

Home Beyond the Home Office:

Addressing Refugee Move-On Challenges in the Oxford Area

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[SOAS, University of London](#) is home to a thriving research community engaging with contemporary global issues. Research in the Department of Development Studies works to build understanding of how economic, political and social change happens, how power is exercised and how inequalities can be explained and confronted. This project was funded by the Impact and Knowledge Exchange Fund which supports collaborative projects between SOAS staff and non-academic partners to inform and build practical impact.



[Asylum Welcome](#) tackles poverty, suffering and isolation among asylum seekers, refugees and vulnerable migrants in Oxfordshire. The charity's advice service supports individuals navigating the asylum system and the early stages of life in the UK through twice-weekly drop-in sessions for asylum seekers and newly recognised refugees in contingency accommodation in Oxford, as well as advice appointments for people living in the wider community. Asylum Welcome's [Sanctuary Hosting](#) service provides temporary accommodation for refugees, asylum seekers, and vulnerable migrants at risk of homelessness across Oxfordshire and Reading by matching them with volunteer hosts. Previously primarily focused on supporting people with no recourse to public funds, Sanctuary Hosting is increasingly supporting people after they get refugee status, to prevent them becoming street homelessness.

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Executive summary

People who are successful in obtaining refugee status are given 28 days before they are catapulted into the private rented market. This creates pressure on local authorities, the voluntary sector and communities to keep people off the streets. This report explores access to housing for newly-recognised refugees, focussing on men who have been living in contingency asylum accommodation in the city of Oxford. It also outlines what the Oxfordshire-based charity Asylum Welcome has learned over the last 10 months from supporting people as they transition into the mainstream housing system. The report draws on a range of sources, including existing research and statistics; interviews with refugees and stakeholders; a survey of asylum claimants attending 'moving on' briefings; and Asylum Welcome's extensive casework experience. Our key findings are as follows:

- The surge in successful asylum applications in autumn 2023, while welcome in many ways, occurred without effective coordination with the Local Housing Authority or the charitable sector, which tries to fill gaps in state provision.
- The 28-day move-on period (in its various recent permutations) is too short to set up the essentials of a new life and give people a realistic opportunity to avoid homelessness. Very few refugees leaving the Oxford contingency accommodation since September 2023 were able to move directly into private rented housing.
- The Oxford area, where people have been placed on a no-choice basis during the asylum process, is an extremely expensive place to find housing. Yet it is also the place where these individuals have developed much-needed legal, social and practical connections that can support them going forwards. Newly recognised refugees face intersectional disadvantage in the fast-moving and competitive private rented market. Even people with advanced English and digital literacy struggle to secure housing offers.
- The Local Housing Authority provides temporary accommodation for people with significant physical and mental health issues, keeping them off the streets and giving time and help to find stable private rented housing. However, housing needs assessments are often completed very close to eviction, substantially increasing stress. Most single male refugees who are identified as Priority Need are placed in emergency hotel accommodation, with no cooking or laundry facilities, often out-of-area, disrupting their language training and the support networks that can assist with housing searches.
- The relief of getting refugee status is rapidly overtaken by precarity, homelessness and stress, delaying integration. People who speak little or no English, due partly to a lack of learning opportunities during the asylum process, constitute the majority of the homeless cases following the withdrawal of asylum support in Oxford, and struggle most in their onward journey.

In response:

- To help newly recognised refugees navigate this transition, Asylum Welcome has developed information resources: a combination of in-person briefings; a moving-on guidebook; and short informational videos.
- To support people in the move-on period better, Asylum Welcome is adjusting its casework approach, liaising closely with the local authority and experimenting with coaching to search for private rented housing
- To address the toughest challenge, which is the limited supply of affordable housing, the project team continue to reach out to landlords and are collaborating with a second Oxford-based charity, Aspire, to establish a bridging accommodation property.

Our key recommendations are:

- Equip newly recognised refugees for moving on better, by providing asylum seekers waiting a decision on their claim with right to work, more English language provision, and community-based accommodation for a reduced period of asylum processing.

- Increase the move-on period from 28 to at least 56 days, to give newly recognised refugees a better chance of completing the tasks required to avoid homelessness and destitution, thereby reducing subsequent costs to the state.
- Improve collaboration within and between organisations involved in the local move-on process, including the local authority, the Home Office, the asylum accommodation provider, housing associations, landlords, and third-sector organisations, to facilitate refugees' access to housing.

1. Introduction

The eviction of newly recognised refugees from Home Office accommodation began to hit UK headlines in 2023.¹ People who successfully obtain refugee status are expected to leave asylum accommodation after 28 days, as the Home Office attempts to process its backlog of asylum cases and curb its accommodation costs. In Oxford, the Local Housing Authority has seen a sharp rise in refugees needing help to prevent and relieve homelessness. Charities like Oxfordshire-based Asylum Welcome and members of the community are playing a vital role in trying to keep people off the streets, but the move-on process creates huge stress and too many people fall between the cracks. Single men housed in the contingency hotel in Oxford have found it particularly hard to secure housing.

Funded by the Impact & Knowledge Exchange Fund of SOAS, University of London, the 'Home Beyond the Home Office' project complemented Asylum Welcome's existing outreach activities in Oxford, aiming (a) to build knowledge about refugees' routes into housing and homelessness, and (b) to use that knowledge to develop information resources and interventions to support refugees through the transition into the mainstream system.

This report draws on:

- **Secondary research:** a review of existing reports, analysis of statutory homeless statistics, and more recent data obtained from Oxford City Council.
- **Primary research:** eight housing journey interviews with refugees; nine interviews with key stakeholders; and the results of a questionnaire completed by 50 refugees in contingency accommodation attending 'moving on' briefings.²
- **Casework experience:** a) the housing outcomes of 77 people who got refugee status (Sep - May 2023) b) the experience of working with newly-recognised refugees at Asylum Welcome's hotel outreach service (Dec 2023 - June 2024) c) monitoring the housing market in Oxford (February – July 2024), d) the intensive coaching of individuals looking for private rented housing (February – July 2024).

Sections 2 and 3 outline how Home Office asylum support policy and the 28-day notice of cessation of support contribute to the 'move-on' challenge for newly-granted refugees. Section 4 documents people's uphill struggle to secure housing in a notoriously tough local housing landscape. Section 5 charts refugees' struggles with homelessness and the role of the local authority in homelessness prevention and relief. Throughout, we highlight Asylum Welcome's interventions to tackle these issues, including introducing new information resources; adjusting our casework approach; and working on generating affordable accommodation options. Recommendations are outlined in Section 6.

¹ Holly Bancroft (2023) '[Thousands more refugees facing homelessness after government eviction rule changes](#)' *The Independent*; Rajeev Sayal '[Thousands of refugees in England and Wales 'face homeless Christmas' | Immigration and asylum | The Guardian](#)' *The Guardian*; Gregg Barradale (2023) '[Rise in homeless refugees in wake of Home Office asylum change](#)' *The Big Issue*.

² Research ethics approval was obtained from SOAS, University of London.

2. Living in asylum accommodation

The Home Office has a statutory duty to provide accommodation to people who would otherwise be destitute while their asylum claim is being considered; this applies to most people seeking asylum in the UK. As shown in Figure 1, the number of people in Home Office asylum accommodation in the UK has doubled since 2019. A significant proportion are placed in 'contingency accommodation' (mass accommodation in re-commissioned hotels and former government/military sites) rather than being dispersed to regular community-based asylum housing, or 'dispersal accommodation'.³ Originally an emergency measure introduced at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the use of contingency accommodation has become normalised.⁴

The pattern in Oxford is distinctive, as shown in Figure 2. Oxford has not historically been a dispersal area; there were previously low numbers of asylum seekers, mainly on subsistence-only support (receiving a monthly stipend from the government but in independent accommodation).⁵ Traditional dispersal accommodation has increased modestly since 2021, reaching a peak of 40 people in March 2024. In autumn 2022, the Home Office sourced contingency accommodation in an Oxford hotel via their subcontractor, Clearsprings Ready Homes. Initially, 176 people were placed in this accommodation, rising to 238 in September 2023 as room-sharing was expanded. As of March 2024, the contingency accommodation housed 215 people. The population has fluctuated, with some asylum seekers being granted refugee status, and others being relocated to the Bibby Stockholm barge, Napier Barracks, and other forms of accommodation across the UK.

Figure 1. People in receipt of asylum support - UK

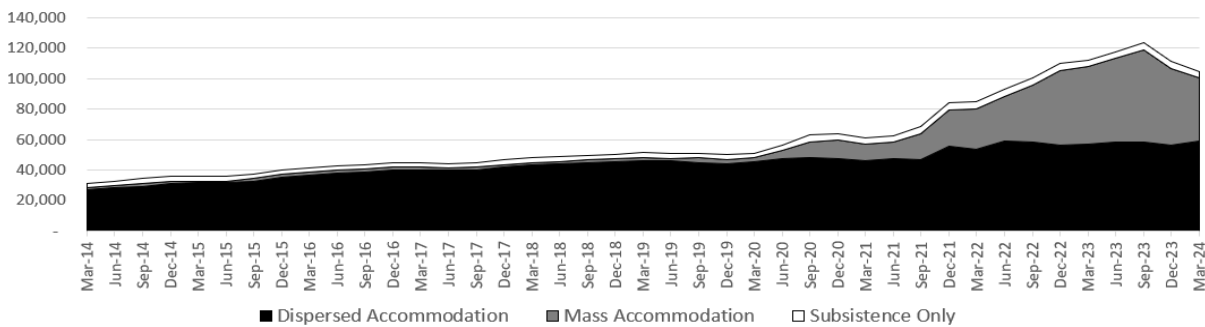
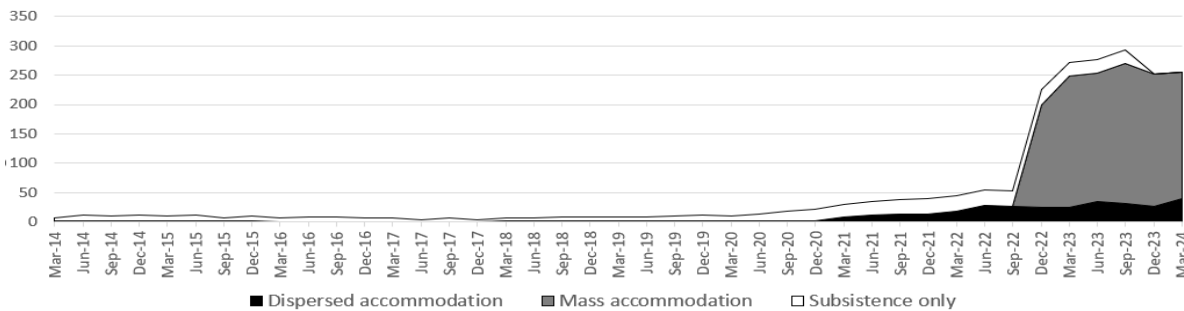


Figure 2. People in receipt of asylum support - Oxford



Source: Home Office, [Asylum seekers in receipt of support detailed datasets, year ending March 2024](#). Numbers for end of quarter. Includes main asylum applicant and dependents. Note: 'Mass accommodation' includes 'contingency' accommodation in re-purposed hotels and hostels, former government/military sites, and initial short-term accommodation.

³ Melanie Gower and Georgina Sturge (2020) [Asylum accommodation: the use of hotels and military barracks](#), House of Commons Library; Melanie Gower (2023); [Asylum accommodation: hotels, vessels and large-scale sites](#), House of Commons Library.

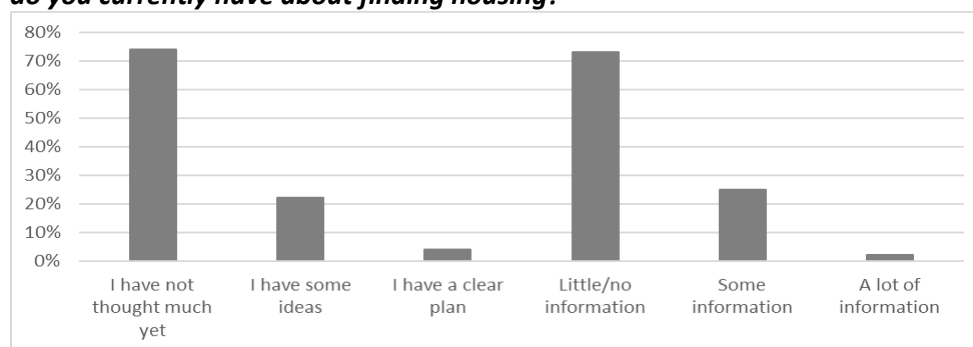
⁴ Chris Philip, MP, Letter to [Letter to Chief Executives of Local Authorities](#), 27 March 2020

⁵ This report focuses on people who have sought asylum and been offered Contingency Accommodation at a hotel in Oxford. This is an important component of a wider population of people seeking sanctuary through different routes. Since 2021, several hotels were contracted across the county to house asylum-seekers and resettled refugees. As Figure 2 indicates, there are also asylum-seekers in more conventional dispersal housing. Some 50 refugee households have been resettled in homes in Oxford since 2015. There has also been a sizeable population of Ukrainians on humanitarian visas housed under the 'Homes for Ukraine' scheme in the county.

Living in contingency accommodation, with the restrictions currently imposed on asylum-seekers, has an institutionalising effect that does not prepare people well for life after getting status. People crave privacy: most asylum seekers in the Oxford contingency accommodation share a room, with no choice about their roommate, and experience frequent unannounced room-checks.⁶ They also crave autonomy. Meals are available at particular times in take-away containers and residents cannot choose what they eat or cook for themselves. There is very little communal space, and people have to sign in and out of the centre. The hotel is on the edge of the city, and with support of £8.86 per week,⁷ people have very little money to meet non-food needs and engage in everyday life in the local community. Asylum seekers cannot apply for free, accredited ESOL classes until they have been in the UK for 6 months; they cannot apply for restricted permission to work until they have been in the asylum system for more than a year. On top of prior distress, and the rigours of navigating the asylum process, these conditions contribute to poor mental well-being, with anxiety and depression very common.⁸ Many people are as active as they can be within these constraints. But for long months, people are explicitly and implicitly told that they *cannot* do things. All this has important implications for people’s preparedness to launch immediately into action following a grant of refugee status.

People lack information about what to expect in terms of the housing situation, if they get refugee status, as shown in Figures 3 and 4. Often people find it hard to think about and plan for the future while waiting for the all-important outcome of their asylum application. As one refugee expressed, *“During that time, how can I think about the future? I was thinking, ‘Will they deport me?’ I never thought that there would be a problem with housing. There are a lot of houses! People who came before did not have such a problem. But when I got my status, then I learned. I saw people in tents. People said to me, ‘You need to think about finding housing!’.”*⁹ In the early phases of our project, most of the information people received about housing was word-of-mouth from co-language speakers, including other hotel residents and members of the diaspora community who had been in the UK for much longer. This can raise issues. One individual who went through the process of getting status and trying to find housing stated: *“Sometimes, people in your own community might... tell you... that as soon as you get your status, they’ll give you a house.”*¹⁰ We saw in our casework that people’s understanding, particularly regarding the availability of social housing, is often inaccurate or outdated.

Figure 3. Have you thought about how to find housing after getting refugee status? How much information do you currently have about finding housing?



N=50. Asylum Welcome survey of people before ‘moving on’ briefings

⁶ Mamo (2024) [The housing issue for asylum seekers starts from day zero](#) *Border Criminologies*

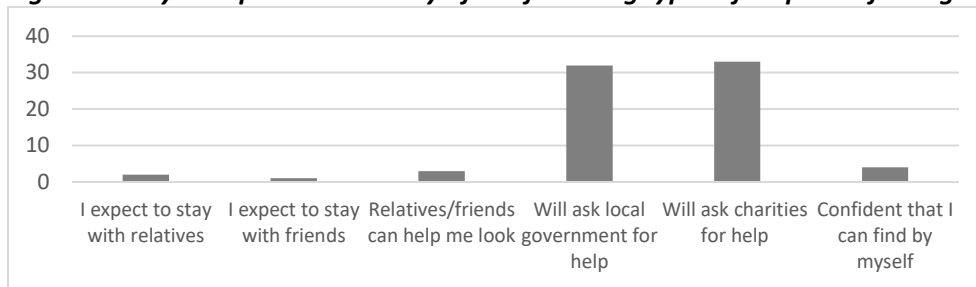
⁷ Home Office (2023) [Report on review of weekly allowances paid to asylum seekers and failed asylum seekers: 2023](#) Updated 05/24.

⁸ Eva Mowat (2024) Quarterly Report: Asylum Welcome/Oxford City Council Kassam Outreach Project. 4th December 2023 – 26th March 2024. See also Philip Brown, Santokh Gill and Jamie P. Halsall (2023) [‘The impact of housing on refugees: an evidence synthesis’](#) *Journal of Social Policy*, 39(1): 227-271.

⁹ Refugee housing journey interview, 23.6.24a

¹⁰ Refugee housing journey interview, 21.2.24

Figure 4. Do you expect to have any of the following types of help with finding housing?



N=50. Asylum Welcome survey of people before 'moving on' briefings

In 2023, there was a concentrated effort to clear the 'backlog' of asylum claims awaiting decisions from the Home Office and to reduce reliance on hotel accommodation. In February 2023, the Streamlined Asylum Questionnaire was developed to speed up the processing of asylum claims from nationalities with the highest acceptance rates: Afghanistan, Eritrea, Libya, Syria and Yemen. Sudan, Iraq and Iran were later added to this list. In the year ending March 2024, 62% of initial decisions were grants of protection (refugee status, humanitarian protection or alternative forms of leave).¹¹ The number of people granted refugee status (68,564) was the highest in a year since records began in 1984.¹²

The impact of this increase was felt across the country and had a marked effect in the Oxford area. Neither Asylum Welcome nor Oxford City Council have been able to track individuals being granted asylum systematically; the city council has access to a rolling dashboard of decisions, but not cumulative data. It was evident at Asylum Welcome's autumn drop-in advice sessions and from the Homelessness Prevention Applications received by the city council that there was a surge in positive decisions on asylum cases for individuals living in the Oxford contingency accommodation. Soon after, those individuals began to receive Notices to Vacate from the accommodation provider, Clearsprings. Individual refugees, NGOs, and the local authority were poorly prepared for these transitions into the mainstream housing system, highlighting the lack of joined-up working and information sharing between local and national governments, and a failure by the Home Office to recognise and manage the move-on and housing integration challenge.

To meet the need for clear, accurate information, and prepare people better for the transition out of asylum support accommodation, Asylum Welcome started 'move on' group briefings to residents, with local authority funding. These meetings are designed to give hotel residents accurate information about life in the UK, including the housing situation - dispelling myths about the availability of council housing - and prepare them for the tasks they must complete during the 28-day move-on period.

3. The 28-day move-on period

During the move-on period, to set up the essentials of their new life, refugees have to:

- open a bank account (if they do not already have one)
- apply for and start receiving Universal Credit (UC) and/or find a job and start working and earning
- find a new place to live

¹¹ Lower than the high of 74% the previous year, but higher than pre-pandemic rates of around one third to one half. Home Office (2024) [How many people do we grant protection to?](#) The majority of positive decisions received by asylum-seekers in the Oxford Contingency Accommodation are grants of refugee status. The minority granted Humanitarian Protection have a similar set of rights and entitlements in relation to housing.

¹² Home Office (2024) [How many people do we grant protection to?](#)

The need for help with move-on processes among refugees in Oxford has dramatically increased since September 2023. While a small minority of those residing in contingency accommodation complete the above steps independently, the majority ask for some form of help to navigate mainstream systems at Asylum Welcome's busy twice-weekly drop-in advice sessions at the hotel, which have been running with the help of volunteers since 2022, to fill gaps in advice and support.

The 28-day timeframe has been a major challenge. Legislation states that 28 days after receiving refugee status, the individual's asylum support stops (i.e., accommodation and any monetary support). The individual should be warned of this by the Home Office when they are granted refugee status.¹³ Following this, and a minimum of seven days prior to eviction, the Home Office-contracted accommodation provider should issue a 'Notice to Vacate' letter to the resident.¹⁴ There is a wealth of evidence showing that 28 days is insufficient time to make move-on arrangements.¹⁵ Refugee rights organisations have long been calling for a move-on period of at least 56 days, which would align with homelessness legislation and the period during which local authorities have a duty to help *prevent* homelessness among those at risk.¹⁶

In 2023, changes to the 28-day timeframe led to widespread confusion. Previous Home Office practice was to cease asylum support 28 days after the issuing of a Biometric Resident's Permit (BRP).¹⁷ From August 2023, the Home Office effectively accelerated the move-on timetable, by setting the cessation of asylum support at 28 days from the date of receiving the refugee status letter, which comes before the BRP is issued.¹⁸ Moreover, some people's BRP cards are/were significantly delayed, making it necessary to request an extension to the move-on period to allow the individual to apply for a bank account, universal credit, and obtain the 'share code' required by prospective employers and landlords. The Home Office then suspended all evictions over the 2023 Christmas and New Year period.¹⁹ The (re)issuing of Notice to Vacate letters gradually picked up pace again in the early months of 2024. Currently, people's BRP card letters usually indicate that they have 28 days to leave the hotel and are followed by a 7-day Notice to Vacate from their accommodation provider.

The move-on period remains too short for most people to secure work. Many new refugees are eager to find work; moreover, having some employment, even if part-time, substantially enhances people's ability to get private rented housing. However, the people Asylum Welcome work with often have no experience of working in the UK when they get refugee status.²⁰ The Jobcentre and the government-supported Refugee Employability Programme offer support with CVs and signposting to job adverts and training. However, substantive advice appointments often do not take place until late in the 28-day period or after people have had to leave the asylum accommodation. Moreover, people are often sent away from these appointments with 'homework' that they struggle to complete without support because of language issues and a lack of familiarity with the UK system.

Most new refugees have to claim Universal Credit (UC), but often have to leave the asylum accommodation before their UC payments have begun. After applying for UC, there is a few days' delay before the initial identification appointment, and a few further days' delay for documents to be verified and the date for the

¹³ UK Government (2002) [The Asylum Support \(Amendment\) Regulations 2002](#)

¹⁴ UK Government (2000) [The Asylum Support Regulations 2000](#)

¹⁵ NACCOM (2018) [Still an Ordeal](#); NACCOM 2018 [Mind the Gap](#); British Red Cross (2020) [The costs of destitution](#); Refugee Council (2024) [Keys to the City 2024](#).

¹⁶ British Red Cross (2020) [The costs of destitution](#); Interview, Oxfordshire Homeless Movement, 13.02.24.

¹⁷ Home Office (2019) [Welcome: a guide for new refugees](#) Last updated 2021.

¹⁸ Sonia Lenegan (2023) [Home Office change in practice increases risk of homelessness for recognised refugees](#) *Free Movement*; Refugee Council, Helen Bamber Foundation, NACCOM, ASAP, Asylum Matter, British Red Cross, Shelter and Crisis (2023) [Why the changes to the "move-on" period mean more refugees are facing homelessness and destitution](#); Red Cross (2023) [More than 50,000 refugees could become homeless by the end of the year, British Red Cross warns](#) Press release.

¹⁹ Gregg Barradale (2023) [Home Office to halt asylum evictions amid soaring crisis](#) *The Big Issue*; Homeless Link (2023) [Asylum support cessation: Some progress](#).

²⁰ People who have been in the UK asylum process for more than one year are able to apply to the Home Office for permission to work, restricted to jobs on the skills shortage occupation list, although it can be difficult to find an employer who will accept them. Some people have started working part-time, for instance in construction, while waiting for their asylum decision.

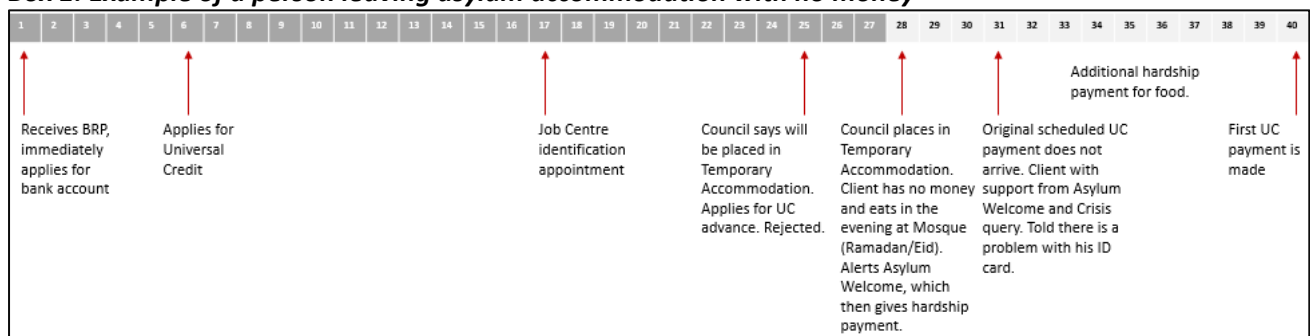
first UC payment to be set, which is typically around five weeks after application.²¹ There is also a window for advance payments if an individual is destitute. The reality is that many have no money when they leave Home Office accommodation. When clients present as destitute and it is not possible to apply for an advance on their first UC payment, Asylum Welcome draws on a fund from Oxford City Council to provide a basic hardship payment of £40 per week, or £20 for periods shorter than a week. Box 1 shows an example of such a case, where the individual received their first UC payment 13 days after having to leave contingency accommodation. This mismatch between the cessation of asylum support and the timetable for accessing the mainstream DWP safety net is an ongoing problem.

Many contingency accommodation residents are at high risk of homelessness after getting refugee status.

As Figure 4 shows, many pin their hopes on local government and charities to support their transition into mainstream housing and do not immediately appreciate the real risk of homelessness they face. People often try to make arrangements themselves, but struggle, and then seek support just before their eviction date. Alongside the time pressure, there is a siloing of different elements of the move-on process. Refugees must engage with many new organisations and systems, which are often not geared towards the rigours of the 28-day timeframe and face their own high demands, leading to waiting times for replies from each organisation. Even when people reach out early, getting practical and effective help with move-on processes is difficult. There is some guidance in the refugee status letter, in the Government’s guide for new refugees²² and on the website of Migrant Help.²³ Migrant Help are contracted by the Home Office to provide email and telephone-based support to asylum seekers, including advice and signposting appointments during the move-on period. However, clients report waiting many hours on the phone to speak to a Migrant Help adviser, a lack of translators when they do get through, and a failure to respond to their emails. We found many people need more prompt, practical, locally specific guidance than Migrant Help is currently providing, in relevant languages often combined with in-person help to navigate the necessary digital bureaucracy.

By making contact with clients who had previously lived in the Oxford contingency hotel and who had received refugee status since September 2023, we found people in a variety of housing situations, as shown in Figure 5. By May 2024, aside from those still living at the hotel pending eviction, some had secured private rented housing, which the Home Office states is the preferred option, most with the support of Asylum Welcome (see section 4). The largest group was in council-sourced accommodation (typically emergency ‘interim’ accommodation, although some had been moved from emergency accommodation into council-sourced private rented housing. The next largest group was homeless, either sleeping rough, hidden homeless staying with friends and acquaintances, or on a temporary placement with Sanctuary Hosting - a volunteer hosting scheme run by Asylum Welcome (see section 4).

Box 1: Example of a person leaving asylum accommodation with no money



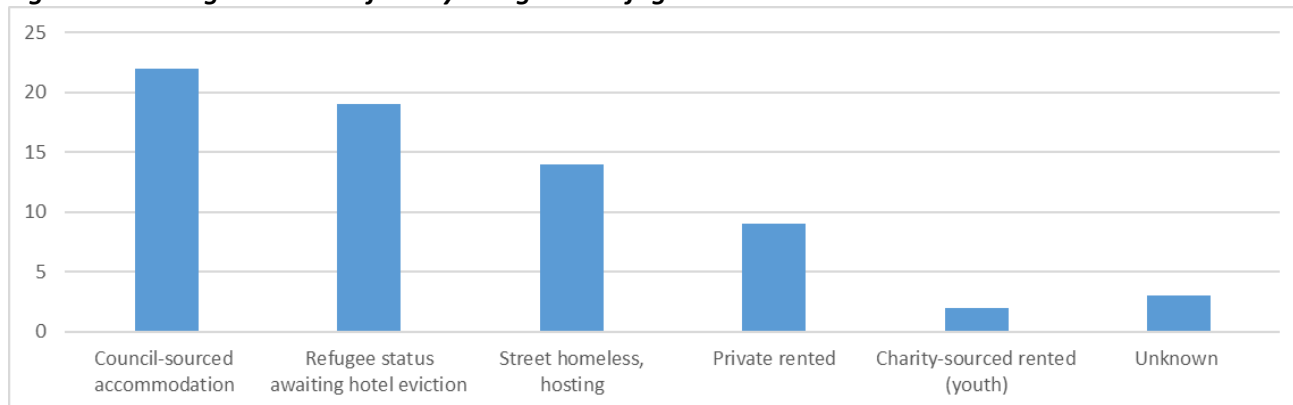
Source: Asylum Welcome Casework and individual interview.

²¹ Department of Work and Pensions, [Universal Credit: How you're paid](#)

²² Home Office (2019) [Welcome: a guide for new refugees](#) Last updated 2021.

²³ Migrant Help [Section 4: Receiving a Positive Decision](#); [FAQs: Positive asylum decision](#)

Figure 5. Housing situations of newly recognised refugees



Source: Asylum Welcome casework, situation of people evicted from Oxford contingency asylum accommodation since September 2023, as of 10 May 2024

To meet the need for timely support and information, Asylum Welcome has developed resources and adjusted its casework approach. Initially, due to the high demand for support, and the low adviser/client ratio, not everyone with refugee status was managing to get immediate help from Asylum Welcome's drop-in service, wasting valuable time. To provide more timely and useful support to newly recognised refugees, Asylum Welcome developed:

- a specific workflow for move-on casework, to front-load as many tasks as possible
- a '[moving on](#)' guidebook and accompanying [videos](#), with translations, to meet the need for accessible, useable information;
- twice-weekly drop-in support through its charitably-funded Employment & Education service to help newly-recognised refugees to write their CVs and apply for jobs.

4. Refugees' struggle to find private rented housing

Searching for private rented housing is a real challenge. Nationally, the demand for housing is outpacing supply, costs are outpacing incomes, and there is an acute shortage of affordable housing. Millions of people have unsafe and unstable housing situations.²⁴ If an individual has made a Homelessness Prevention Application, the local authority's housing services complete a Personal Housing Plan, signposting them to relevant websites for room searches, and explaining the local scheme through which people on low incomes can apply for help with deposit and a loan for the first month's rent. Beyond signposting, an Oxford City Council employee confirms, 'there's not really the capacity to support them for looking' for private rented housing.²⁵ Even people with advanced English and good digital literacy can struggle to navigate the online systems for private-sector renting and/or become disheartened after repeated rejection by landlords.

The city of Oxford represents a particularly unaffordable local housing landscape, yet many hesitate to move to other areas of Oxfordshire, because they have formed legal, social and practical connections in the city:

- **People needing asylum support have no choice about where they are placed, but as a result of residing in asylum accommodation, they develop a 'local connection' with the city for legal purposes, which is**

²⁴ Shelter [What is the housing emergency?](#)

²⁵ Interview, Oxford City Council, 19.03.24

relevant to accessing homelessness support, including temporary accommodation, deposit support, and the (very long) social housing register.²⁶

- **People often live many months or years in asylum accommodation, and over time develop social connections locally:** through friendships with people in asylum accommodation and in the community, through churches, mosques, football and other sports activities, community groups and volunteering. Often Oxford is the only place people have known in the UK, and they have acquired a familiarity with the area that gives a much-needed sense of security. As one refugee explained, *'Before I got refugee status I was worried about the next steps. Some other cities are easier than Oxford. But because I started to live here, I wanted to stay.'*
- **There are also very practical obstacles to looking outside Oxford:** while still living on asylum support of £8.86 per week (before UC begins), it is hard to search effectively for accommodation, because this requires phone credit, Wi-Fi access when out and about, bus fares for viewings at a distance (a day return costs £4 and a saver bus ticket costs £4.50 within the city area, and more for travel to viewings in Banbury, Abingdon or Didcot). The newly recognised refugees who have started much-awaited English language classes in Oxford are concerned about availability and waiting lists for classes elsewhere. There is also an awareness of the higher density of entry-level jobs in the city and a lack of awareness of job opportunities elsewhere in the county. Around two-thirds of people attending Asylum Welcome's move-on briefings would prefer to stay in the city.

Refugees face a particular set of financial barriers to private rented housing. As a result of the constraints, they face during the asylum process and the 28-day move-on period, many refugees begin their lives in the UK on benefits or low incomes, before they have built up their language skills, UK-based work experience and skills accreditation. As most asylum seekers are prohibited from working, they have not had the opportunity to save for a deposit (often 5 weeks' rent in advance) and the first month's rent (typically required on move-in day). Many lack social networks to provide a UK-based guarantor, which is sometimes required by landlords. Thus most refugees are restricted to a particular corner of the PRS market, i.e. private landlords advertising rooms directly to prospective lodgers and tenants (letting agents typically require a holding fee of one week's rent, a higher level of financial checks, and often advertise long before the room will be available).²⁷ It is still common for private landlords and letting agents to advertise properties for 'professionals only' or explicitly indicate that they are not interested in applications from people relying on the housing element of Universal Credit to pay their rent.²⁸ Regularly screening Spare Room and Daily Info (a local advertising site) for landlords advertising rooms in a suitable price bracket for our clients, this exclusion criteria was the most commonly articulated barrier, both explicitly in adverts and in communications with landlords.²⁹ These experiences articulated in interviews with clients were typical:

- *'With the letting agencies, they refused me straight. I didn't fit their criteria: I had just got status, so I didn't have a job, payslips... Then private landlords said they couldn't rent to me because I was on benefits. Everyone thinks refugee status gives you wings! I say, "My friend, it doesn't even give you arms!"'³⁰*
- *'I know every charity... I was struggling for a long period of time, and they were giving me advice or information that still didn't help me... I've seen many houses... And when the landlords knew I'm on Universal Credit they wouldn't be happy. That's the reason they gave... I never thought I will experience*

²⁶ In recognition of the issues obtaining private rented housing, Oxford City Council has indicated willingness to consider supporting with deposits moves to private rented housing out-of-area both within the county and further afield. However, barring some with strong community connections elsewhere, people often lack familiarity and contacts in other places.

²⁷ Interview with letting agent, 19.1.24, Asylum Welcome casework.

²⁸ Wendy Wilson (2023) [Can private landlords refuse to let to benefit claimants and people with children?](#) London: House of Commons Library.

²⁹ The unwillingness of landlords to rent to people on UC is borne out by more systematic national research, e.g. Behavioural Insights Team (2021) [Encouraging landlords to rent to people receiving UC 2021](#)

³⁰ Refugee housing journey interview, 9.2.24

such a hassle. I thought after I received my status... everything would be fine, you know? So, after I left the hotel... I was stressed... you have to make your mind strong because there will be a challenge...³¹

Second, refugees are also navigating prejudice among prospective landlords and housemates. People can prove their 'right to rent' relatively easily by using their BRP to obtain a share code, which landlords can verify. However, 'right-to-rent' regulations have generally been shown to dampen private landlords' willingness to rent to racialised groups.³² It is also well documented that black and minoritised ethnic communities face greater housing discrimination and homelessness rates than the white British population.³³ Being male and young (typically in 20s or early 30s) also puts former hotel residents at a disadvantage, as many families looking for a lodger will only consider letting to women.

Asylum Welcome began regularly screening properties key platforms for suitable properties. This demonstrates what an uphill struggle it is to obtain a housing offer, as illustrated in Box 2.

Box 2. Looking for rooms

On 20 March, the research team contacted 70 landlords advertising rooms in Oxfordshire in our clients' affordability range, which offered an agreement for six months or more, having already filtered out those explicitly looking for professionals, women, or students. Seven landlords - 10% - replied with some interest.¹ From this batch, the team secured two viewings for clients. With the first, at the viewing, the landlord said that the room would be available for less than six months. This made it unsuitable for most clients as, in order to receive support from the council with deposit and rent-in-advance via the low-income Lord Mayor's Deposit Scheme, the rental agreement must be for at least 6 months. With the second property, we were able to help the client liaise with the landlord and the existing joint tenants, obtain support from the council and move in. This represents a 1-in-70 success rate on pre-filtered properties, with mediation and support.

In a very competitive and fast-moving housing market, landlords expect quick answers. The prospective tenant, when they receive a housing offer, sends the tenancy or lodger agreement (often with Asylum Welcome's support) to Oxford City Council's Housing Services Placement and Procurement team, requesting support with the deposit and rent-in-advance. That team then liaises directly with landlords to ensure the housing offer meets regulatory requirements. This involves checking that the landlord has a suitable licence, where required, and that the tenancy agreement is legitimate. It also involves checking that all the required paperwork (energy performance, gas and electrical safety certificates) for the property is up to date (something which presumably should be checked for all properties on a rolling basis anyway). The approval process typically takes several days, sometimes longer, even when the landlord responds promptly. This has a chilling effect on even diligent landlords' willingness to rent to people on low incomes. The process is fraught for prospective tenants; there is always the threat that the landlord will withdraw the hard-won offer. The whole process is very difficult for a newly recognised refugee to navigate successfully without support.

Finding housing is not the end of the story, of course. For many years, the quality of much private rented housing has given cause for concern: *'The time pressure they are under makes them vulnerable to rogue landlords and to accepting very poor-quality housing. Issues such as damp, mould, and poor heating are*

³¹ Refugee housing journey interview, 25.2.24

³² Leigh Day (2022) [Right-to-rent case taken to European Court of Human Rights](#); Kim McKee, Sharon Leahy, Trudi Tokarczyk and Joe Crawford (2021) 'Redrawing the border through the 'Right to Rent': Exclusion, discrimination and hostility in the English housing market' *Critical Social Policy*, 41(1): 91–110.

³³ Glen Bramley, Suzanne Fitzpatrick, Jill McIntyre and Sarah Johnsen (2022) [Homelessness Amongst Black and Minoritised Ethnic Communities](#) Edinburgh: Heriot-Watt University; See also Philip Brown, Santokh Gill and Jamie P. Halsall (2023) [The impact of housing on refugees: an evidence synthesis](#) *Journal of Social Policy*, 39(1): 227-271.

commonly reported.³⁴ Moreover, sustaining tenancies on a low income can also be a challenge. For example, a 24-year-old who fled Sudan, was recognised as a refugee and is not yet in employment, would be eligible for a £550 housing payment plus £311 basic Universal Credit each month. If he rents a room in a shared house for £550 including bills, he will still be spending 64% of his income on rent. An often-used benchmark of

To address barriers to housing, Asylum Welcome has piloted a coaching model, providing intensive support to clients searching for private rented rooms. Volunteers screened adverts on key platforms to identify potentially suitable opportunities. Another volunteer sat with clients, using the relevant section of Asylum Welcome's 'Moving On Guidebook' to explain the housing system. The volunteer helped clients set up accounts on key housing search platforms and reach out to landlords. This was accompanied, where appropriate, by extensive back-up: contacting landlords on a client's behalf and attending viewings with clients. The clients that Asylum Welcome provided this support to were either in the 28-day move-on period, already homeless, accommodated by Sanctuary Hosting or in council Temporary Accommodation. If an individual receives an offer of housing, Asylum Welcome have helped them to (a) request the deposit and rent-in-advance from the council (b) ensure they receive Local Housing Allowance on time, and are aware of budgeting restrictions. This has led to some success, as 15 people have been supported to move on into share housing (primarily individual or joint tenancies, some lodgers and some supported housing). An example is given in Box 3.

Working with Aspire (an Oxford-based community enterprise who empower people facing homelessness, poverty and disadvantage to find employment and housing), we have established the first example of 'springboard accommodation' specifically for Asylum Welcome clients. Asylum Welcome was contacted by the landlord of a 2-bedroom property in Oxford who was willing to rent to refugees at the local housing allowance rate, well below the market norm. Aspire agreed an initial 3-year lease with the landlord where they guarantee the rent, maintain the property and support tenants with bill payments and some other needs. The occupants receive Enhanced Housing Benefit from the local authority. Asylum Welcome referred several clients who met the necessary criteria for this property. Aspire selected two individuals who moved in during May 2024; the goal is to move them on into mainstream private rented tenancies within a year.

Going forward, we will intensify work with prospective landlords. Our new 'Moving On, Moving In' project (funded by the ESRC Impact Acceleration Account at SOAS, University of London) seeks to inform and mobilise landlords and connect refugees with private housing opportunities in Oxfordshire. Further enquiries with housing associations, letting agents, church and university networks and private landlords are on-going.

Finally, we have continued to engage with clients post-move, to help ensure they are accessing their entitlements and understand the challenges of budgeting.

affordability is that housing should not cost more than 30% of a person's income.³⁵

Box 3. A successful transition to private rented housing

K. arrived in the UK from Afghanistan in the autumn of 2022. When he claimed asylum, he was placed in contingency accommodation in Oxford. After he was granted refugee status, in early March he received a notice from the accommodation provider that he would have to leave in early April. He had no friends or family in the UK whom he could stay with, so he submitted a Homelessness Prevention Application. As he did not have an acute health issue, he was assessed not to be Priority Need. He was told that he needed to find private rented housing himself. He speaks intermediate English and some digital literacy, and started searching for rooms

³⁴ Eva Mowat (2024) Quarterly Report: Asylum Welcome/Oxford City Council Kassam Outreach Project. 4th December 2023 – 26th March 2024.

³⁵ Deborah Potts (2020) *Broken Cities: Inside the Global Housing Crisis*. Bloomsbury: London

using the websites given by the council, using guidance from Asylum Welcome. He found it hard to figure out how to contact landlords and to know what to say.

Two working days before his eviction date, Asylum Welcome identified a household advertising for a new tenant. At one hour's notice, K. cycled out to the viewing. The housemates took to him immediately and offered him the room. The landlord was initially sceptical because he anticipated delays, as the council would be paying the deposit and first month's rent. In the end, however, he was willing to allow the existing tenants to select their new housemate themselves. Asylum Welcome helped K. to apply to the council for support with the deposit and rent-in-advance. 10 days later, K. was able to move in. In the days following his eviction and before his move-in date, Asylum Welcome drew on emergency charitable funds to pay for a hostel for two nights, to prevent him being street homeless. Then, Sanctuary Hosting found him a hosting arrangement until he moved in. K.'s English is greatly improving now, thanks to regular attendance at English classes, as well as interactions with his housemates. He is managing on a tight budget, keeping up with rent and bill payments, and applying for jobs. He said: 'I am happy here and would like to stay here a long time. I talked with the housemates, and they are happy for that too.'

Source: Asylum Welcome casework and individual interview

5. Homelessness and homelessness prevention and relief

Homelessness legislation states that Local Housing Authorities have a legal duty to prevent and relieve homelessness. Aside from offering advice, as outlined in Section 4, individuals whom the council assess as being 'Priority Need' after considering their Homelessness Prevention Application are placed in Temporary Accommodation. To be assessed as 'Priority Need,' asylum accommodation leavers might be suffering from significant physical or mental health conditions or disabilities; have suffered from trafficking or exploitation; and/or already be homeless and suffering serious health consequences.³⁶ Each case is considered in the round, to assess whether that person would be more vulnerable to harm than most people, were they to become homeless. The city council's Housing Services Placement and Procurement Team then works hard with landlords so they can offer people suitable and settled private rented housing, while still also encouraging people to search independently. The council tries to take account of existing connections in making offers, but due to the housing shortage, people are quite often offered a room in an unfamiliar town or city.

Whether a refugee will be assessed as being 'Priority Need' is often hard to predict. Although most asylum seekers register with the GP on arrival, some do not seek help for health problems or struggle to connect with appropriate services. Many people who have sought asylum have experienced mental and physical harm which, combined with displacement and the stress of the asylum process and life in mass accommodation, often induces anxiety, depression and other mental health difficulties. For Asylum Welcome advisers and city council housing workers, an ongoing issue remains the need for 'a safe and comfortable space where a confidential conversation can take place,' as we have found that clients often do not immediately disclose their medical issues.³⁷

Obtaining medical evidence promptly can be an issue. Although the onus is on the Local Housing Authority to investigate each Homelessness Prevention Application, due to short-staffing, newly recognised refugees with significant health problems are recommended to submit recent evidence of their health issues themselves, to speed up the assessment process. People sometimes do not understand the importance of this

³⁶ Shelter (2023) [Who has a priority need?](#)

³⁷ Chloë Morgan (2019) [Making homelessness applications for refugees in England: A guide for anyone supporting newly-recognised single refugees](#) London: Refugee Council, p.8

or submit a doctor's letter from several months prior. Obtaining medical evidence can also take some time, in a strained NHS. The recent introduction of an Asylum Seekers' Health Care Coordinator for Oxfordshire, working between the local GP surgery and the hotel, holding health drop-ins twice a week, has been making it easier for people to access health services in a timely manner.

Most of Asylum Welcome's clients at the hotel apply to the council for help with homelessness prevention and relief. Prior to October 2023, approaches to Oxford City Council from refugees at risk of homelessness (from the contingency and dispersal accommodation) were low (<5 per quarter). By contrast, council data indicates that, from October 2023 to March 2024, it received 82 referrals or initial contacts from refugees at risk of homelessness.³⁸ Of these, 60 progressed to the point where a homelessness duty was acknowledged, the majority (50) being accepted at relief stage (i.e. at the point of being made homeless). Around half were placed in temporary accommodation, from which some had been moved on into council-sourced private rented housing. The others were assessed as not Priority Need: around half of these people were recorded as having found their own accommodation, and the other half were rough sleeping or staying with acquaintances.

A major challenge is that people routinely only hear if they have been assessed as Priority Need and allocated temporary accommodation on or very close to their eviction date. This means that Asylum Welcome may have to refer the person to homeless and housing charities and/or hosting schemes before the person has been assessed for temporary accommodation, creating double the work, and the uncertainty causing considerable stress for clients.

Due to a lack of temporary accommodation, a person accepted as 'Priority Need' is typically placed again in mass accommodation, i.e. repurposed hotels or 'bed and breakfasts' with no cooking and laundry facilities, often for several months.³⁹ Concerns about the cost of pre-prepared food and the health impact are common: *'The food I can buy is expensive and not healthy. Just chips costs £3!'* This interim accommodation could be in the Oxford area, or in High Wycombe and Reading. Particularly for people with limited English, the separation from support networks reduces the likelihood of them self-finding private rented housing.

The snapshot of housing outcomes in section 3 (Figure 5) does not adequately capture the precarity of the housing journey that people are on. It is very hard to transition directly into private rented housing. Of the 15 individuals Asylum Welcome has helped to secure private rented housing, only four were able to move in directly from the hotel. Five were accommodated for varying periods by Sanctuary Hosting. Three spent some time in council temporary accommodation, continuing their housing search. Two were homeless (one rough sleeping, one sofa-surfing). One went to a hostel for two nights paid for by charitable funding.

An alarming proportion of newly recognised refugees experience homelessness. Oxford City Council records suggest that 12 refugees were homeless, either sleeping rough or staying with friends/acquaintances, at the end of March 2024. In contacting 77 refugees from Oxford contingency accommodation about their housing journeys, we found many more who had experienced some form of homelessness after having been granted refugee status.⁴⁰ The solidarity of friends and the wider community helps keep some people off the streets. For instance, one man who was homeless managed to find a bed most nights with different people from his place of worship. Sometimes people have been able to stay for longer periods in informal arrangements with friends and acquaintances.⁴¹ Some people are forced to sleep rough. For example, in March 2024, several people were sleeping in tents near the asylum hotel. People who are rough sleeping often struggle to have their situation verified via the nationwide Street Link system. Another issue reported by homeless charities is that some refugees would disengage due to communication and/or mental health difficulties, not

³⁸ Email correspondence from Oxford City Council, 8 April 2024. Note at this stage data had not been cleansed and validated by DLUHC for official publication.

³⁹ BBC South (2024) [Oxford City Council urges government for help housing homeless](#)

⁴⁰ Clients who got refugee status from Sept 2023, as of 10th May.

⁴¹ People have also sought help from contacts to move to bigger cities, including Cardiff, London, Liverpool, York and Edinburgh.

understanding that it was only through sustained contact with homeless charities that they might access shelter placement or specialist support with finding private rented housing.

The difficulty of these housing journeys and lack of settled accommodation undermine people's ability to positively start a new phase of life in the UK. People with lower levels of English language and (digital) literacy, and people with few or no social contacts in the UK, are particularly badly affected.

Our 'Moving-On' Guidebook contains realistic and practical advice on housing, presenting the challenge in direct and unvarnished terms, and addressing common misconceptions about the availability of council housing. It explains what being put in temporary accommodation means and provides advice on searching for private rented housing. The guidebook also outlines support systems for people who are rough sleeping or sofa-surfing. This provides a basis for clear conversations, helping people to manage an uncertain and stressful transition.

Asylum Welcome has been working closely and constructively with Oxford City Council. Since November 2023, Housing Services workers attend the hotel drop-ins to take Homelessness Prevention Applications. This has facilitated more fluid communication on the granular details of different individuals' situations. For example, around the logging of medical evidence, (non)Priority Need decisions, and eviction dates. It has also facilitated better communication at an organisational level. For example, after a period where the council only accepted Homelessness Prevention Applications after an individual had received a Notice to Vacate from the accommodation provider (often issued only 7 days prior to eviction), following representations by Asylum Welcome, the council agreed to accept the 28-day notice of cessation of asylum support as a reliable indicator of risk of homelessness, rather than the Notice to Vacate, aligning with Refugee Council recommendations for good practice.

People who are evicted with no where to go often come to Asylum Welcome's Community Outreach service for advice and support. Where possible, it provides sleeping bags, tents and hardship payments to people forced to sleep rough – the demand for this increased substantially since autumn 2023. Where needed, it supports clients to contact to the local St Mungo's Outreach Team. Where possible, it can refer people to Crisis and other specialist homelessness and housing organisations.

6. Recommendations

The housing predicament of refugees is part of a much deeper and wider national housing crisis, affecting millions across the UK, which urgently needs addressing. This section outlines some recommendations specifically relevant to refugees who have newly been granted status.

6.1 To national government

- 1. Design an asylum support system that considers integration from day one, preparing people better for life in the UK.**
 - a) Grant asylum seekers the right to work within six months, not restricted to the skills shortage occupation list.
 - b) Scrap the six-month waiting period for asylum seekers to join accredited ESOL courses; allow access to language learning provision from arrival.
 - c) Increase asylum support rates and/or provide transport options so asylum seekers are not isolated from communities.
 - d) Speed up asylum application processing times so people spend less time in limbo. This includes increasing access to legal aid to reduce incorrect decisions and bringing people out of 'inadmissibility' and into the asylum system by repealing relevant elements of the Illegal Migration Act 2023 and the Nationality and Borders Act 2022.
 - e) House people seeking asylum in communities, not institutional accommodation including re-purposed hotels, barracks and barges.
- 2. Reduce the likelihood of newly recognised refugees falling into homelessness.**
 - a) Increase the 28-day move-on period to at least 56 days, to better align with homelessness legislation, and reduce the likelihood of refugees falling from asylum support into homelessness. Evidence shows that extending the move-on period would also save the taxpayer money.⁴²
 - b) Tackle the mismatch between the cessation of asylum support and access to mainstream welfare support by reducing the waiting period for the first Universal Credit payment so it is received before having to leave asylum accommodation. Ensure translation support is more readily available at Jobcentre appointments.
 - c) Repeal right-to-rent legislation which makes landlords responsible for verifying the immigration status of their tenants, as this has a chilling effect on private landlords' willingness to rent to racialised groups.
 - d) Rather than local authorities taking disparate approaches, develop a universal policy that housing authorities cover the deposit for local people on low incomes, including refugees, when they find private rented accommodation. Allow people to apply for support when moving to a new area.
 - e) Provide more financial support to housing authorities to address homelessness, recognising its long-term human and financial costs.

6.2 To local government

- 1. Improve collaboration within and between organisations involved in the move-on process.**
 - a) To respond to the need for problem-solving around refugee move-on processes, bring together all parties involved on an on-going basis building on work already initiated within the existing structure of the local Migration Partnership. Practical collaboration may well require the development of an information-sharing agreement between the Home Office, the local authority, the asylum accommodation provider and leading local third-sector refugee organisations, to improve preparedness for evictions.

⁴² British Red Cross (2020) [The costs of destitution](#)

- b) Councils to work more systematically to promote voluntary and partnership approaches to making ESOL and digital literacy training more widely available.

2. Improve refugees' awareness and ability to engage with housing processes in collaboration with third sector organisations.

- a) Continue to ensure advice and information about housing in Oxfordshire is available to asylum seekers before their status is granted.
- b) Contact new refugees in the first week after being granted status with accessible and practical information about housing in Oxfordshire.
- c) Thus far all face-to-face, practical and personalised support to help people who are not priority need to access secure housing has been organised by Asylum Welcome. A small amount of external funding was secured to continue the work over summer 2024 but it will end in October. Given the impact of this work, consider supporting a move-on coaching role and/or lodger scheme to help refugees manage the critical transition into private rented housing (and employment).⁴³
- d) Produce guidance on tenancy sustainment to prevent unnecessary evictions. This includes guidance on setting up direct debits for bills and rent, paying council tax, understanding terms of tenancy agreement, the impact of employment on UC payments, financial planning, etc.
- e) Ensure all guidance listed above is available in relevant languages and in accessible formats.
- f) With many refugees still falling back on charitably funded organisations for support, evaluate / seek to complement the services provided by the government-funded organisation Migrant Help and by the Refugee Employability Programme (via Palladium) to newly-recognised refugees in Oxfordshire.

3. Facilitate refugees' access to housing in Oxford and the wider county.

- a) Refrain from using requests to the Lord Mayor's Deposit Scheme as an opportunity to check that all the HMO paperwork for that property is up to date, which slows down move-on processes and increases the likelihood of the landlord withdrawing the offer.
- b) Continue to foster relationships with existing and new landlords, letting agents and housing associations; and to consider and pursue all options to address the shortage of social and affordable housing, including buying homes from the private rental market; compulsory purchase of long-term empty properties as well as housebuilding.
- c) Work with local organisations including universities and churches to bring properties that are empty for defined periods into 'meanwhile use' as bridging accommodation, under council or charity property guardianship.

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⁴³ See also Philip Brown et al. (2022) [Housing and Refugees: Policy Briefing](#). University of Huddersfield.