stresses and never think about this thing' (Hedi).

As an indication of its size and reach, in 2020, St Augustine's supported 648 people, offered 7,917 free hot lunches, and did 1760 pieces of welfare casework. As with other organisations, when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out the, St Augustine's switched most services to online provision and delivered others as outreach or home delivery, e.g., food and clothes parcels. St Augustine's also began a new project around digital inclusion to provide WiFi dongles and refurbished laptops, tablets, and phones to people in the asylum system who could not otherwise access the Internet.⁵³

Dispersal in Halifax

The fact that most asylum accommodation in Calderdale (88% according to Council data) is concentrated in the postcode area 'HX1', and particularly Park Ward, was perceived to be a problem by local authority staff we interviewed and some third sector workers in organisations supporting those seeking asylum in the area. Discussing requests from Mears to procure properties in the area, one local authority worker said, 'we will always say no because it's in HX1'. Those who expressed this concern talked about 'pressure' on services, which they felt were already under strain due to pre-existing deprivation. There was a felt need

amongst these participants for dispersal to be 'widened' in Calderdale and for Mears to cease procuring new properties in HX1. However, people we interviewed who had been accommodated outside of HX1, in more rural areas such as Elland or Southowram, described experiences of racism, feelings of isolation and poor public transport, which many struggled to afford. These experiences were similar to those of people dispersed to outlying villages around Doncaster. One participant, Asma, described feeling very marked out and excluded in the rural area in which she had been placed:

'They did not have time for me even to say hello or something like that, because you know they know that house belongs to asylum seekers and belongs to the Home Office, it's just the only house there. So, I couldn't even meet my neighbour, nobody, and so I felt like – it was like feeling am I going to establish myself here, being integrated within the community or no?' Azma



Halifax is a former mill town

Experiences of living in Halifax

There were a wide range of views on what it was like to live in Halifax amongst participants, with some describing Halifax as a 'friendly place' where they had built friendships and a sense of community, while others reported more negative impressions and experiences, such as hostility and abuse from other residents. Racism was also described by participants who were living in more central parts of Halifax, particularly amongst black interviewees, such as Lucy and Esther.

"The first house I moved in with my daughter when she was born they were not good, they were a bit racist and they were Asians. Yeah, I was in a community with Asians but they were a bit racist, they would stone my door, house. [...] They would stone the door, yeah. At that time, I think they didn't want other people to come in the area." Lucy

"Another aspect, which doesn't bother me as much, but sometimes bothers my son, is the reaction we've gotten from locals, you know obviously Halifax before now ... now I think there are a lot of ... it's becoming more multicultural but not a lot of locals are that receptive, especially when you know they see Africans." Esther

Many participants talked about the significance of support organisations and groups such as St Augustine's Centre, Sisters United, and Light Up Black and African Heritage Calderdale, where they felt they had been able to find a sense of community, make friendships and give and receive support.

"So, in St Augustine's Centre I met with many people. There we can see each other and we can talk to each other, we can find friends. In St Augustine's Centre it's a good place for asylum seeker really. Really useful for classes, English class. Like DIY group – they have a DIY group, you can help, you can start to work, like volunteer, so that's good when we are asylum seeker, we are not allowed to work, so that's a good place for spend time, you know, not stay at home sleeping." Arman

DONCASTER

Like Halifax, Doncaster became a dispersal area following the introduction of the National Asylum Support System in 1999. Doncaster is a former mining town and centre of train engineering. Today, it is a significant distribution hub. The local authority, Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council, encompasses former pit villages, including e.g., Stainforth, Hatfield, and Thorne. Outlying villages are increasingly used for asylum accommodation, raising particular issues around local-level dispersal and fragmentation.⁵⁴ People housed in outlying villages can be especially isolated as there are few culturally appropriate services, e.g., no mosques, no provision of halal food, and limited or non-existent co-ethnic networks and support groups.

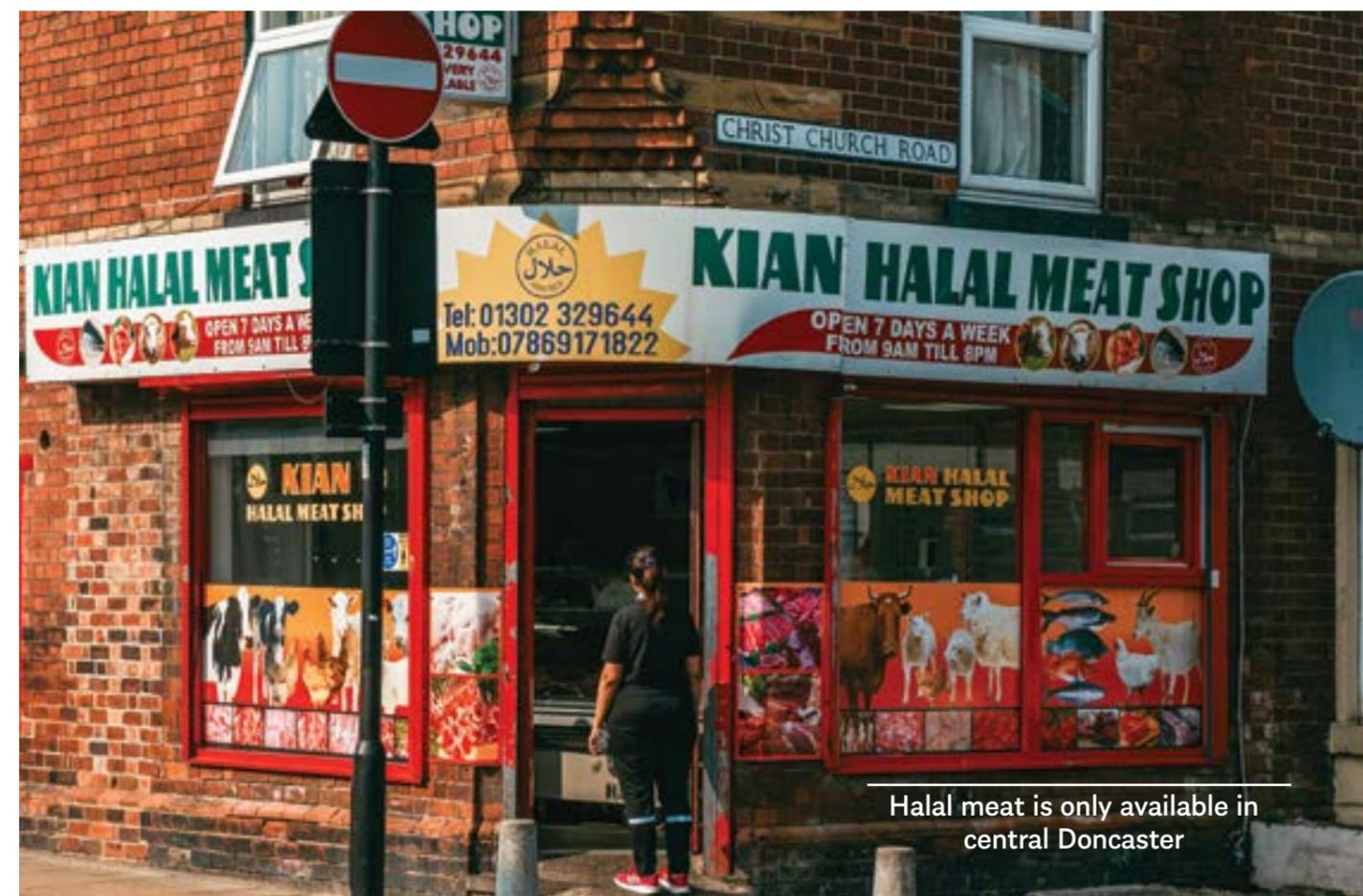
The population estimate for Doncaster was 312,785 for mid-2020 according to the ONS. Home Office data shows that there were 313 people in receipt of section 95 support in Doncaster at the end of December 2021.⁵⁵ Since the late summer of 2021, 84 people have been housed in a hotel on the outskirts of Doncaster, and from late spring of 2022, 17 people seeking asylum were housed in an additional hotel.



Housing in Stainforth

In the 2011 Census data, 91.8% of Doncaster residents identified as 'White British'. The second largest group (3.4%) was recorded as 'Other White' and the third 'Asian' (2.5%).⁵⁶

In the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) 2019, Doncaster was ranked the 41st most deprived local authority district out of 317⁵⁷ and the ONS reported that Doncaster's unemployment rate was 5.4% in 2020, as compared to the national average of 4.5%.⁵⁸ Life expectancy in Doncaster is lower than the national average.⁵⁹



Halal meat is only available in central Doncaster



CAST is a theatre of sanctuary and works with Doncaster Conversation Club

Doncaster Conversation Club

Doncaster Conversation Club (DCC) is the main support organisation for people in the asylum system in the Doncaster area; it is entirely volunteer run and led. Many volunteers spend a considerable amount of time on work for DCC, for example organising and delivering support, including English language tuition several days a week. DCC has a core of about 15 regular volunteers, with some volunteering on a daily basis, and regularly taking calls in the evenings and weekends.

DCC provides a wide range of advice and support services for asylum seekers dispersed to Doncaster and the wider area, including around immigration, asylum, and service access, and how to access language courses at Doncaster College. DCC also provides tailored English language tuition, practical support (transport to events and activities), food parcels, and befriending and social activities. In collaboration with Doncaster Rovers FC, DCC hosts three free weekly football sessions for people in the asylum system at the Keepmoat Stadium. For these sessions, the organisation sources football boots and socks and provides transport to the stadium for those living in outlying villages. Alongside this, DCC also procures and delivers bikes to people in the asylum system as public transport is expensive and not always practical.

The organisation counts among its full-time volunteers a retired GP who aims to see all new arrivals and help them register with local GPs as well as assess health issues and needs (e.g., to identify torture survivors and ensure they are adequately supported). Volunteers with personal experience of the asylum system and with a background and training in healthcare support this work as 'health volunteers'. E.g., with the health volunteers, DCC has given talks about the UK health system and how to access care to people seeking asylum in English as well as Arabic, Kurdish, and Tigrinya.

Pre-COVID, DCC ran an advice and social drop-in in central Doncaster, with about 140 weekly attendees, and 60-70 new people registering to see someone every week. The drop-in also served to disseminate and share information about activities and events, and helped new arrivals meet co-nationals. During the pandemic, DCC suspended the social drop-in and moved its support online. As lockdown restrictions have gradually eased, it has become clear that a new modus operandi is needed as the local geography of dispersal has changed during the pandemic (see discussion below). At the time of writing (March 2022), DCC has re-opened its advice drop-in on an appointment basis, and is looking for a sustainable way to re-instate social drop-ins.

Dispersal in Doncaster

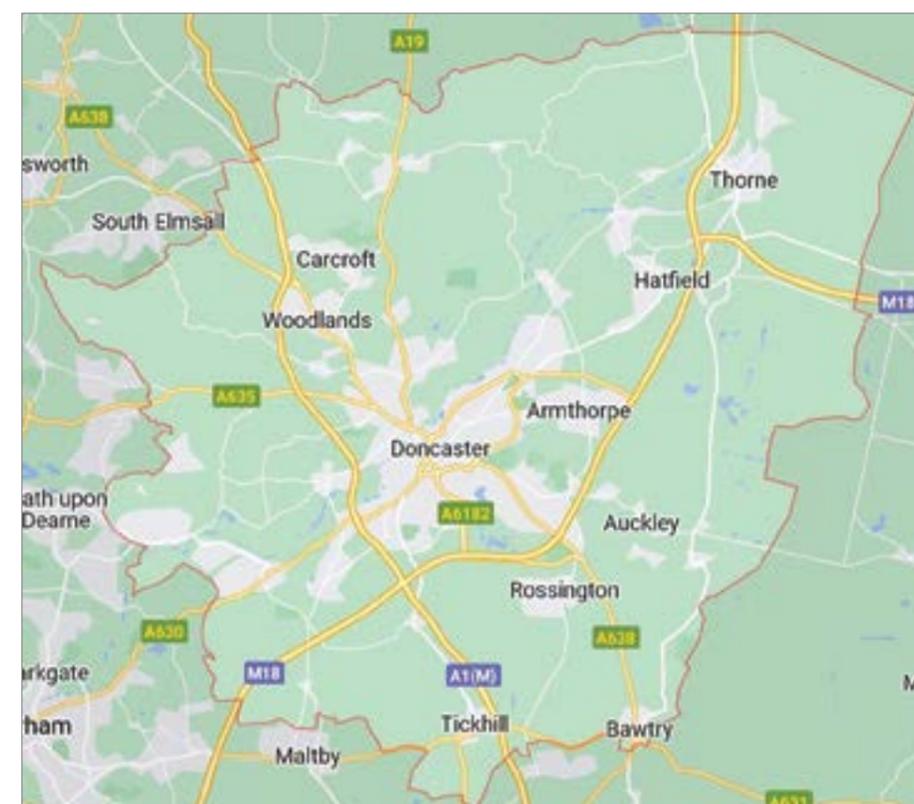
During the pandemic, the number of people in the asylum system dispersed to Doncaster rose, and more people were accommodated in outlying villages, including Stainforth, Rossington, Balby Armthorpe, Thorne and Moorends. This presents specific and different challenges from those in Halifax. To illustrate, Stainforth (7.4 miles from Doncaster; approximately 40 mins by bus) now has more than 40 people in asylum accommodation (see case-study below). Local public transport is limited and prohibitively expensive for people living on asylum support (a return adult bus ticket costs £5), meaning that those accommodated in outlying villages sometimes have to choose between spending money on food or travelling to Doncaster to access services, support, and co-ethnic communities.

COVID-related lockdowns and the new geography of micro-dispersal has led to a fragmented landscape of accommodation and support for people seeking asylum who live in Doncaster. It also poses social, logistical, organisational, and financial challenges for people supporting them. To illustrate, it has become unfeasible to return to the pre-pandemic schedule of social and other events, and it is more complex, as well as more costly to organise events (coordination, travel time, fuel costs, information sharing).

Experiences of living in Doncaster

People in the asylum system that we talked to in Doncaster and surrounding villages told us that they generally found the areas welcoming, but there were very few activities they could take part in. 'For people with a car, people who work, it's fine' said Khaled. He took us on a walking tour around Stainforth. There is a local supermarket, but it doesn't stock halal meat, which is only available in central Doncaster. The local Church of England church has a weekly foodbank that Khaled and other people in the asylum system in Stainforth make use of. Several also volunteer for the food bank. Stainforth has a small private gym, which is popular with people in the asylum system, and where local volunteers who support people in the asylum system have negotiated an arrangement that makes it accessible. Once a week, a small group affiliated with DCC organises English language tuition and a social drop-in, in the Catholic Church hall.

People in the asylum system in and around Doncaster described being cared for and supported by DCC volunteers. They also told us that they find the waiting time hard, there are few activities they can be involved in, and they cannot afford to go to Doncaster often. They find themselves spending lots of time at home in houses that they share with others, and this can be very challenging.



Map of Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council. Maps Data: Google, ©2022. Stainforth lies to the north-west of Hatfield

Conclusions and recommendations

The UK asylum system is fragmented and fragile and in need of urgent reform.⁶⁰ Support for those seeking asylum is outsourced to private companies, with the third sector 'filling the gaps'.⁶¹ Waiting times for asylum decisions are long. This means that many people spend months and even years in dispersal accommodation in enforced destitution, barred from work and with very limited opportunities to rebuild their lives.⁶² Communication and coordination is poor, and local authorities and support groups are not systematically informed and consulted when people are dispersed to their areas.⁶³

Based on our research, we recommend that support for those seeking asylum should be incorporated into the mainstream welfare system rather than provided through the current complex and separate system, which sees those on asylum support receive substantially less than people in receipt of welfare benefits. Alongside this, priority should be given to reducing asylum application processing times and enhancing decision-making. The Home Office should also improve coordination and communication with all stakeholders in the asylum system. People in the asylum system should be allowed to work across the board, not just in jobs on the shortage occupation list, as also recommended by the Migration Advisory Committee.⁶⁴ This would enable people to live dignified lives free from destitution. It would help decrease social isolation and mean that people can contribute in meaningful ways to their local communities. Research consistently finds that early access to the labour market has a positive impact on long-term employment outcomes for people seeking asylum, and the UK is more restrictive than many other European countries and the US in this regard.⁶⁵

Meanwhile, our research suggests that conditions for people while they are waiting for the outcome of their asylum applications could be significantly improved in the following ways:

- 1. Those seeking asylum should have a choice of accommodation and location, e.g. to enable them to settle close to co-ethnic networks, friends, and families;**
- 2. Inclusion and sustainable communities should be a key priority in the accommodation procurement process. This would mean consultation with local authorities and community groups, and careful consideration of availability of services, support, and local transport;**
- 3. There should be consistent provision of adequate and appropriate as well as localised induction for people when they are moved to dispersal accommodation⁶⁶;**
- 4. Accommodation should be adequately furnished. Minimum standards should include Wi-Fi, televisions, and vacuum cleaners;**
- 5. Reporting of issues in asylum properties should be made simpler and the system should be responsive so that disrepair and infestation issues are tackled promptly.**



Doncaster College offers English language tuition for people in the asylum system



GLOSSARY

ASYLUM SUPPORT

People seeking asylum are not allowed to claim mainstream welfare support and are not usually allowed to work. A separate system of support for ‘destitute’ people seeking asylum is administered by the Home Office under Part 6 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. It is composed of three different kinds of support:

Section 98 support (Initial Accommodation)

This is a form of emergency support provided to people while they are being assessed for asylum support. It is designed to be ‘short term’ though is increasingly being used for long periods of time. Accommodation is usually in a hostel or hotel.

Section 95 support

Section 95 support is a longer-term form of support. Those granted Section 95 support can access £40.85 in cash support per week and ‘dispersal accommodation’, which is provided on a no-choice basis. Financial support is paid via the so-called Aspen card, a kind of pre-paid debit card. Those eligible for section 95 support can also opt for cash-only support if they have access to alternative accommodation. The cash support is set significantly lower than benefit rates, and is less than a quarter of the Minimum Income Standard for a single adult of working age in the UK of £206.55 a week (excluding rent,

childcare, Council Tax and water) according to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.⁶⁷

Section 4 support

Section 4 support is provided to people who have been refused asylum in very limited circumstances. These include where the person is destitute and:

- taking all reasonable steps to leave the UK
- unable to leave the UK due to a physical impediment to travel or some other medical reason
- the Home Office accepts there is no viable route of return to a person’s country of origin
- been granted permission to proceed with an application for judicial review of a decision on their asylum claim
- the provision of support is necessary to avoid breaching human rights (e.g., a person has made further submissions for a fresh claim)

Support provided under Section 4 comes in the form of accommodation and £40.85 per week in financial support provided through an Aspen card, which can only be used to buy food and other essential items (but cannot be used for cash withdrawals). However, unlike people in receipt of Section 95 support, those supported under Section 4 cannot claim ‘cash-only support’.

CLUSTER LIMIT

The ‘cluster limit’ means that no more than one person seeking asylum per 200 residents can usually be dispersed to an area. The limit is meant to apply within a council and ward level. Regional dispersal policy specifies that ‘as a general rule, asylum seekers should be accommodated in areas where there is a greater supply of suitable accommodation’.⁶⁸ In practice, this means that asylum accommodation is concentrated in the wards with the cheapest accommodation.

CONTINGENCY ACCOMMODATION

A term used by the Home Office to describe accommodation that should not normally be used widely or frequently, such as hotels and former military barracks, but is being used to make up so-called shortages of accommodation.

DESTITUTION

People seeking asylum are eligible for asylum support if they are ‘destitute’ or at risk of ‘destitution’. According to the Home Office definition, a person is destitute if they do not have adequate accommodation or any means of obtaining it (whether or not their essential living needs are met) and/or they cannot meet their other essential living needs.

DISPERSAL ACCOMMODATION

With the introduction of the ‘National Asylum Support Service’ (NASS) in 1999, a ‘dispersal’ system was instituted that saw people in asylum support dispersed across the country, primarily outside of London and the South-East, on a ‘no-choice’ basis to ‘dispersal areas’.

The dispersal scheme was not, and is not, mandatory for local authorities, who opt-in voluntarily, though the Home Office has the power to compel local authorities to accept dispersed asylum seekers. As of March 2020, 180 of 382 local authorities in the UK had agreed to become ‘dispersal areas’.⁶⁹

The dispersal system was fully privatised in 2012. The private companies currently contracted by the Home Office to provide accommodation services to people in asylum accommodation are: Serco, Mears, and Clearsprings. These companies often use complex systems of subcontracting. Since September 2019, Mears is the company providing services in Yorkshire.

PERSON SEEKING ASYLUM

The legal definition of a person seeking asylum in the UK is someone who has made a claim for asylum under the 1951 Refugee Convention, the United Nations treaty that protects the rights of refugees, or a claim under Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).⁷⁰ Individuals remain ‘asylum seekers’ until their claim is determined by the Home Office, or, if they are refused, until their appeal has been decided.

Endnotes

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