



“We are getting hurt”

Safe accommodation for
LGBTQIA+ people seeking sanctuary
in Northern Ireland

June 2024



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FOREWORD

Our research has found that the majority of LGBTQIA+ people seeking sanctuary in Northern Ireland have experienced violence or abuse in their asylum accommodation. Almost half of those surveyed have attempted suicide. This necessitates an urgent safeguarding response.

I know that the safety of asylum seekers in Northern Ireland is of utmost importance to the Executive Office, Migrant Help, Mears, PSNI and others.

I trust that the duty bearers will work with Law Centre, Rainbow Refugees NI and other stakeholders to implement the necessary measures to ensure that all asylum seekers can enjoy the right to dignity, respect and to safe accommodation.

I am confident in our collective ability to bring about progressive change.

Ursula O'Hare
Director, Law Centre NI

To our Rainbow Refugees NI members who contributed to this report, we sincerely thank you for your bravery in responding so honestly to the survey and discussing the recommendations to improve your safety and wellbeing.

Rainbow Refugees NI is a vibrant and joyful space yet we are regular witnesses to our ('family') members being hurt.

We want this report to bring your stories to light.

We call on the responsible agencies named in this report to do everything in their power to ensure that LGBTQIA+ people who arrive in Northern Ireland seeking sanctuary are protected from day one.

Committee
Rainbow Refugees NI

Law Centre NI provides legal advice, representation, policy advocacy, research and training in immigration law, specifically in areas of forced migration.
www.lawcentreni.org



Rainbow Refugees NI is the only independent organisation of LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers, refugees, and allies in the region.
www.rainbowrefugeesni.com



We thank Northern Ireland's LGBTQIA+ refugees and people seeking asylum for sharing their stories and reviewing the recommendations.

We thank Bridget Pranzatelli from Harvard Law School for her work on this report.

We also thank staff at the Department of Health, Mears, Micro Rainbow, Migrant Help, Rainbow Migration, Red Cross NI, Refugees at Home, and the Executive Office for discussing this topic with us.

INTRODUCTION

Across the UK, research has found that LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers face bullying, harassment, physical violence, and sexual violence in asylum accommodation.¹ Sexual orientation or gender identity can make a person susceptible to harm and can be a barrier to a person obtaining assistance. The fact that asylum accommodation is provided to asylum seekers by the Home Office on a 'no choice' basis makes it difficult for victims of abuse to exit situations of harm.

Our research, which is the first of its kind in Northern Ireland, finds that homophobic abuse is similarly prevalent in asylum accommodation in this jurisdiction. Alongside the abuse, we have documented alarming rates of self harm and suicidal ideation among this minority group. This report calls for the relevant duty bearers in Northern Ireland to adopt urgent measures to protect LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers from further harm.

The report makes two key recommendations. The first is that Mears, the contracted accommodation provider, designates 'safe houses' for people seeking sanctuary who identify as LGBTQIA+.

The second recommendation is that all agencies treat any homophobic abuse that occurs within asylum accommodation in alignment with the racial and domestic abuse procedures. This would give victims of homophobic abuse access to an expedited procedure to be relocated away from the abuser.

In this paper, we demonstrate that our recommendations could be implemented within the existing legislative and policy framework and are consistent with Northern Ireland safeguarding policies.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

In summer 2023, Rainbow Refugees NI conducted a survey of LGBTQIA+ people seeking asylum in Northern Ireland. The survey was available in English, Arabic and Farsi (Persian). The survey returned 23 substantive responses from 9 nationalities. The majority of respondents (65%) were asylum seekers and lived in either Dispersal Accommodation (80%) or Contingency Accommodation (20%). Respondents also included former asylum seekers who had since been granted leave to remain (35%), recounting their experiences of living in asylum accommodation within the past two years. Following the survey, two focus groups were held to explore the recommendations.

Based on contact with, or membership of Rainbow Refugees, we estimate the size of the LGBTQIA+ asylum seeker community in Northern Ireland to be in the region of 50 people.² It is difficult to be definitive about the size of the population. Therefore, while we acknowledge the modest scope of our survey, we believe it provides valuable insight into the experiences and views of this small community. No trans people took part in our survey, therefore this report focuses on homophobia and biphobia.

This report is also informed by the Law Centre's casework experience and by conversations with a range of stakeholders including statutory providers.

¹ Women and Equalities Committee, 'Equality and the UK Asylum process; fourth report of the session 2022-23' (20 June 2023); Rainbow Migration, 'Parliamentary briefing: risks to LGBTQI+ people in initial and contingency accommodation', (December 2023); Adeniyi Balogun and Rohan Williams, 'The Experience of Home Office Accommodation by BAME LGBTQI+ People Seeking Asylum in the UK: A Case for Improvement' (The Rainbow Family, January 2024), etc.

² This figure is based on the membership and contacts of Rainbow Refugees NI as of April 2024.

SIGNIFICANCE OF HOMOPHOBIC ATTACKS

For most LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers, homophobia/transphobia is the very reason they fled their homeland and thus forms the basis of their asylum claim.³ The types of harm people have experienced include extreme discrimination, complete ostracisation, imprisonment, physical beatings, execution, 'corrective rape', etc. On reaching a safe country, it can be devastating for individuals to experience homophobic abuse afresh - now in a wholly new and alien context. Abuse that takes place in asylum accommodation occurs within the victim's own home, meaning the distress and fear it causes is unrelenting.

At present, the onus is on the victims to take steps to address the abuse. This means they must be prepared to recount the events and discuss their sexual orientation and/or gender identity with various agencies.

The impact of homophobic abuse on individuals living in asylum support should not be underestimated. As acknowledged by the Department for Communities, everyone should feel safe in their own home.

"All LGBTQIA+ people should feel safe and secure in their own homes, in their communities and online to ensure they are free from fear, harassment and other forms of harm."⁴

-Department for Communities, Report from the Sexual Orientation Strategy Expert Advisory Panel

TERMINOLOGY

Throughout this paper we use the term 'LGBTQIA+'. This is an evolving acronym which stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual. It is an inclusive term that aims to encompass all sexuality and gender minorities. We also use the term 'homophobic abuse' to encompass all abuse based on a person's sexual orientation or gender identity.

³ Note that some LGBTQIA+ individuals' asylum claims are not based on sexual orientation; indeed some individuals choose not to disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity to the Home Office.

⁴ Department for Communities, 'Report from the Sexual Orientation Strategy Expert Advisory Panel' (December 2020).

INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS STANDARDS

International human rights law affirms that all people are entitled to safety, freedom and equal treatment. This applies equally to LGBTQIA+ people who are seeking sanctuary. The following table sets out core human rights obligations and their relevance in the context of asylum accommodation.⁵

Human rights obligation	What it means in practice
Prevent abuses against LGBTQIA+ people including abuse by State agencies and officials and by private corporations and individuals. ⁶	Preventative measures must be in place to reduce the occurrence of all forms of homophobic abuse.
Protect LGBTQIA+ people from all forms of abuse including bullying, harassment, violence as well as so-called 'honour-based' abuse. ⁷	Effective response measures are necessary whereby any abuse can be quickly reported, and safety measures promptly implemented.
Prohibit and address discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, and sex characteristics. ⁸	States must ensure that LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers are not subject to less favourable treatment than other asylum seekers experiencing harm.
Safeguard freedom of expression . ⁹	LGBTQIA+ persons cannot be required or expected to conceal their sexuality or gender identity to avoid harm – even if doing so could keep them safer in their asylum accommodation. ¹⁰
Safeguard privacy . ¹¹	LGBTQIA+ people must be protected from unauthorised disclosure of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

⁵ UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Born Free and Equal: Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Sex characteristics in International Human Rights Law" (Second edition, 2019)

⁶ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 9.

⁷ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 9; European Convention on Human Rights, Article 3, etc.

⁸ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 26; International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, Article 2.

⁹ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 19(2).

¹⁰ HJ Iran, [2010] UKSC 31. Available [here](#).

¹¹ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 17.

ASYLUM SUPPORT

Most asylum seekers are destitute on their arrival to the UK and are therefore entitled to apply for asylum support from the Home Office. If a person is deemed eligible, they will be provided with accommodation and financial support for the duration of their asylum claim.¹²

Asylum accommodation can be provided in different ways. In Northern Ireland, asylum seekers are accommodated in 'contingency accommodation', which is catered hotels or 'dispersal accommodation', which is self-catered private dwellings in local communities consisting of furnished flats, houses or rooms in Houses in Multiple Occupation.¹³

Asylum accommodation is offered on a 'no choice' basis. This is reflected in both the law¹⁴ and guidance and means that the asylum seeker is not permitted to indicate any preference with regards to their accommodation.¹⁵ However, when allocating accommodation, the Home Office is required to consider the *individual circumstances* of the applicant.¹⁶ Recent Home Office guidance confirms that the consideration of individual circumstances includes the person's objective needs and clarifies that *needs are distinct from preferences*.¹⁷

ROLE OF MEARS AND MIGRANT HELP

Asylum support is not delivered directly by the Home Office. In Northern Ireland, the asylum support process is managed by Migrant Help, whereas asylum accommodation is provided by Mears. The role of each agency and their contractual duties are set out in two contracts: the Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility (AIRE) contract and the Asylum Accommodation and Support (AASC) Contract respectively. A common thread throughout both contracts is the safety of residents and importance of safeguarding. The commitment to safety was also very evident in discussions with staff from both agencies in relation to this research.

*[Migrant Help] shall proactively identify and implement best practice frameworks and processes relating to safeguarding and the protection of vulnerable Service Users, on an ongoing basis, across all aspects of their service delivery.*¹⁸

[Extract] Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility Contract (AIRE)

*... the safety and security of the Service Users in the Provider's care is of absolute importance and must not be jeopardised. [Mears] shall be responsible for the general welfare of Service Users in its care.*¹⁹

[Extract] Accommodation and Support (AASC) Contract

¹² Note that asylum seekers can lose their entitlement for various reasons.

¹³ For a breakdown as to the type of accommodation provided to asylum seekers in Northern Ireland, please refer to Law Centre NI, 'Refugee Statistics' (April 2024) available online [here](#).

¹⁴ 'The Secretary of State may not have regard to an individual's 'personal preference as to the nature of the accommodation to be provided.' The Asylum Support Regulations 2000, Regulation 13.

¹⁵ Home Office, 'Allocation of asylum accommodation policy' (Version 12:0), 27 March 2024, p 5.

¹⁶ Home Office, 'Allocation of asylum accommodation policy' (Version 12:0), 27 March 2024, p 5.

¹⁷ Home Office guidance, 'Failure to travel to Bibby Stockholm vessel' (Updated 24 October 2023).

¹⁸ AIRE, Schedule 2: Statement of Requirements, para 2.6.4.

¹⁹ Asylum Accommodation and Support Contract, Schedule 2: Statement of Requirements, para 1.2.1.9.

ALLOCATING ASYLUM SEEKERS TO PARTICULAR ACCOMMODATION

The process whereby asylum seekers are allocated to particular accommodation is as follows²⁰:

STEP 1: The asylum seeker applies to Migrant Help for asylum support by completing an ASF1 application form. As part of this application process, Migrant Help must:

- Proactively identify the service user's 'specific characteristics and needs'.²¹
- Notify the Home Office and Mears of any risks or specific needs.²²

STEP 2: Migrant Help forwards the ASF1 application to the Home Office to be determined.

STEP 3: If the Home Office determines that the asylum seeker is eligible for support, it issues an Accommodation Request to Mears.

STEP 4: On receipt of the Accommodation Request, Mears identifies suitable accommodation. In doing this, Mears must:

- Take into account a number of factors²³ including any risks or specific needs which might require the provision of particular accommodation.²⁴
- Proactively identify such characteristics/needs²⁵ and respond appropriately; ²⁶

STEP 5: Mears submits an Accommodation Proposal to the Home Office whereby it specifies what accommodation it proposes the individual will be allocated to. If Mears identifies a service user as 'vulnerable or at risk', Mears must specify *how* the Accommodation Proposal is adapted to the individual's specific needs.²⁷

STEP 6: The Home Office grants approval and Mears organises the accommodation.

While Home Office authorisation is generally required prior to any relocation, the AIRE and AASC contracts make express provision for Mears to act without prior approval. This can occur in situations where Mears considers that 'serious or persistent anti-social and/or violent behaviour' represents a risk to the safety and wellbeing of service users, its staff, etc. In such situations, Mears may take any necessary actions²⁸ and then notify the Home Office of said actions as soon as possible.²⁹

20 AASC, Schedule 2: Statement of Requirements, para 4.1.3.

21 AIRE, Schedule 2: Statement of Requirements, para 2.6.4.

22 AIRE, Schedule 2: Statement of Requirements, para 2.6.2.

23 AASC, Schedule 2: Statement of Requirements, Annex A, C and E.

24 AASC, Schedule 2: Statement of Requirements, para 1.2.1.1

25 AASC, Schedule 2: Statement of Requirements, para 1.2.1, Annex G.

26 AASC, Schedule 2: Statement of Requirements, Annex G.6.

27 AASC, Schedule 2: Statement of Requirements, Annex A 1.5

28 AASC, Schedule 2: Statement of Requirements, para 4.4.4.

29 AASC Contract, Statement of Requirements, Para 1.2.1.5. and C.2.10. See also: Home Office, 'Allocation of asylum accommodation policy' (Version 12:0), 27 March 2024.

KEY POINTS - ALLOCATION

The following 'key points' are derived from the AASC and AIRE contracts.

Key points

The AIRE and AASC contracts both explicitly acknowledge that being LGBTQIA+ is a recognised indicator that can denote **adults at risk** or adults with **specific needs**.³⁰

If Migrant Help or Mears believes a service user is an **adult at risk** or has **specific needs**, it is contractually obliged to **respond appropriately** to these needs and to tailor its services.³¹

Mears is responsible for **identifying** suitable accommodation whereas the Home Office retains overall authority for **approving** placements.

Where there is a risk to the safety or wellbeing of a service user, Mears can relocate the person immediately.

³⁰ AASC, Schedule 2: Statement of Requirements, Annex G.2.5; AIRE, Schedule 2: Statement of Requirements, B Annex B, 1.2.5. "Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Trans and Intersex".

³¹ See, for example, AIRE, Statement of Requirements, Para 5.5.12 and Annex B.1.5; AASC, Statement of Requirements, Para 1.2.1.5.

REPORTING AND RESPONDING TO INCIDENTS

One of Migrant Help's responsibilities is to ensure effective processes for managing issue reporting, feedback and complaints.³² Accordingly, Migrant Help acts as a single point of contact for service users' queries and requests for assistance.³³

Information is provided to all asylum seekers on arrival in their accommodation to explain that any issues or problems arising in the accommodation should be reported to Migrant Help. Asylum seekers are informed that reporting issues/problems will not affect their asylum claim. This assurance is most welcome.

Asylum seekers can contact Migrant Help either by telephone or via webchat. These are 24-hour services and interpreters are available.

If the issue being reported relates to accommodation, Migrant Help notifies Mears, which aims to respond to and resolve the complaint within five working days. If the issue cannot be resolved by Mears or the individual is not satisfied with the response, Migrant Help will escalate the complaint or request to the Home Office, which aims to respond within 20 working days. In some circumstances, complaints can be further escalated.³⁴

Separate processes and standards apply if the asylum seeker makes a Request for Assistance. This is defined as 'communication regarding risks to [the service user's] health and wellbeing, or concerns over their welfare'.³⁵ In such instances, Migrant Help will refer the service user to an appropriate party which can include the appropriate emergency service.³⁶

When responding to complaints or Requests for Assistance, Migrant Help and Mears must 'assure the safety and wellbeing of service users'.³⁷ They must also develop and implement operational plans for dealing with violence and abuse as well as investigating and recording all incidents with the view to resolving them where possible.³⁸

Key points

All issues and problems should be reported to Migrant Help in the first instance.

All reported issues are logged.

³² AIRE, Schedule 2: Statement of Requirements, para 1.3.2.4.

³³ AIRE, Schedule 2: Statement of Requirements, para 1.3.2.4.

³⁴ If the individual remains dissatisfied with the response, they can escalate it further to the Independent Examiner of Complaints within three months of the date of the response. See: Home Office, 'Guidance: living in dispersal accommodation' 25 May 2023, available online.

³⁵ AIRE, Schedule 2: Statement of Requirements, para. 5.5.2.

³⁶ AIRE, Schedule 2: Statement of Requirements, para. 5.2.

³⁷ AASC, Schedule 2: Statement of Requirements, para 4.4.4.

³⁸ AASC Schedule 2: Statement of Requirements, para 4.4.4; AIRE Schedule 2: Statement of Requirements, para 5.2.

REQUESTING RELOCATION

As explained, neither asylum support law nor policy permits asylum seekers' individual preferences to be taken into account. Home Office guidance specifies that where an individual argues that they have specific needs, the Home Office caseworker must make an 'individual evaluation' of such needs on a 'case-by-case basis'.³⁹

The guidance requires asylum seekers to provide 'verifiable expert or professional evidence' in order to support any request to be treated as having specific needs. Examples of the types of evidence that may be accepted include:

- A healthcare record, which may include information about an individual's diagnosis, treatment, hospital admissions, and any risk assessment based on the individual's current needs;
- Evidence of ongoing treatment which would be interrupted by a move to new accommodation;
- Personalised assessments and/or psychiatric evidence setting out their specific, individual needs, completed by expert healthcare or medical professionals.

The Home Office guidance goes on to explain that such evidence should generally be supported by 'documentation from support services or verifiable, expert professional healthcare practitioners'. The guidance cautions that without such additional documentation, the evidence will 'carry less weight'. The caseworker is required to review any evidence on a case-by-case basis including by considering the expertise of the author and verifying the legitimacy of the author; an example could be by searching the General Medical Council register.

Where necessary, the guidance suggests that the caseworker may refer to the 'Home Office Asylum Support Medical Adviser and/or Home Office Psychiatrist for their expert opinion'.⁴⁰

Key points

If the asylum seeker seeks to rely on 'specific needs' (i.e. rather than such needs being proactively identified by Migrant Help / Mears), the onus is on the individual to provide the evidence.

The evidential requirements for 'specific needs' to be considered by the Home Office are very high.

³⁹ Home Office, 'Allocation of asylum accommodation policy' (Version 12:0), 27 March 2024, p 18.

⁴⁰ Home Office, 'Allocation of asylum accommodation policy' (Version 12:0), 27 March 2024, p 18 – 19.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Our research sought to explore the prevalence of homophobic abuse within asylum accommodation in Northern Ireland, its impact on wellbeing and the barriers to obtaining effective assistance.

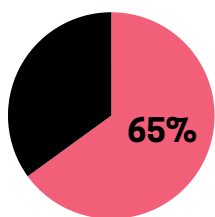
(a) homophobic abuse

LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers in Northern Ireland face significant rates of bullying, harassment, physical violence, and sexual violence. Four out of five survey respondents experienced some form of abuse or violence from other refugees or asylum seekers.⁴¹ Of those who experienced abuse, **the majority (79%), experienced it within their asylum accommodation.**

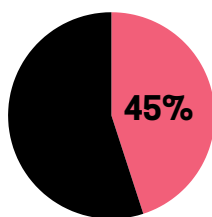
78% of respondents have experienced some form of **abuse or violence** from other refugees and asylum seekers



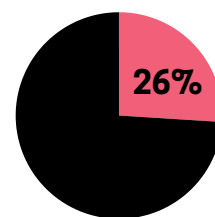
Respondents were asked to list the type of abuse they had experienced. Two thirds reported homophobic name-calling and insults (65%), with nearly half reporting more severe bullying and harassment (45%). A quarter reported intimidation and threats (26%). One third reported suffering physical violence (30%). A quarter reported sexual assault (26%). One survey respondent simply stated: **“We are getting hurt.”**



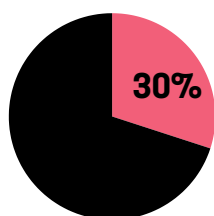
name-calling,
insults



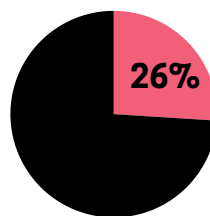
severe bullying,
harassment



intimidation,
threats



physical violence

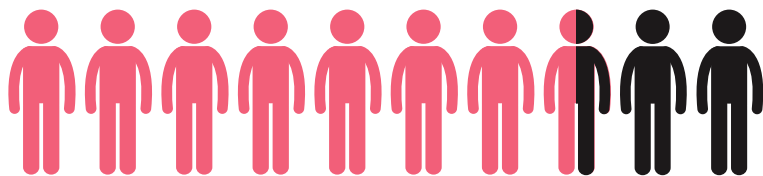


sexual assault

⁴¹ Respondents were asked if they experienced any of the following forms of abuse from other asylum seekers or refugees due to their sexual orientation or gender identity: Bullying, harassment, intimidation, threats of violence, name-calling, insults, damage to property, violence, physical assault, sexual assault, blackmail, and sharing private information about their sexuality/gender without consent.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

In a worrying indicator of so-called 'honour based' abuse, **74%** of respondents reported that while in Northern Ireland, they had been told that their sexuality or gender identity brought "shame or dishonour" on their national, religious, or ethnic community.⁴²

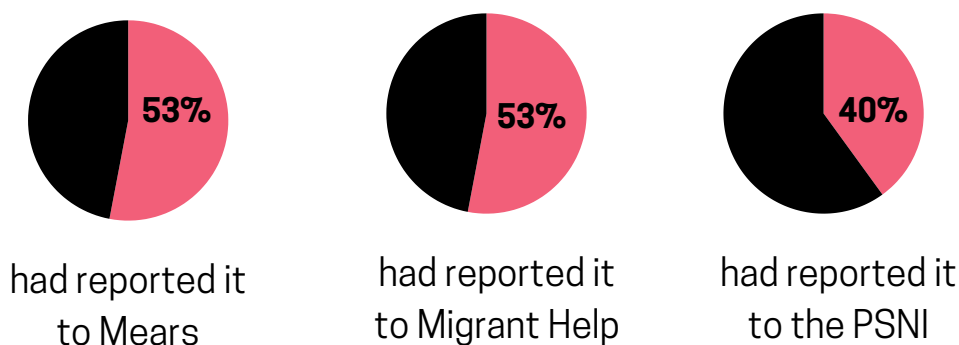


74% reported bullying consistent with so called **honour-based abuse**

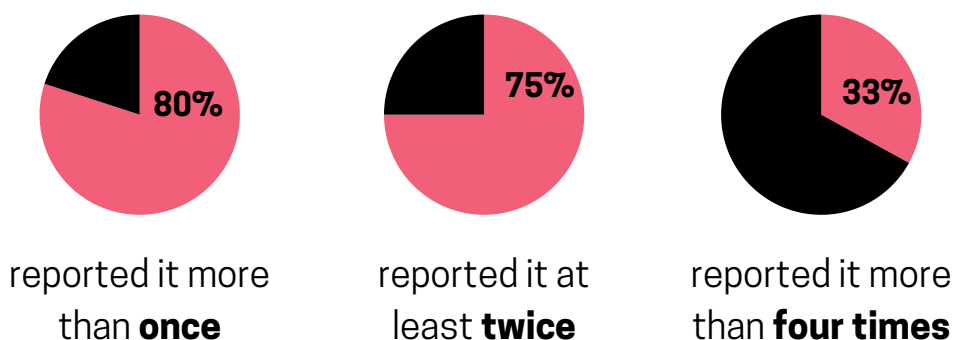
(b) incident reporting and response

Respondents were asked to comment on how they sought help after experiencing homophobic abuse. We found that the majority of victims of homophobic abuse did in fact report it. This is a positive finding and indicates that most asylum seekers have a degree of confidence in the relevant support agencies.

Of those who reported abuse:



Respondents were asked how many times they reported abuse. The results show that many victims made repeated reports:



⁴² Honour-based abuse is defined as "an incident or crime involving violence, threats of violence, intimidation, coercion or abuse (including psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional abuse) which has or may have been committed to protect or defend the honour of an individual, family and/or community for alleged or perceived breaches of the family and/or community's code of behaviour." Home Office "Statistics on so called 'honour-based' abuse offences, England and Wales, 2021 to 2022" (October 20, 2022). See also www.galop.org.uk

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

While the survey shows a willingness to report instances of abuse, the reporting process did not prove to be an effective remedy for the large majority of victims of abuse who sought help. Of those who reported abuse, **just 21%** felt that the issue was dealt with appropriately. Respondents made the following comments about the reporting process:

"No change no response
nothing changed!!!"

"I'm avoiding reporting or talking about my situation to Mears or any other parties anymore, it seems **no one really cares**. Exhausting."

"they told me to be careful how I talk and act around not to be attacked"

"I called [Migrant Help] **multiple times** to report but ... never had a chance to talk to the right person."

"Migrant Help: your helpline is **not helping**."

"**No change**, they don't listen and they don't care."

"As for Mears, **they do not help me**, they only takes the words from me and then tells me, yes, we will find a solution, but they do not find me a solution."

One respondent queried the value of reporting incidents noting that by the time the reporting process was under way, the harm had already occurred.

"We need help before the violence happens."

The Law Centre has sought information from the PSNI about how it responds to hate crimes or incidents relating to people living in asylum accommodation.⁴³ In its response, the PSNI confirmed that the information is available but cannot be shared.

The comparatively weak procedures for responding to incidents of homophobic abuse is in contrast to the processes to protect victims from incidents of racism or domestic abuse that occurs within asylum accommodation. Elements of existing processes (below) would be helpful in shaping an effective response to homophobic abuse.

43 Law Centre NI Freedom of Information Request F-2023-01738 'Asylum seekers: accommodation and hate crime'

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

How are **racist incidents** treated within asylum accommodation?

[Extract from Home Office policy]

The Home Office recognises that asylum seekers are “unlikely” to report racist incidents unless they believe that the relevant agencies will respond effectively.⁴⁴ Accordingly, the Home Office has developed a policy which outlines the following response to **racist abuse** within asylum accommodation: ⁴⁵

- The accommodation provider, with the agreement of the Home Office, must arrange safe temporary housing for a victim when they have grounds for concern for the victim’s immediate safety if they remain at the same address.
- In such circumstances, the accommodation provider should relocate the victims (and dependents) *immediately* and should notify the Home Office at the earliest opportunity, and in any case no more than one working day after the relocation has taken place.
- In certain instances, moves may need to be permanent, where there is no possibility of safe return to the accommodation, or should police support a permanent transfer.
- Where no safe temporary housing or permanent transfer can be arranged, admittance to emergency accommodation must be arranged by the Home Office until such time as safe permanent accommodation can be secured.

How are **domestic abuse** incidents treated within asylum accommodation?

[Extract from Home Office policy] ⁴⁶

An expedited process is in place whereby victims of **domestic abuse** can quickly and safely be relocated. This process is set out in specific guidance and the key principles are as follows:

- Where an asylum seeker reports that they are a victim of domestic abuse – which includes threats, harassment, and intimidation – the Home Office accommodation provider must offer alternative safe accommodation for the victim and any children;
- [All parties should] seek to address harassment and bullying before it escalates to physical violence;
- There is a presumption that the victim should be believed i.e. there is no requirement that the victim provides corroborating evidence;
- The accommodation provider can transfer the victim *immediately* and without prior authorisation from the Home Office;
- The accommodation provider is required to consult with the victim as to whether the location of any alternative accommodation offered is somewhere they would feel safe;”
- The victim should be referred for additional support e.g. to Mears Welfare Support team.

⁴⁴ Home Office, ‘Conditions of asylum support instruction’ (Version 2:0, 10 March 2023), p21.

⁴⁵ Home Office, ‘Conditions of asylum support instruction’ (Version 2:0, 10 March 2023), p.22.

⁴⁶ Home Office, ‘Domestic abuse: responding to reports of domestic abuse from asylum seekers’ (Version 2:0), 1 January 2022, p 10-12.

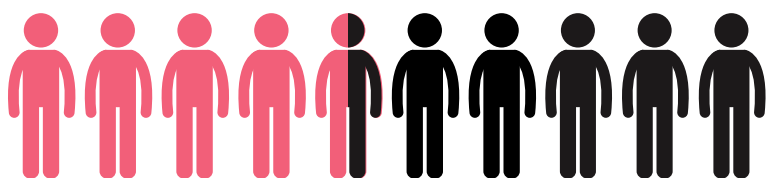
FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Overall, our research shows that it is rare that victims of homophobic abuse are relocated to safe accommodation. It is only when there have been multiple incidents of homophobic abuse and/or where there is sustained lobbying from independent support organisations that relocation occurs. The researchers noted that when confronted with situations of homophobic abuse, Mears staff often try to mediate a solution. While this is undoubtedly done in good faith, it is extremely unlikely that mediation is appropriate given the high risk of harm (note that mediation would not be considered acceptable in situations of domestic abuse). **Annex 2** provides detailed testimony from a member of Rainbow Refugees NI with this regard.

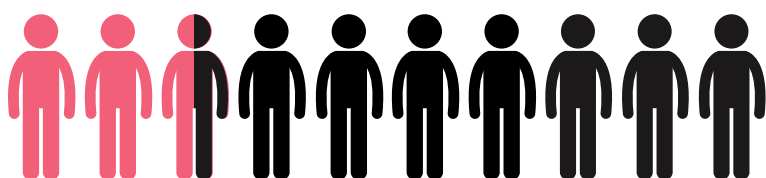
(c) self harm and suicide ideation

This survey identifies a high prevalence of self harm and suicide amongst respondents.

This is a matter of grave concern and necessitates an immediate response. The Home Office does not publish data on deaths in asylum seeker accommodation. The Asylum Seeker Memorial Project, which is a journalist-led initiative aiming to document asylum seeker deaths, reports that there have been 82 deaths in asylum accommodation since 2020,⁴⁷ of which 23 deaths can be attributed to suicide.⁴⁸ We do not have data on the number of LGBTQIA+ deaths by suicide but a recent incident in B was reported in September 2023 when Roma al-Badi, a 21 year-old queer Omani woman, took her own life in an asylum hotel in Britain.⁴⁹



44% have tried to take their own life while living in asylum accommodation



26% have self-harmed while living in asylum accommodation

In response to deaths occurring within its accommodation in Britain, a Mears spokesperson said:

*"The safety and welfare of our service users is of the utmost importance to Mears [...] We continually review our approach and processes in seeking to provide the best accommodation and support to our service users and we work closely with all stakeholders, including the Home Office, public health authorities, local councils and third sector bodies to this end"*⁵⁰

Mears spokesperson

⁴⁷ See www.asylumseekermemorial.co.uk

⁴⁸ Aaron Walawalkar & Diane Taylor, "Suicides of asylum seekers in Home Office accommodation double in the last four years," The Guardian (December 21, 2023).

⁴⁹ Katherine Hearst, "UK: Queer Omani woman takes her own life while waiting for asylum," Middle East Eye (September 20, 2023).

⁵⁰ See: <https://www.asylumseekermemorial.co.uk/about-asylum-seeker-deaths>

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The authors of this report welcome Mears' clear commitment to continuous improvement and to partnership working. We urge all stakeholders to work collaboratively and swiftly to respond to the harms identified in this research.⁵¹ We note that the Department of Health has identified the necessity of **collaboration** in effective safeguarding responses.

Whilst asylum and immigration law is an excepted matter in Northern Ireland, the NI Department of Health is the lead duty bearer with responsibility for setting out the strategic direction for suicide prevention. The Department recognises that some categories of people face an **increased risk** of suicide, which include the following categories: ⁵²

- Working-age men ⁵³
- People who are LGBT
- Ethnic minorities
- Persons who have experienced trauma and conflict

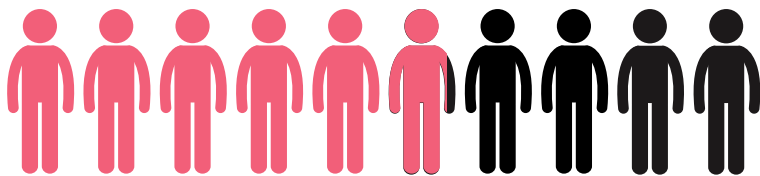
Our findings of self harm and risk of suicide are clearly aligned with the Department's risk categories. This report provides the impetus for the involvement of the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency in this sphere to develop targeted interventions. This could include ensuring that asylum seekers have access to suicide prevention awareness and associated services as well as ensuring that community-led initiatives are adequately resourced.

(c) interpreter services

The survey also reveals low levels of trust in interpreters. This impedes disclosure and acts as a barrier to LGBTQIA+ people making comprehensive reports to the relevant support services. Three quarters of respondents expressed concern that interpreters would disclose their sexuality to others in their community. For more than half of the respondents, this wariness resulted in them withholding relevant information about their sexuality from service providers.



78% were concerned that interpreters would **report details of their sexuality** to their community



58% withheld information about their sexuality from service providers because of the interpreter

⁵¹ Northern Ireland's Adult Safeguarding policy places a key focus on preventative action (p.3) and early intervention, (p.6). See: Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and Department of Justice, 'Adult Safeguarding: Prevention and Protection in Partnership', July 2015.

⁵² Department of Health, 'Protection Life 2 Suicide Prevention Strategy 2019 - 2027' p 17.

⁵³ In 2023, almost three quarters (72%) of asylum claimants were male. Immigration Statistics, 'Asylum applications, initial decisions and resettlement detailed datasets, year ending December 2023, Asy_D01.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION



67% have used translation software with service providers due to **discomfort with the interpreter**

One respondent explained that the interpreter he was provided with by a government agency knew his cousin and that they met socially the previous week:

“I couldn’t say anything in front of him about my sexuality, he was my cousin’s friend, I couldn’t be honest about my situation.”

Two other respondents stated that their interpreters did not know the appropriate word in their language for ‘gay’ or how to use the correct pronouns.

“She was an old, old woman. She couldn’t hear me and she doesn’t know anything about LGBT and gay people. I had to explain what I am first. She didn’t stop calling me he and him. I said 10 times I am not a boy and she nonstop calling me boy. I had to cancel my interpreter. I asked for another and they said there is no one.”

The respondents’ experiences echo evidence heard by the Women and Equalities Committee that asylum claimants may be ‘wary of interpreters from their own ethnic communities as they may fear they share the homophobia or transphobia they have fled or will put them at risk by disclosure’.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Written evidence from the SOGICA Project (University of Sussex) to the Women and Equalities Committee, ‘Equality and the UK Asylum process; fourth report of the session 2022-23’. Written evidence number EA0001.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1

Designate a housing unit(s) for the exclusive use of LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers. This measure should be implemented immediately.

Duty bearer: Mears

This proposal is not without precedent. In 2022, the Women and Equalities Committee, led by former Immigration Minister Caroline Nokes, recommended that the Home Office provide “*dedicated safe asylum accommodation for LGBT people*.”⁵⁵ With regards to international best practice, the UN Refugee Agency agrees the need for “*separate facilities or protected areas of accommodation*” for LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers.⁵⁶ In the absence of such separate facilities, the UNHCR advises that LGBTQIA+ refugees should be housed in private dwellings to avoid any potential discrimination or violence from other tenants.⁵⁷

Our safe house proposal is consistent with current asylum support policy, which already makes provision for particular groups to be accommodated separately / differently to mainstream provision:

- **Unaccompanied children:** Minors are not accommodated within the asylum support system and are instead accommodated by Health and Social Care Trusts;
- **Disabled persons:** In some instances, disabled asylum seekers can be accommodated by Health and Social Care Trusts;⁵⁸
- **Women:** Practice in Northern Ireland is not to require single adult female asylum seekers to share accommodation with adult men either in contingency accommodation or dispersal accommodation;
- **Transgender people:** We understand that Mears seeks to offer trans and gender-diverse people separate accommodation due to their susceptibility to hate crime. We commend Mears for this approach, which we consider to be best practice;
- **LGBTQIA+ and room sharing:** The Home Office does not require persons who are LGBTQIA+ to room share with non-LGBTQIA+ people. This appears to acknowledge the inherent risks of requiring an LGBTQIA+ person to share a bedroom with a cisgender/heterosexual person.⁵⁹

In practice, the *safe house* could be accessed through two routes:

First, and with their informed consent, a person could be allocated to a *safe house* directly at their point of entry into asylum support.

Secondly, where an asylum seeker living in standard accommodation experiences homophobic abuse, they can avail of an expedited process to be relocated into a safe house.

⁵⁵ Women and Equalities Committee, “Equality and the UK asylum process” (June 2023) recommendation 19 at paragraph 128. At the time of publication, the committee comprised 6 Conservative party members, 4 Labour and 1 SMP. The Government rejected this recommendation in its response. See Equality and the UK Asylum process: Government’s response to the Committee’s Fourth Report, (13 September 2023), p 13.

⁵⁶ UNHCR, ‘Global Roundtable on Protection and Solutions for LGBTIQ+ People in Forced Displacement’, 7 – June 2021.

⁵⁷ UNHCR, ‘Global Roundtable on Protection and Solutions for LGBTIQ+ People in Forced Displacement’, 7 – June 2021.

⁵⁸ Home Office guidance, ‘Asylum seekers with care needs’ (Version 2.0, 3 August 2018).

⁵⁹ ‘The Provider [Mears] shall not accommodate the following Service Users in the same sleeping quarters with other unrelated adults: Service Users who the Authority or the Provider have identified as having specific needs of being at risk’. As outlined above, people who are LGBTQIA+ fall within this definition and therefore are not required to room share. See AASC, Schedule 2 Statement of Requirements, Annex C.1.7 and Annex G.

RECOMMENDATIONS

No policy change is required for this recommendation to be adopted; it could be facilitated within the existing AIRE and AASC contractual frameworks. In the medium to long-term, we recommend that MEARS explores partnering with a specialist NGO to provide accommodation to asylum seekers who identify as LGBTQIA+. Micro Rainbow provides an illustrative example.

In 2017, Micro Rainbow opened the first “safe house” in the UK dedicated solely to LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers. It provided four bed spaces. The organisation has since grown considerably and now operates 21 safe houses across England - in London, the West Midlands and the North West. It provides over 30,000 bed spaces a year. Micro Rainbow is a specialist provider of LGBTQIA+ asylum support. It provides safe accommodation as well as wraparound support and social inclusion programmes. Micro Rainbow is a sub-contractor to both Clearsprings and Serco, agencies that provide the asylum accommodation in England and Wales. Micro Rainbow does not currently partner with Mears and so does not operate in Northern Ireland or Scotland.

Recommendation 2

Service users should be asked **if they are a member of the LGBTQIA+ community** as part of the initial needs assessments.

Duty bearer: Migrant Help

This recommendation builds on Recommendation 1 as a means to support early identification of appropriate accommodation. We recommend that Migrant Help proactively seeks to ascertain if the applicant identifies as LGBTQIA+ when they apply for asylum support.⁶⁰ This is clearly in accordance with the requirements of the AIRE contract.

Where an applicant identifies as LGBTQIA+, we propose that this should trigger a conversation between the applicant and Migrant Help about their **specific needs**.⁶¹ We recognise that not all asylum seekers will feel comfortable in disclosing details about their sexual orientation / gender identity during this initial conversation. This is why it is important that all agencies seek to foster a safe environment - including through displaying markers of acceptance - and that they recognise that the process of disclosure can occur at different rates. Our model ensures that late disclosure does not preclude the individual from accessing the safe house at a later date.

A presumption should be introduced that *safe house* accommodation best meets the needs of LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers. We acknowledge that accepting an allocation to the *safe house* would not be without risk; some asylum seekers might worry that this could effectively identify them as being LGBTQIA+.⁶² Accordingly, some asylum seekers might reject the offer of ‘safe house’ accommodation and may instead enter standard asylum accommodation.

⁶⁰ This could potentially happen at the point of applying for asylum support when completing the Asylum Support Application Form (ASC1).

⁶¹ Such conversation would be consistent with the Women and Equalities Committee recommendation that a risk assessment be conducted before any decision is made regarding where to place LGBT people at risk of hate crime. Women and Equalities Committee, “Equality and the UK asylum process” (June 2023) recommendation 21, paragraph 134.

⁶² Due to the relatively small size of the asylum population in NI, it is perhaps inevitable that the location of the ‘safe house’ would become known by other asylum seekers and other persons.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Opting to accept a safe house allocation should not be considered to be a **preference**.⁶³ Rather, the decision relates to safety based on documented **risks** and **specific needs**. This is consistent with Northern Ireland's Adult Safeguarding policy, which recognises that people should be supported to assess and balance risk:

Northern Ireland's Adult Safeguarding policy states:

*Adult safeguarding is about empowering and supporting people to make decisions that **balance acceptable levels of risk** in their lives.*⁶⁴

The individual asylum seeker should be fully involved in this risk assessment. This is consistent with best practice.

The UNHCR recommends:

*Do not place a refugee who has diverse [sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics] in a shared house or location with their ethnic community **without their choice and consent**.*⁶⁵

Recommendation 3

Homophobic abuse should be treated in alignment with the racial and domestic abuse policies thereby giving victims of homophobic abuse access to the **expedited relocation policy**.

Duty bearer: Mears

For LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers who are already living in standard asylum accommodation, we propose an **expedited process** to be agreed, whereby any homophobic incident would trigger immediate consideration of relocation to the *safe house*. As outlined above, expedited processes already exist in situations that involve racism or domestic abuse. While domestic abuse is usually understood as occurring within relationships between family members or intimate partners, UK government guidance indicates that this can also be abuse perpetrated by "someone you live with".⁶⁶ This is clearly relevant in the context of asylum accommodation as the homophobic abuse is perpetrated by fellow residents.⁶⁷

Accordingly, we argue that victims of homophobic abuse should be able to avail of protections similar to those available to victims of domestic abuse. In practice, this would mean that in incidents of homophobic abuse:

- Alternative safe accommodation should be offered immediately;
- The contract providers should aim to address harassment before it escalates to physical violence;
- There is a presumption that the victim should be believed immediately and without the need for corroborating evidence;
- The victim should be consulted with regards relocation of accommodation.

⁶³ As explained above, the Asylum Support Regulations do not permit the asylum seeker's preferences to be taken into account when allocating accommodation.

⁶⁴ Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and Department of Justice, 'Adult Safeguarding: Prevention and Protection in Partnership' July 2015, p 33.

⁶⁵ UNHCR, 'Integration Handbook' available [online](#); Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 'The Gender Handbook for Humanitarian Action' (February 2018).

⁶⁶ "Recognise Domestic Abuse", available [here](#).

⁶⁷ See: "Domestic abuse: how to get help" (Last updated: September 25, 2023). Available [here](#); United Nations, "What is Domestic Abuse?" Available [here](#). ("Victims of domestic abuse may also include... any other household member."). Note that 'household' is defined as "one person or group of people who have the accommodation as their only or main residence and either share at least one meal a day or share the living accommodation, that is, a living room or sitting room." See: London: Office for National Statistics, "Family Resources Survey" (2003). Available [here](#); see also United Kingdom, "Household projections" (Last updated: April 9, 2013). Available [here](#).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 4

Asylum seeker communities can **access services on suicide prevention** and associated services including by resourcing community-led initiatives.

Duty bearer: Department of Health / Public Health Agency

Ensure that asylum-seeking communities can access suicide prevention awareness and services and other associated services including by resourcing community-led initiatives.

Recommendation 5

Explore the creation of an **independent LGBTQIA+ quality standard for interpreters** that would create a bank of verified interpreters.

Duty bearer: The Executive Office and Department of Health

Interpreters play a critical role within the asylum process. Our survey identified two key issues with interpreters. First, respondents highlighted that some interpreters are not sufficiently familiar with LGBTQIA+ terminology or trained on the need for a sensitive approach to sexual orientation and gender identity. Secondly, respondents were not confident that all information relayed to the interpreter would remain confidential. This is despite the professional duties binding interpreters.⁶⁸ Our findings echo those of a Westminster Women and Equalities Committee in 2023.⁶⁹

Recommendation 6

Sensitivity training should be provided for all service providers, including Migrant Help and Mears staff and also including contingency hotel staff. In parallel, the voluntary and community refugee support sector should work to ensure that their staff are alert to and trained in the needs of LGBTQIA+ people in the asylum system and that their services are inclusive.

Duty bearer: All service providers

LGBTQIA+ people seeking asylum should feel confident in disclosing information about their sexual orientation / gender identity to service providers. Understanding the needs of the LGBTQIA+ service users in their care is a contractual requirement of both the AIRE and AASC contracts. Mears and Migrant Help are also required by those contracts to proactively manage risk and seek to prevent harm.

⁶⁸ For example, see: Home Office, 'Interpreters Code of Conduct', 30 November 2021. The Code requires *inter alia* that interpreters must immediately notify the Interviewing Officer of any conflict of interest; they have a duty to be impartial and to be seen by others to be impartial at all times; they must act with integrity in all their professional and business activities, etc.

⁶⁹ Women and Equalities Committee, "Equality and the UK asylum process" (June 2023) recommendation 9, paragraph 75.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Mears and Migrant Help should display markers of acceptance in their offices and contingency accommodation sites to demonstrate acceptance and support of the LGBTQIA+ community in all asylum accommodation. This should include rainbow flag symbols, information about services and assurances about protecting privacy when service users disclose their sexual orientation. This is in line with the recommendations of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

UN High Commissioner for Refugees recommends that accommodation providers:

Display identifying materials, guidelines and resources, information on LGBTQIA+ friendly and trauma-informed service providers.⁷⁰

For the refugee support sector, this means that staff and support workers should be attuned to the overlapping vulnerabilities and/or barriers that LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers face due to their sexual orientation or gender identity and are aware of the need to make specific support provision.

For the LGBTQIA+ sector, this means that staff and support workers should have an understanding of the immigration processes and the impact of Home Office 'hostile environment' policies. They should also be aware of the trauma that is often associated with forced displacement and the need to embrace LGBTQIA+ refugees within the wider LGBTQIA+ community and bring them into existing services.

Recommendation 7

Local LGBTQIA+ sector organisations, as well as people with lived experience of the asylum process, should be **consulted about the needs of LGBTQIA+** people living in asylum accommodation.

Duty bearer: Public authorities

The human rights law principle of effective participation recognises that everyone has the right to participate in decisions that affect their human rights.⁷¹ LGBTQIA+ people are best positioned to articulate their own experiences and needs. Consultation and participation are contractual requirements in the AIRE and AASC contracts.

The AIRE contract requires that:

[Migrant Help] shall work collaboratively with other providers, stakeholders, including the authority and regional stakeholders, to help secure the safety and welfare of service users, and improve local service delivery.⁷²

The AASC contract requires that:

[Mears] shall participate in multi-agency forums, as required, to support the safeguarding and wellbeing of service users with specific needs, or at risk service users.⁷³

⁷⁰ UNHCR, 'Global Roundtable on Protection and Solutions for LGBTIQ+ People in Forced Displacement, 7 – June 2021, p.11.

⁷¹ "States parties should identify [...] LGBTI groups - and support their participation in shelter programme design, delivery and monitoring, and ensuring that they have a role in coordination. See: Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 'The Gender Handbook for Humanitarian Action' (February 2019) p.138.

⁷² AIRE, Schedule 2: Statement of Requirements, para 2.13.2.

⁷³ AASC, Schedule 2: Statement of Requirements, para 1.2.5.4.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 8

The **PSNI is invited to meet** with the Law Centre, Rainbow Refugees NI and other stakeholders.
Duty bearer: PSNI

Engagement is needed in relation to the PSNI response to homophobic abuse in asylum accommodation. This includes:

- Increasing staff awareness of the experiences of LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers and the barriers they face in obtaining protection;
- Opportunities for PSNI and community partners to collaborate to improve safety and increase confidence.

The PSNI has a critical role in keeping LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers and refugees safe. Our research indicates that there are low levels of confidence within the LGBTQIA+ community in relation to the PSNI.

Recommendation 9

The Executive Office tables this for discussion at the **Strategic Planning Group** to seek support for the *safe house* concept and to oversee implementation of the recommendations outlined in this paper. It should also embed the concept in the forthcoming Refugee Integration Strategy and Sexual Orientation Strategy.

Duty bearer: The Executive Office

Through the Refugee and Asylum Support and Integration Division (RASID), the Executive Office has strategic responsibility for asylum matters in Northern Ireland. Accordingly, the Executive Office is well placed to facilitate and lead on collaboration and to drive forward the implementation of this report's recommendations. In order to do this effectively, the Executive Office may wish to request that Migrant Help / Mears shares with it monitoring data relating to sexual orientation/gender identity and incident reports of homophobic abuse.

The draft Refugee Integration Strategy recognises the need for targeted interventions for vulnerable groups and explicitly considers the LGBTQIA+ community as falling within this cohort. The Executive Office is now invited to make good on this commitment by advocating for the adoption of safe house accommodation.

The Executive Office, Draft Refugee Integration Strategy [Extract relating to Safeguarding]

*Certain groups within our refugee and asylum population are particularly vulnerable and it must be recognised that **tailored support** and approaches will be required in the delivery of services in order to support the most vulnerable. This includes victims of trafficking, women, children, members of the LGBTI community and those with physical or mental disabilities. Each of these groups faces specific challenges and we will **take steps to explicitly address the additional adversity** that they may experience.⁷⁴*

⁷⁴ The Executive Office, 'Draft Refugee Integration Strategy 2022 – 2027', p 17.

CONCLUSION

This research has demonstrated the harms LGBTQIA+ people experience while living in asylum accommodation in Northern Ireland and the high risk of self harm they face, including suicide ideation.

The implementation of our proposed recommendations will bring a number of tangible benefits:

- Increased safety and wellbeing
- Decreased homophobic abuse
- Reducing prevalence of self harm and lowered risk of suicide among LGBTQIA+ persons in asylum accommodation
- Reducing reliance on costly, reactive interventions to violence and abuse in asylum accommodations; instead cost-effective, proactive solutions
- Enhancing compliance with international law and best practice

We reiterate that these recommendations do not require any legislative or policy change; they can be implemented within the existing AIRE and AASC contract frameworks.

Law Centre NI and Rainbow Refugees NI look forward to discussing this report and its recommendations and stress the need for urgent action.

ANNEX 1: WHAT ELSE DID RESPONDENTS SAY?



"We left our countries [because] **we couldn't be free** to be who we are and **we can't do it here** even"

"The fact you are placed with non LGBTQ members, you **just don't be yourself**, and its annoying and **not fair** at all"



"I [am] **afraid of other refugees**, they say too much bad thing and **they can attack me**"

"In the hotel [...] I faced homophobia and **I decided to change my appearance** rather than getting in an argument with residents"



"All we need is a safe place, nothing else. Don't mix us and **don't create a problem that you can't fix after someone loses their life or gets hurt**"

"I don't want **interpreters** to see my face"



"In general if you don't mention your sexuality yourself, **they won't ask you anything** and you really don't know if you need to tell them or not"

"We should be able to get **accommodations with other LGBTQ** asylum seekers"



"[most] asylum seekers come from countries where homosexuality is crime or death penalty. Most asylum seekers live with same mentality so I understand why asylum seekers hate us and not happy being around us and try to attack LGBTQIA+ community - it's lack of awareness, their traditional beliefs and religious views. So living daily life in this environment is sometimes **feels like prison**, so how I can be myself in this environment? **There is no protection - I hide.**"

ANNEX 2: CASE STUDY OF HOMOPHOBIC ABUSE IN ASYLUM ACCOMMODATION

testimony from Rainbow Refugees NI member ‘Manyzwal’

Shortly after Manyzwal* (not his real name) moved into Mears shared housing in Belfast he began experiencing homophobic abuse. It started when one of his housemates began calling him derogatory and homophobic names. Other housemates and the man’s friends – some of whom did not live in the house – then joined in. The name calling quickly turned to intimidation. One night, the men ganged together and banged on Manyzwal’s bedroom wall and door, demanding that Manyzwal come out. Manyzwal eventually opened his door and was met with threatening homophobic abuse. The men called him “unclean” and threatened to kill him for being LGBTQIA+. Manyzwal called the police. The police arrived and broke up the gathering but did not make any arrests nor take a statement from Manyzwal at the time.

Manyzwal reported the abuse to Migrant Help which notified Mears. Mears sent a member of staff out the next morning. Manyzwal explained what had happened to the staff member, including the intimidation and death threats. In response, Mears issued a written warning to the main instigator of the homophobia and instructed him not to invite non-tenants back to the house.

Because Manyzwal had contacted the PSNI and Mears, the main instigator and his friends sought “revenge”. The very next night they gathered outside Manyzwal’s bedroom again. This time, as Manyzwal was hiding inside, they tried to smash their way in, and indeed broke the bedroom door handle and left kick marks on the door. Manyzwal describes his terror during this attack:

“That night, if the door was broken, they would have killed me. I never was as scared in my life. It was very late; they were out of their mind. After I always worried they were going to come back. I thought they will kill me. I was on the ground floor, with a big window, I thought if they are out of their minds, they can come through the window. I was afraid to open my phone in case they saw the phone light.”

Panicking, Manyzwal called the police who arrived and again dispersed the men. Just as happened the previous night, Manyzwal reported the incident to Migrant Help who sent Mears out the following morning. Manyzwal told the Mears officer that he felt extremely unsafe. However, other than organise a repair to the broken bedroom door, Manyzwal does not think Mears took any other action.

Manyzwal described then having to continue to live in the shared house in a state of fear and hypervigilance:

“If I was going to the kitchen, I had to make sure everyone was out, then lock the front door and quickly cook. Then eat my food in my bedroom, in the dark. I thought if they see me, they will kill me.”

Following the second attack, Manyzwal sought support from a Refugee Support Organisation, which engaged with the PSNI and Mears. This prompted a Mears welfare support visit and Manyzwal recounted the aggressive homophobic intimidation and the death threats to the Officer.

The Mears Welfare Officer spoke to the main instigator who seemingly admitted to having targeted Manyzwal and having used homophobic slurs.

Mears treated the attack as a household disagreement and insisted the two men shake hands and agree to live together peacefully. Manyzwal felt he had no option but to agree to shake the man's hand. However, he did not feel that this 'resolution' was appropriate:

"This is not the right way. It did not make me feel safe. After hurting me and threatening to kill me, and then not being taken seriously, this did not make me feel safe, protected or happy."

The intimidation continued. On a subsequent visit from a Mears Housing Officer, Manyzwal was told that if he wanted to be considered for a move to another house, he would need to get a letter from a doctor or a psychologist and obtain a police crime number and then report the incidents and submit the supporting documentation to Migrant Help. Manyzwal felt overwhelmed by the thought of all this paperwork but did manage to contact his GP. The GP responded quickly and wrote a letter to support Manyzwal's request to be moved due to the impact his living arrangements were having on his mental health. Describing this impact, Manyzwal said:

"To be honest, I wanted to leave Belfast. I was so afraid I wanted to run to another country, to go to Dublin and claim asylum there. I felt that Belfast is not safe for me. I needed £20 to pay for the bus to Dublin, but I didn't have it. I was going to end my life. I couldn't do anything, I was alone. I had two options, run to Dublin or end my life. The police were not helping, Mears was taking too long. I decided to hide in my room and wait until the Monday to get my Aspen card money, then leave Belfast."

Noting the gravity of the situation, and lack of response, the Refugee Support Organisation intervened further and raised the issues directly with the Home Office Safeguarding team. Following this support and advocacy, Manyzwal was eventually moved to another shared house where he felt safer.

Manyzwal expressed how significant the support he received was, and how without advocacy from the Refugee Support Organisation, he could not have achieved a satisfactory outcome. He said:

"I felt more relaxed when organisations helped, dealing with the police and Mears. I felt there was no hope until the organisations helped. If there was no organisation like the Refugee Support Organisation, I would have ended my life".

Manyzwal has since been granted refugee status.

CONTACT

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"We are getting hurt"