



# REFUGEE RIGHTS EUROPE

in partnership with:



# **FINALLY SAFE?** **EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN IN ASYLUM ACCOMMODATION IN BIRMINGHAM**



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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**“EVERYONE HAS THE RIGHT TO A  
STANDARD OF LIVING ADEQUATE FOR  
THE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF  
HIMSELF AND OF HIS FAMILY,  
INCLUDING FOOD, CLOTHING,  
HOUSING AND MEDICAL AND  
NECESSARY SOCIAL SERVICES [...]”**

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 25(1)

## ASYLUM AND THE RIGHT TO DIGNIFIED LIVING-STANDARDS

The universal right to an adequate standard of living, enshrined in Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), sets the minimum requirements for dignified living conditions for all human beings. Alongside similar provisions contained within Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR),<sup>1</sup> this provision extends to “everyone including non-nationals, such as (...) asylum-seekers.”<sup>2</sup> States which are signatories to the UDHR are therefore obliged to provide asylum-seekers with the means to secure an adequate standard of living during all stages of the asylum-seeking process, including decent housing.

### STATES WHICH ARE SIGNATORIES TO THE UDHR ARE THEREFORE OBLIGED TO PROVIDE ASYLUM-SEEKERS WITH THE MEANS TO SECURE AN ADEQUATE STANDARD OF LIVING...

In the European context, the rights of asylum seekers to adequate housing have been further specified in the 2013 Reception Conditions Directive by the European Parliament and the Council,<sup>3</sup> which in Article 17(2) affirms that member states shall ensure that “material reception conditions provide an adequate standard of living for applicants, which guarantees their subsistence and protects their physical and mental health.”<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, in Article 21, the Directive declares that states must take into account the specific needs of vulnerable persons.

In the United Kingdom, asylum seekers are entitled to be provided with accommodation while they await their asylum decision. They are also entitled to a small cash support sum to the amount of 37.75/ week. While the government has not accepted the aforementioned European Directives as legally binding; certain standards concerning the reception and treatment of asylum-seeking individuals have been set out in national laws and regulations. One of these documents, the Home Office’s Statement of Requirements for Accommodation and Transport,<sup>5</sup> obliges housing providers to “provide safe, habitable, fit for purpose and correctly equipped accommodation in areas agreed with the Authority, including appropriate related services for those Service Users, either single or in groups, nominated to receive such services by the Authority.”<sup>6</sup> The same document also set outs standards concerning maintenance and emergency responses, requiring providers to “ensure that accommodation is maintained and serviced to the required standards and provide an emergency response and reactive maintenance service in accordance with contractual requirements and timescales.”<sup>7</sup>

## THE CURRENT CONTEXT OF ASYLUM ACCOMMODATION IN THE UK

Within the current context in the United Kingdom, initial and dispersal accommodation is allocated on a ‘no-choice’ basis, meaning that applicants are ‘dispersed’ across regions around the UK on the basis of capacity, rather than on personal preference.<sup>8</sup> Since 2012, the Home Office has outsourced the provision of asylum accommodation through the COMPASS contracts to three main private providers: Serco (Scotland and Northern Ireland; North West England), Clearsprings (Wales and South West England; London and South East England) and G4S (North East England,

West Yorkshire and the Humber; Midlands and East of England). The vast majority of asylum seekers have so far been housed through G4S and Serco in the most economically depressed parts of the country, due to the availability of cheaper housing in these regions.<sup>9</sup>

Between these companies, G4S in particular has faced frequent criticism around the substandard conditions provided in its asylum accommodation.<sup>10</sup> A global corporation with operations in more than 90 countries<sup>11</sup>, G4S provides a variety of services worldwide, including security management, prisons, detention centres and asylum seekers’ accommodation.

G4S has been at the centre of multiple high-profile scandals around abuses at its facilities stretching back over more than a decade, as covered by the

### G4S IN PARTICULAR HAS FACED FREQUENT CRITICISM AROUND THE SUBSTANDARD CONDITIONS PROVIDED IN ITS ASYLUM ACCOMMODATION.

BBC, The Guardian, The Times, and others. These have included several deaths, which have occurred on deportation flights; prison vans; and in one instance, a child at a juvenile detention centre.<sup>12</sup> Journalists from the ‘Shine a Light’ project have aimed to expose G4S as a ‘serial human rights abuser’ through investigative journalism,<sup>13</sup> and a legal challenge<sup>14</sup> to force the government to designate G4S as a “high risk” supplier has been launched by UK charity Bail For Immigration Detainees.

1. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ceschr.aspx>

2. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G09/434/05/pdf/G0943405.pdf?OpenElement>

3. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32013L0033>

4. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32013L0033>

5. <https://data.gov.uk/data/contracts-finder.../77c41d9a-ae6f-4dd8-bd4d-1f57a8fadade>

6. <https://data.gov.uk/data/contracts-finder.../77c41d9a-ae6f-4dd8-bd4d-1f57a8fadade>

7. <https://data.gov.uk/data/contracts-finder.../77c41d9a-ae6f-4dd8-bd4d-1f57a8fadade>

8. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/597382/Allocation-Of-Accommodation-v5\\_0.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/597382/Allocation-Of-Accommodation-v5_0.pdf)

9. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/oct/27/uk-asylum-seekers-living-in-squalid-unsafe-slum-conditions>

10. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/feb/20/g4s-not-trusted-children-welfare-deportation-centre>

11. <http://www.g4s.com>

12. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/shinealight/g4s-securing-whose-world>

13. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/shinealight/john-grayson/pregnant-woman-g4s-asylum-housing>

14. <http://corporate-responsibility.org/bid-take-legal-action-uk-government-designate-g4s-high-risk-supplier>

## WIDESPREAD CRITICISM OF CURRENT ASYLUM ACCOMMODATION

An inquiry by the Home Affairs Committee in early 2017 highlighted the “disgraceful” standards in dispersal accommodations, and noted a lack of accessible information and complaint procedures; worrying reports of discriminatory, invasive and bullying behaviour by staff members; and a gap in safeguarding measures for specific vulnerable groups (including torture survivors and trafficked persons).<sup>15</sup> In its report, the Committee called for an overhaul of the system, citing gross concerns that the contract system was dysfunctional. Following this, a Home Office spokesperson gave the statement that: “We are clear that our contractors should provide asylum accommodation that is safe, habitable and fit for purpose. We demand the highest standards from our contractors and their accommodation and monitor them closely to ensure this is maintained.”<sup>16</sup>

Coherent with the findings of the Home Affairs Committee’s inquiry, a report published in

early 2018 by Refugee Rights Europe (RRE) exposed unsanitary and unsafe conditions and gaps in accessible informations and complaint procedures in asylum accommodation in London<sup>17</sup>. The core areas of concern highlighted in the report were: safety and security (with 64% stating that they felt unsafe); hygiene standards and cleanliness (with 73% stating that their accommodation was dirty when they moved in and many having seen vermin); as well as overcrowding.

### THE COMMITTEE CALLED FOR AN OVERHAUL OF THE SYSTEM, CITING GROSS CONCERNS THAT THE CONTRACT SYSTEM WAS DYSFUNCTIONAL.

The RRE report corroborated issues previously highlighted in a research study by the charity Migrant Voice, which found that the poor standards in the accommodation centres caused or exacerbated high levels of stress and mental health issues in asylum seekers in Birmingham.<sup>18</sup> Other reports have also highlighted these high levels of stress experienced by asylum-seeking women as they were being frequently moved, sometimes at short notice, between accommodation and dispersal regions.<sup>19</sup> Such experiences were reportedly especially difficult for pregnant women and women with children, for whom undisrupted access to healthcare and schooling for children is particularly important.

In the same way, independent charities, journalists and activists have exposed the highly unsuitable conditions experienced by women in asylum accommodation; particularly alarming given that women tend to have additional safeguarding needs due to specific vulnerabilities of their circumstances.<sup>20</sup> For instance, in May 2018, an article in the Independent exposed the ‘filthy conditions’ in an accommodation for mothers with babies provided by Serco.<sup>21</sup> The article painted a harrowing picture of the accommodation riddled with cockroaches, rodents and bedbugs. In response to the findings outlined in the report, MP Afzal Khan said: “Unfortunately we know that this is not an isolated case. Our asylum accommodation system is not fit for purpose. It is unacceptable that in 21st century Britain, people fleeing war and persecution are routinely housed in appalling and at times unsafe conditions.”<sup>22</sup>

### THE ACCOMMODATION WAS RIDDLED WITH COCKROACHES, RODENTS AND BEDBUGS.

Despite the widespread criticism and alarming reports of the sub-standard conditions of asylum accommodations across the country, including the Commons Public Accounts Committee describing asylum accommodation as “unacceptably poor for a very fragile group of individuals and families”<sup>23</sup>, the original five-year COMPASS contracts were nevertheless extended in 2017 for another two years.

## GOING FORWARD: NEW CONTRACTS REPLACING COMPASS

In the lead-up to the expiry of these COMPASS contracts which will now end in 2019, the government invited companies to bid for new ten-year UK-wide contracts, entitled the AASC (Asylum Accommodation and Support Services) and AIRE (Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility) contracts. With contracts to be signed in November and December 2018, the bidding process has taken place out of the public eye with little announcement or opportunity for engagement.

In this context, civil society groups seized the opportunity to call for meaningful change within British asylum accommodation provision. A 2018 campaign spearheaded by the charity Asylum Matters and the Scottish Refugee Council raised concerns about the “lack of public or Parliamentary scrutiny of the forthcoming contracts”<sup>24</sup> whilst also

### THE BIDDING PROCESS HAS TAKEN PLACE OUT OF THE PUBLIC EYE WITH LITTLE ANNOUNCEMENT OR OPPORTUNITY FOR ENGAGEMENT.

urging the Home Office to give more power to local governments in the housing allocation process and the monitoring of private housing providers in their constituency.

This RRE report, researched in collaboration with MEENA Centre for Women and Children and the Baobab Project in Birmingham, aims to add to the existing body of evidence concerning the housing conditions for women in asylum accommodation. It highlights existing shortcomings in the provision of asylum accommodation, and proposes a number of concrete policy recommendations which would hold service providers and the Home Office accountable to upholding adequate and safe accommodation across the United Kingdom over the coming years.

<sup>15</sup> [https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmhaff/637/63703.htm#\\_idTextAnchor004](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmhaff/637/63703.htm#_idTextAnchor004)

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/serco-asylum-seeker-housing-living-conditions-mothers-babies-manchester-cockroaches-rodents-bedbugs-a8374531.html>

<sup>17</sup> [http://refugeerights.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/RRE\\_A-Hostile-Environment.pdf](http://refugeerights.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/RRE_A-Hostile-Environment.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/housing-network/2017/feb/02/squalour-asylum-accommodation-mps-report>

<sup>19</sup> [http://www.asaproject.org/uploads/Safe\\_from\\_violence\\_in\\_the\\_UK\\_ASAP-RC\\_report\\_id.pdf](http://www.asaproject.org/uploads/Safe_from_violence_in_the_UK_ASAP-RC_report_id.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.unhcr.org/publications/legal/3d4f915e4/guidelines-protection-refugee-women.html>

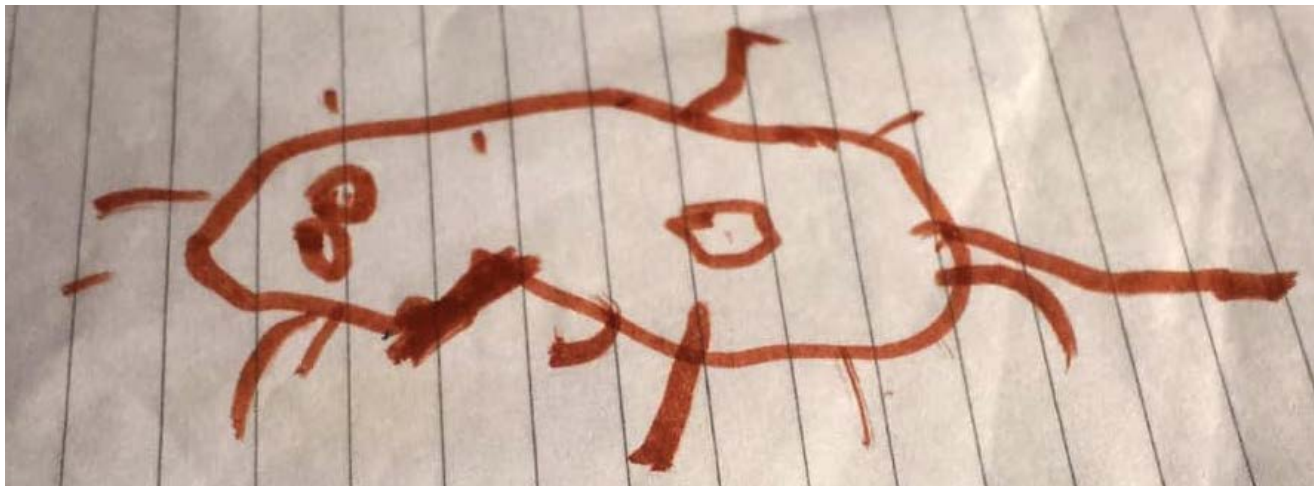
<sup>21</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/serco-asylum-seeker-housing-living-conditions-mothers-babies-manchester-cockroaches-rodents-bedbugs-a8374531.html>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/serco-asylum-seeker-housing-living-conditions-mothers-babies-manchester-cockroaches-rodents-bedbugs-a8374531.html>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/housing-network/2017/feb/02/squalour-asylum-accommodation-mps-report>

<sup>24</sup> <https://cityofsanctuary.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Briefing-for-MPs-on-Asylum-Accommodation-Contracts.pdf>

# METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS



The purpose of RRE's first-hand research is to provide policy makers, advocacy groups and the general public with clear insight into the human rights infringements and living conditions faced by refugees and displaced people within European borders.

The research presented in this report was collected in Birmingham from February until October 2018. The data collection process consisted of two components, a semi-structured survey and a series of open-ended follow-up discussions. Over the research period, 34 surveys were conducted by volunteers at the Meena Centre for Women and Children in Birmingham, in collaboration with the Baobab Project. The format of the survey was semi-structured. Participants were asked a set list of 44 survey questions intended to capture their demographic profile as well as their personal experiences with asylum accommodation. Participants were also given the opportunity to

**PARTICIPANTS WERE ASKED A SET LIST OF 44 SURVEY QUESTIONS INTENDED TO CAPTURE THEIR DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE AS WELL AS THEIR PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH ASYLUM ACCOMMODATION.**

expand or comment upon other aspects of their experiences if they wished to. Responses were recorded on tablets via an online survey tool. The anonymous nature of the survey ensured that participants' identities were protected and kept fully confidential. The survey captured the lived experiences of individuals ranging from 22 to 60

years of age, and was conducted in Arabic, English, French and Tigrinya. In addition, a total of ten open-ended discussions were conducted with both asylum-seeking women and women with refugee status, as well as two support workers. Apart from the support workers, all respondents were women who attend the Meena Centre, and who currently reside in Birmingham either in Home Office provided asylum accommodation or who have previously stayed in such accommodation.

As with all of RRE's work, this study was guided by ethical checklists that were underpinned by data protection policies. The Meena and Baobab team members who led the collection of surveys, and RRE's own field researchers, were guided by safeguarding policies and the principle of 'doing no harm', to ensure the safety, security and dignity of all participants, and ensured full and informed consent from all survey and interview respondents.

Rather than applying a method of random selection and stratification, a 'bus-stop' methodology was chosen as the sampling method for the survey component. Women who attended the Meena

Centre during the sampling period were invited by a volunteer to participate in the survey, meaning that the sample of respondents were self-selected. As such, this report does not claim to present a fully representative view of all asylum-seeking and refugee women in Home Office accommodation in Birmingham; rather it provides a snapshot of the lived experiences among some of them, at a particular point in time.

**THIS STUDY WAS GUIDED BY ETHICAL CHECKLISTS AND UNDERPINNED BY DATA PROTECTION POLICIES.**

Qualitative interviews were conducted by two experienced and female RRE field researchers in Birmingham on 15 October 2018 along with an Arabic speaking interpreter, following strict safeguarding and confidentiality principles. The Meena Centre and Baobab Women's Project helped identify a total of 10 women among their clients who would potentially be willing to engage in a further conversation with the RRE team, and were on hand for any required follow-up such as referrals and/or safeguarding requirements. The further discussions served to allow a more in depth exploration of the lived experiences of asylum-seeking women in Home Office asylum accommodation in Birmingham in 2018.

We believe that our report stands as a piece of solid qualitative research, telling a particular story about the lived experiences of asylum seeking women in Home Office accommodation in Birmingham in 2018 and highlighting a number of widespread issues and shortcomings within the regional asylum accommodation.

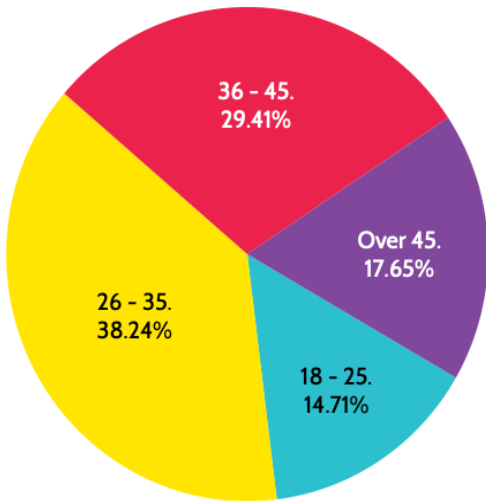
\*Refugee Rights Europe relays the voices of displaced people in Europe, reporting what respondents tell us. Meanwhile, we have not been able to verify claims through official sources. Throughout the report, wording such as "30% had experienced police violence" means that 30% of respondents said they had experienced police violence, but such claims have not been possible to verify.

# ABOUT THE RESPONDENTS

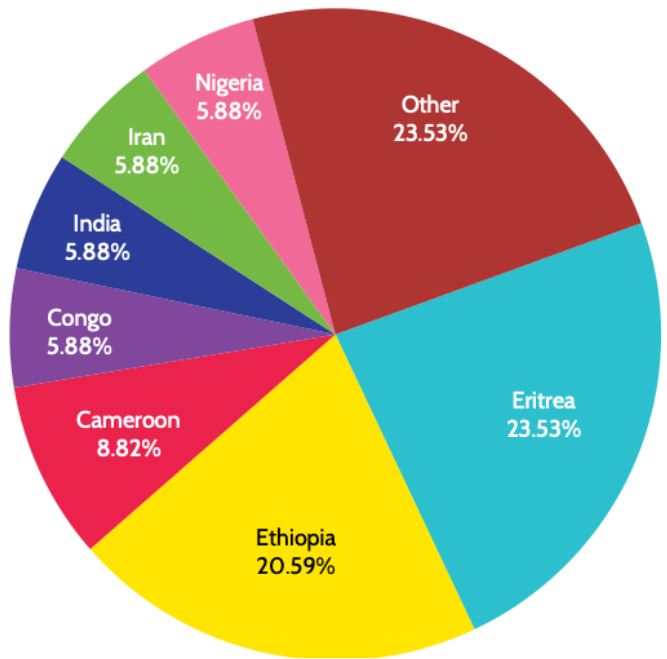
A total of 34 women took part in the survey. The majority were aged between 26 and 45 years. The oldest respondent was 60 years of age, the youngest 22.

24% of respondents were from Eritrea, followed by 21% from Ethiopia and 9% from Cameroon. Other countries included: Democratic Republic of Congo, The Gambia, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Sudan and Uganda.

## HOW OLD ARE YOU?

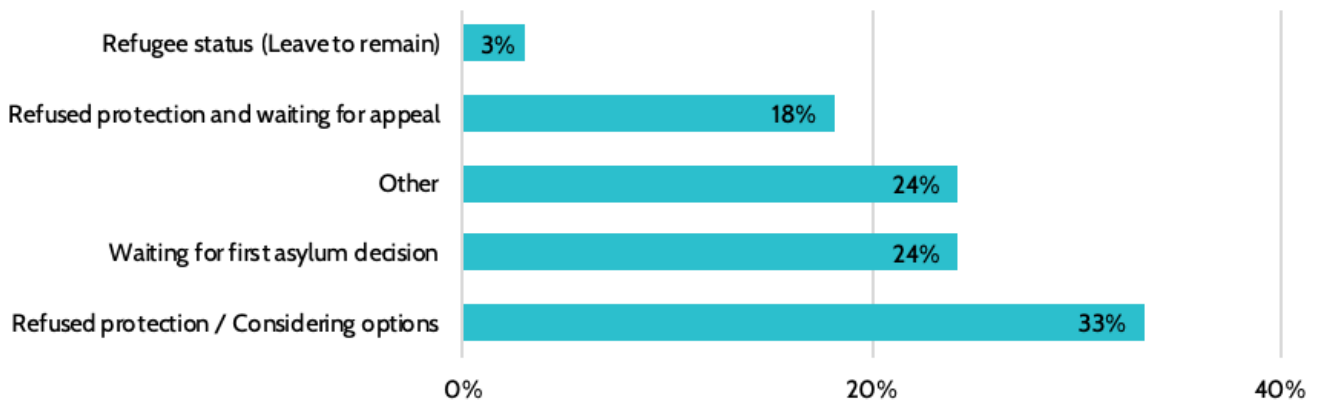


## WHICH COUNTRY ARE YOU FROM?



Half of the respondents, 51%, said their asylum claim had been refused. 33% of the total respondents said they had been refused protection and were 'considering their options,' 18% said they were refused protection and waiting for appeal. 24% were waiting for their first asylum decision.

## WHAT IS YOUR CURRENT STATUS?

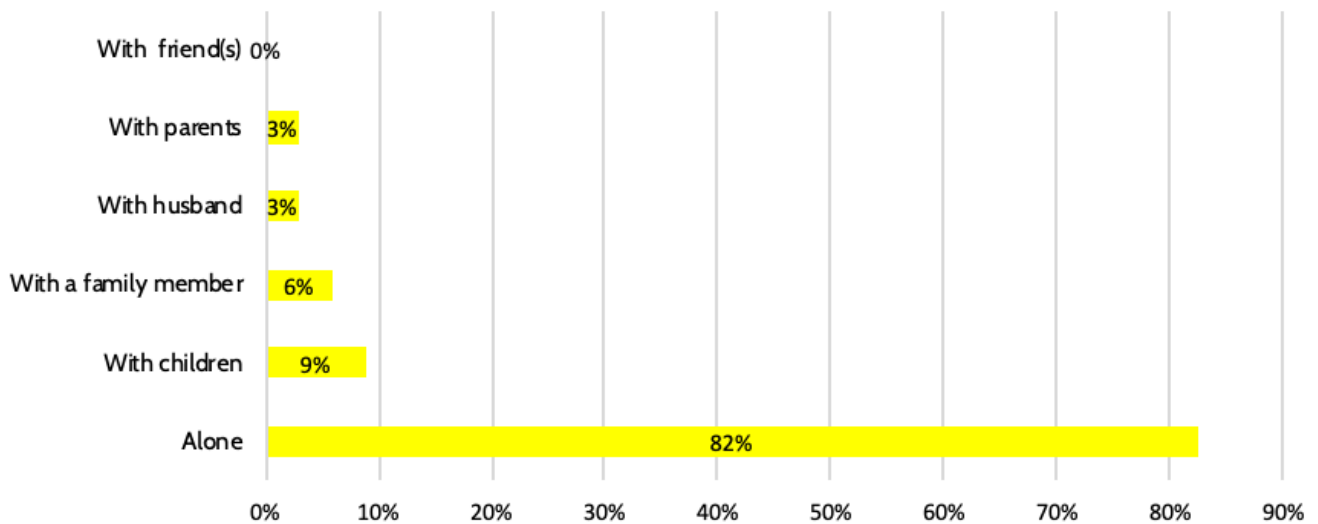






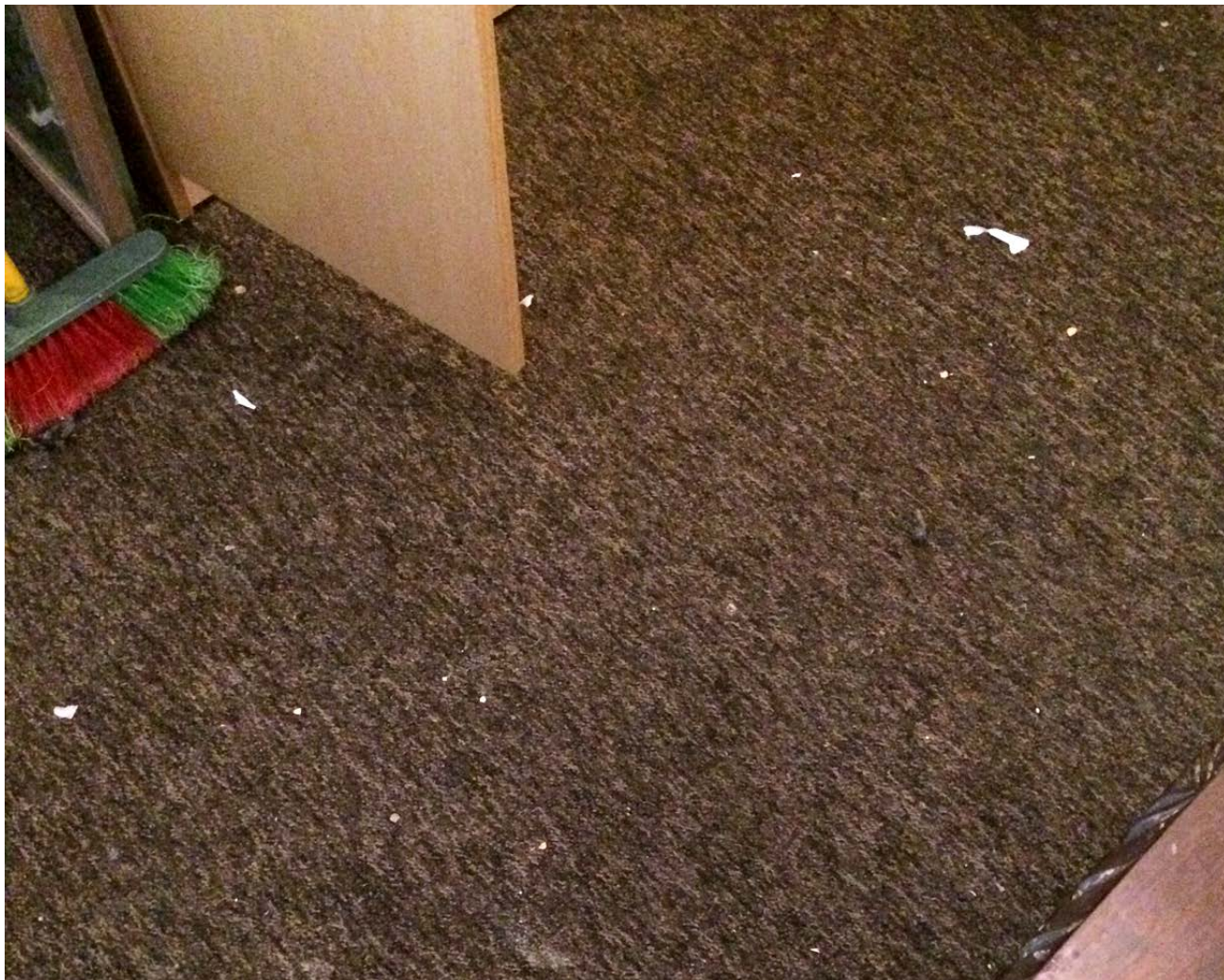
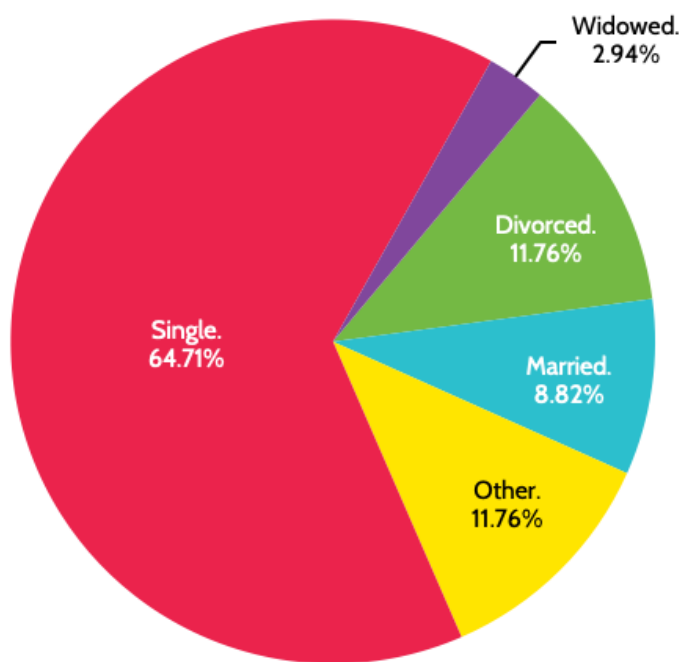
The majority (82%) of respondents said they were alone in the UK. 9% had their children with them, while one woman was with her husband, one woman with her parents, and two with another family member.

## WITH WHOM ARE YOU IN THE UK?



Asked for their marital status, 65% of respondents reported being single, while 12% were divorced and 9% married. Alarming, it appeared as though dispersal policies would sometimes lead to the continued separation of families and spouses. For instance, one Syrian family who had gone through a family reunification process in Britain had been placed in different cities.

## WHAT IS YOUR MARITAL STATUS?





# LIVING STANDARDS

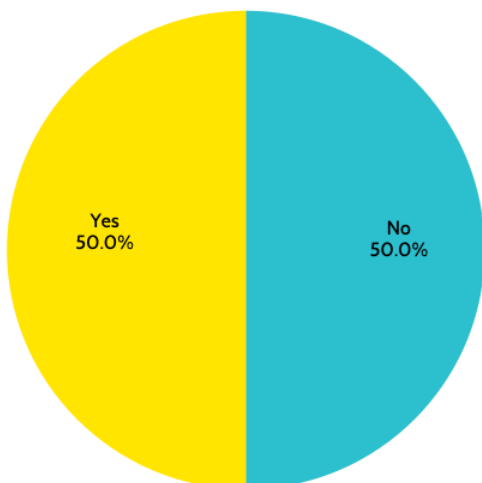
**“CONTRACTORS PLACE ALL ASYLUM SEEKERS IN ACCOMMODATION THAT IS ASSESSED AS BEING FIT FOR PURPOSE, AS SET OUT IN THE CONTRACT, AND CONTRACTORS MAINTAIN HOUSING WITHIN THE SPECIFIED RESPONSE TIME.”<sup>25</sup>**

KPI 6: FIT FOR PURPOSE ACCOMMODATION

## DESTITUTION

Half of the interviewed women reported that they had slept rough since arriving in the UK, highlighting gaps in the accessible provision of accommodation for asylum seeking women in all stages of the process. Worryingly, a support worker told researchers about an elderly woman who had been made destitute when she had to leave her asylum accommodation but did not fulfil the ‘vulnerability criteria’ despite her advanced age and being unable to access support in finding alternative accommodation. She ended up sleeping in the street.

**HAVE YOU EVER SLEPT IN THE STREET SINCE ARRIVING IN THE UK?**



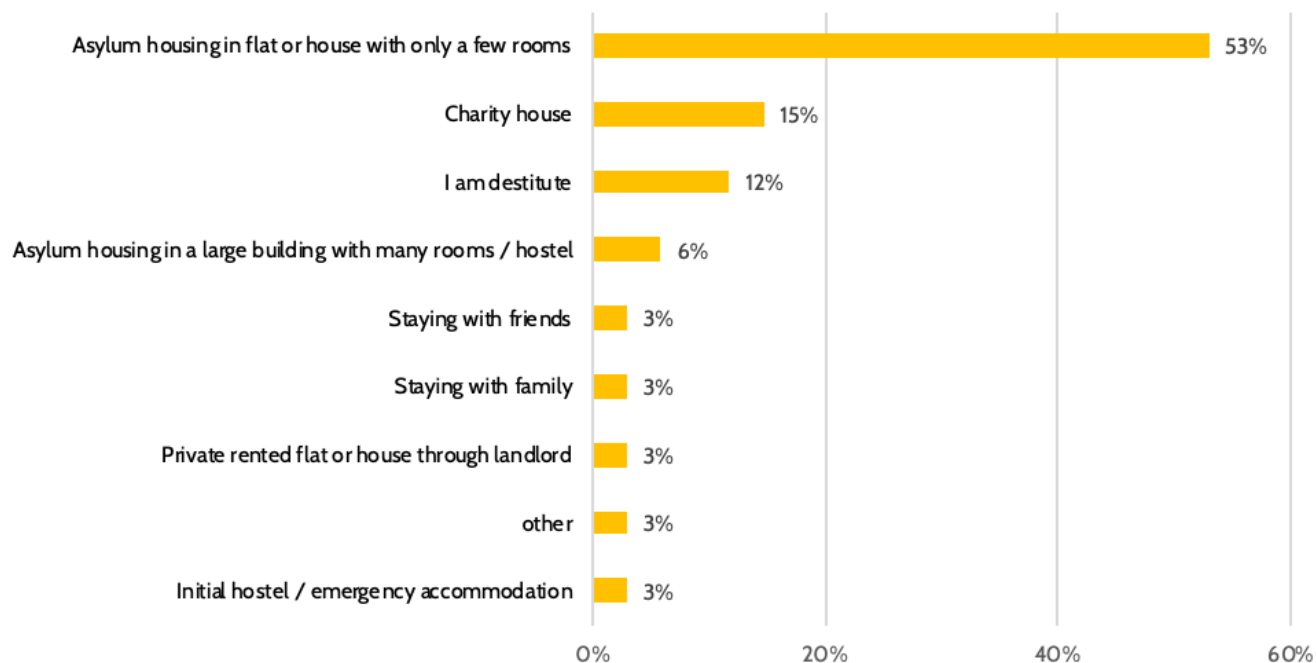
<sup>25</sup> <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmhaff/637/637.pdf>



## CONDITION OF ACCOMMODATION

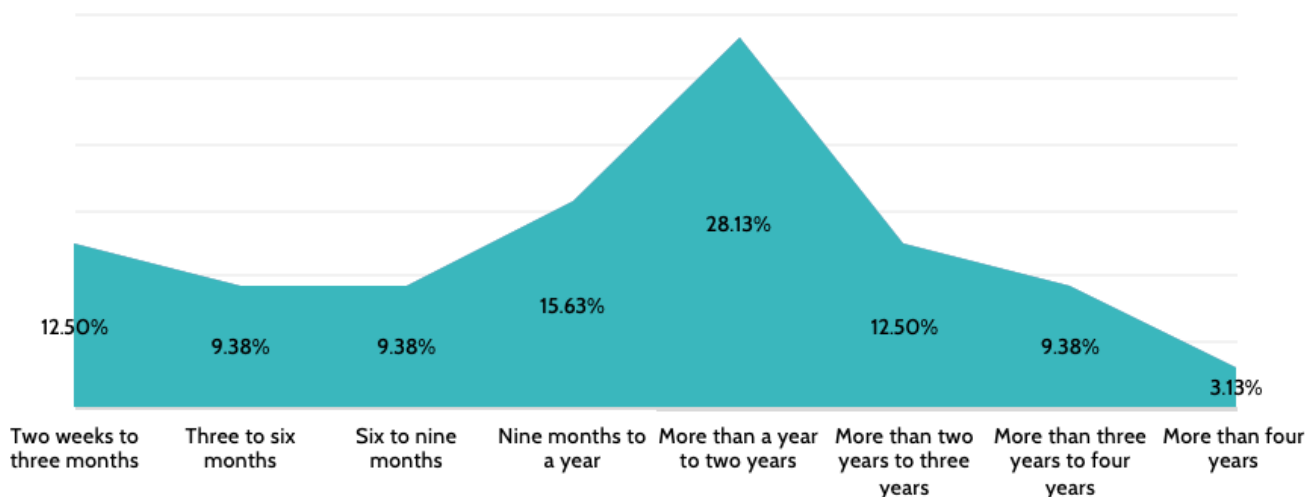
Asked for their current housing situation, 53% reported that they were currently accommodated in asylum housing in flats or houses with only a few rooms and 15% were sheltered by charities. Alarming, 12% reported being destitute.

### WHAT TYPE OF ACCOMMODATION ARE YOU IN?



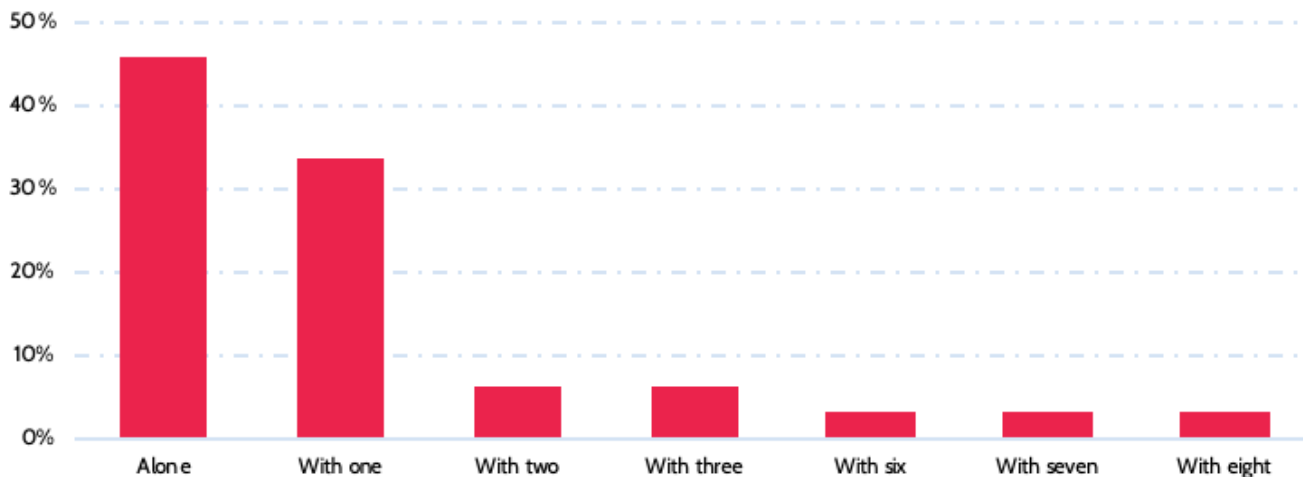
The majority had spent more than a year in asylum accommodation with one woman reporting to have stayed for four years.

### HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN IN YOUR CURRENT ACCOMMODATION?

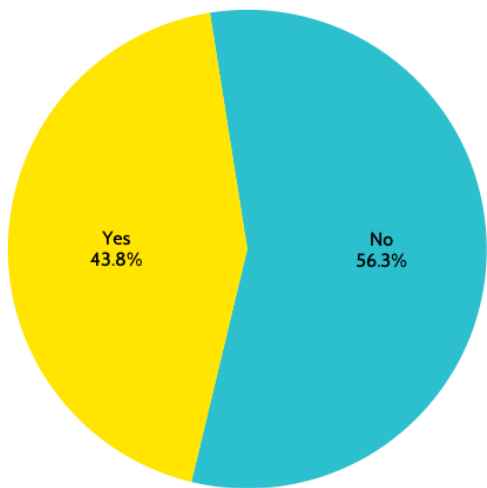


While the majority of women either had a room for themselves (45%) or shared with one other person (33%), some women reported staying in rooms with six, seven or even eight other persons.

## WITH HOW MANY PEOPLE DO YOU SHARE YOUR ROOM?



## DO YOU HAVE CHILDREN LIVING WITH YOU IN YOUR ACCOMMODATION?



44% had children staying in their accommodation.

Some women shared stories about very crowded living conditions in their accommodation.

One woman from Eritrea said: *“The room they give me is very very small and has no cupboard. So small that I can not keep my things in there. I have to store them in the kitchen and the communal living room.”*



**“THE ROOM THEY GIVE ME IS VERY VERY SMALL AND HAS NO CUPBOARD. SO SMALL THAT I CAN NOT KEEP MY THINGS IN THERE.”**

WOMAN FROM ERITREA

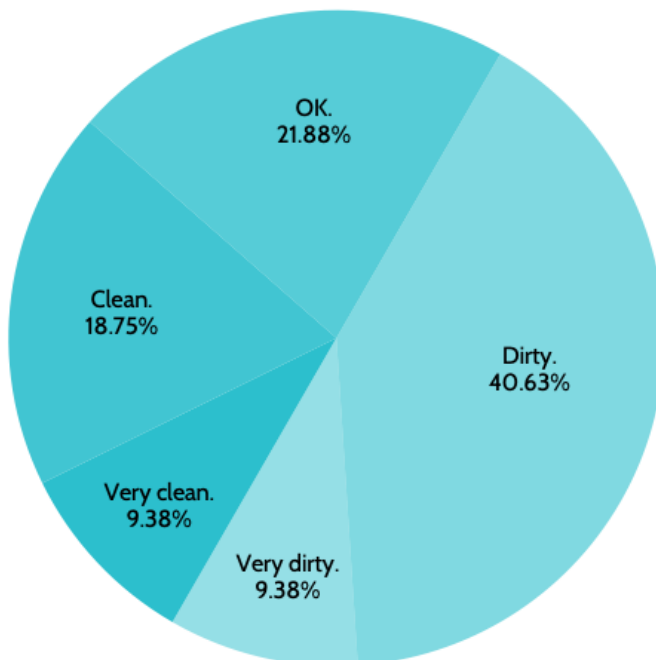
## HYGIENE, CLEANLINESS AND FURNISHINGS

50 % of respondents said they found their accommodation either 'dirty' or 'very dirty' when they moved in. 22% found it to be 'OK', while 28% found it 'clean' or 'very clean'.

**"THE HOUSE IS SO DIRTY AND IT ADDS TO STRESS OF NOT HAVING MY LEAVE TO REMAIN."**

ANONYMOUS

### HOW CLEAN WAS YOUR ACCOMMODATION WHEN YOU MOVED IN?

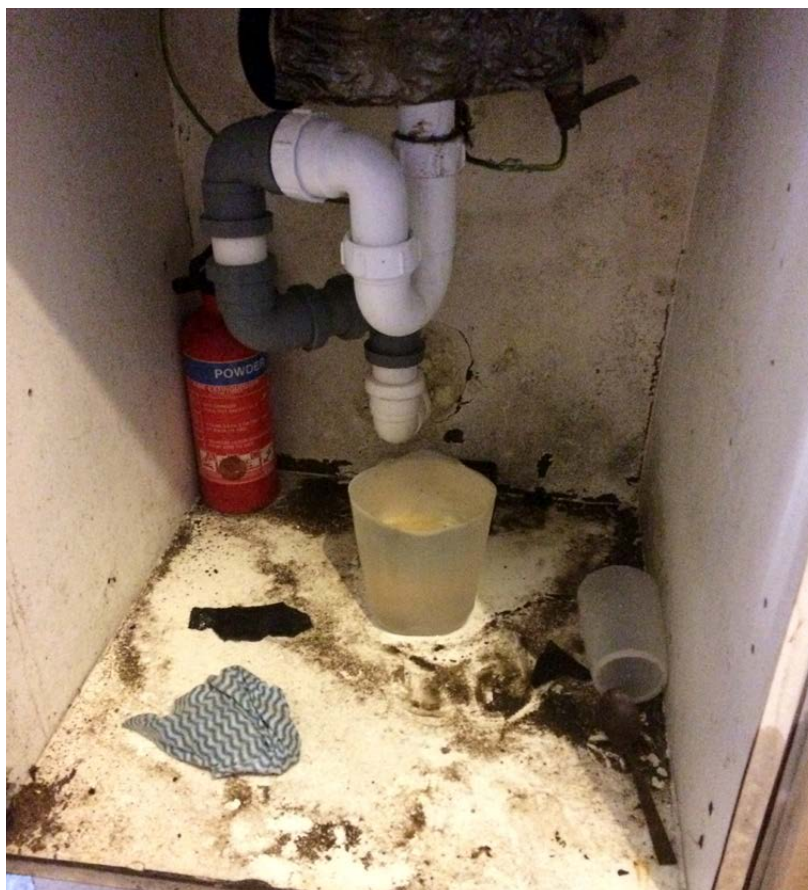


For many women, unsanitary living conditions added to the general stress of their precarious situation

One woman told their interviewers: *"The house is so dirty and it adds to stress of not having my leave to remain."*

A mother of four children, including a child with special needs, reported that she and her sons were given unsanitary mattresses. When they had finally been given appropriate ones, the landlord left the old ones lying around in the garden.

Nearly all of the interviewees described their carpets and sofas as having been in very bad shape, and unsanitary. Many reported allergies from which they and their children suffered. Some reported of bugs living underneath the carpet. One Eritrean woman explained that she had been moved houses when she was pregnant, only to find a very smelly sofa and dirty floor. She explained: *"The sofa smells. It's very dirty and with the baby it's not good. He has a throat problem, and the floor is so dirty. Everything is dirty."* A support worker reiterated these points, reporting concerns regarding the potentially harmful impact of unsanitary accommodation on children's health, with chest infections and other ailments being reported.



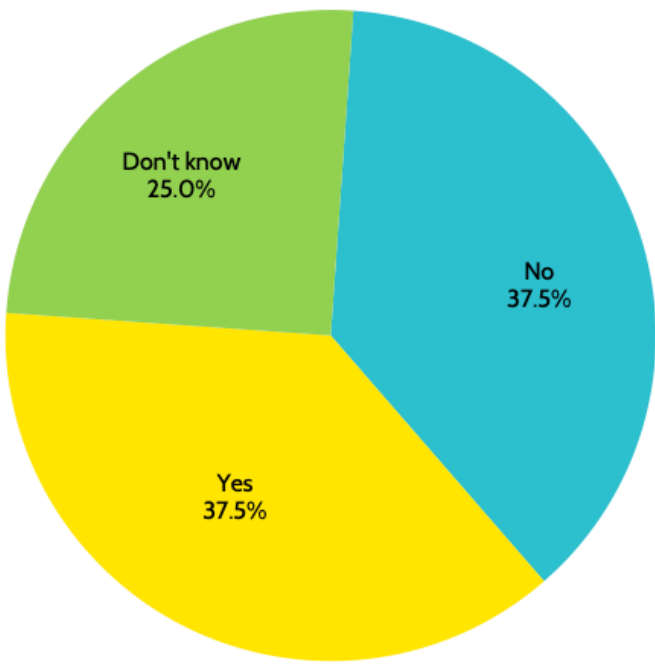


38% reported that something was missing or broken in their accommodation when they first moved in. Such objects included mattresses, cupboards, carpets amongst others. One woman reported that the toilet seat was broken for over two weeks. Another respondent, a woman from Pakistan, said: *"When I moved in, so much was broken- the windows, the wardrobe. They just put sellotape on everything."* An Eritrean woman with a baby explained that she was without a wardrobe for some four months. She was told every day that someone would bring her a wardrobe, but this never happened. All of the clothes are therefore lying around the room.

**"WHEN I MOVED IN, SO MUCH WAS BROKEN - THE WINDOWS, THE WARDROBE. THEY JUST PUT SELLOTAPE ON EVERYTHING."**

WOMAN FROM PAKISTAN

**WAS ANYTHING BROKEN IN YOUR ROOM WHEN YOU MOVED IN?**



One woman reported that the heating in her house is broken so that it gets so warm at night that her daughter can't sleep and has rashes on her body. She sent a letter from the doctor to the Home Office to change this situation over a month ago but has not heard anything back. Another woman, from Sri Lanka, explained: *"Once we were two weeks without hot water. My wardrobe was broken for more than a year. They took a very long time to provide us with a lock to securely lock the back door of the house. Everything takes ages, it is very stressful."*

Several of the women reported that unresolved issues in their accommodation tended to affect not only their physical health (e.g. itchiness, allergies) but also their mental health due to stress and/or sleep deprivation brought on by the same.



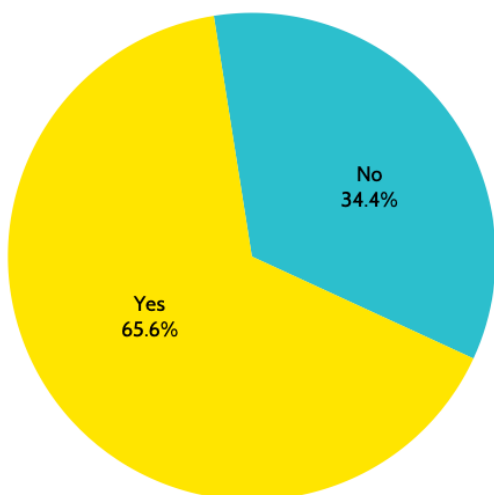
**"ONCE WE WERE TWO WEEKS WITHOUT HOT WATER. MY WARDROBE WAS BROKEN FOR MORE THAN A YEAR."**

ANONYMOUS

## VERMIN

Of particular concern were the apparently widespread problems with vermin in the accommodation, with 66% of respondents reporting that they had seen vermin. Of these, 26% had seen rats, 18% mice, 41% cockroaches, and 26% had experienced bed bugs.

### HAVE YOU SEEN ANY VERMIN IN YOUR ACCOMMODATION?

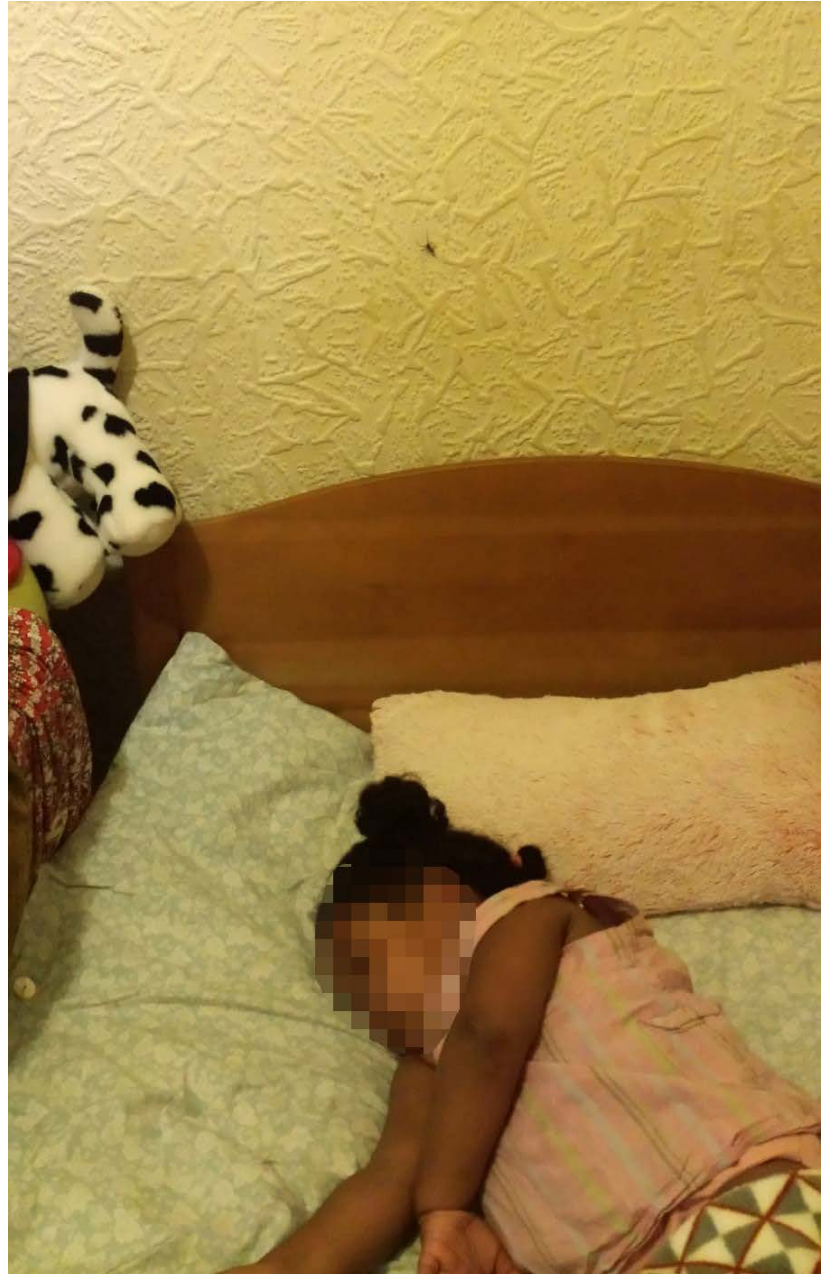


One woman from Eritrea said: "There are many mice, and at night they make much noise so I find it difficult to sleep." Another woman from Pakistan said: "There are so many rats living in the garden, I am worried for my children. When I moved in and looked in the kitchen cupboard they were full of mouse droppings. It was so bad."

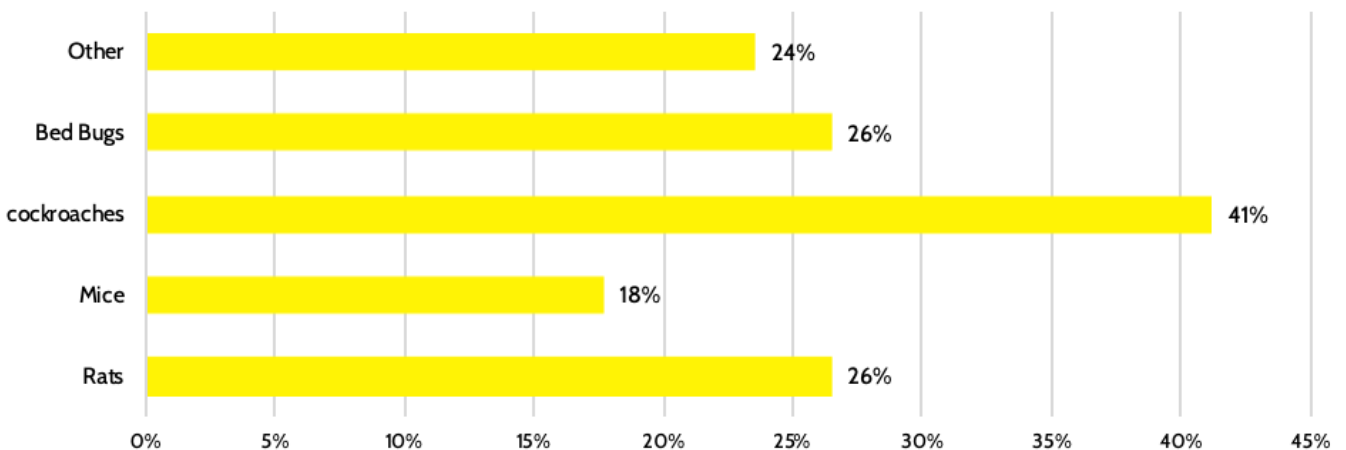
Alarming pictures of cockroaches in baby beds had been shared with the Meena Centre earlier this year and appears to remain an issue.

**"THERE ARE SO MANY RATS LIVING IN THE GARDEN, I AM WORRIED FOR MY CHILDREN."**

WOMAN FROM PAKISTAN



### IF YES, WHAT TYPE OF VERMIN?

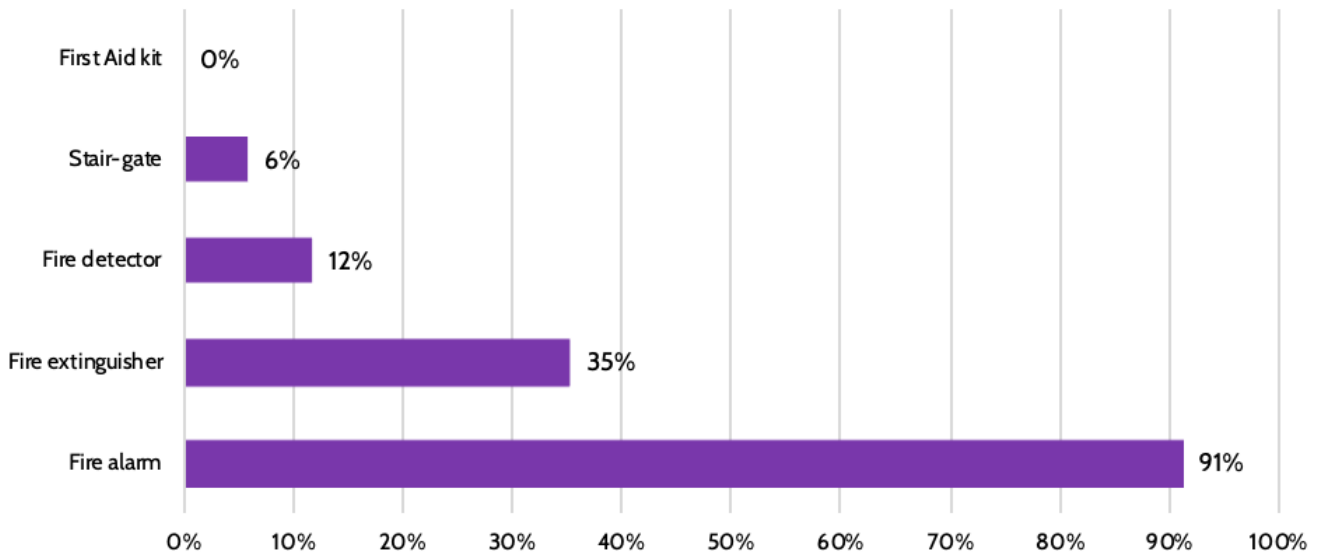




## FIRE SAFETY

A further health and safety issue appears to be the accessibility or knowledge of mandatory fire safety equipment. Only 35% reported being aware of a fire extinguisher in their accommodation, 12% a fire detector, 0% knew of the location of a first aid kit. 24% did not know where the fire exit is in their accommodation.

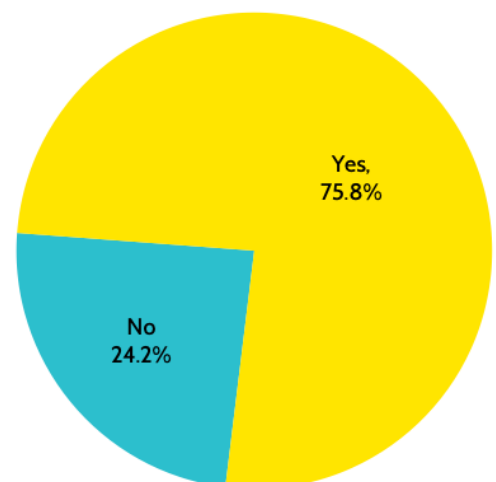
### WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING ITEMS DO YOU HAVE IN YOUR ACCOMMODATION?



One woman reported that the fire alarm would tend to go off without any apparent reason. The woman did not know about the British emergency telephone number so they called the G4S office. There she was simply told that G4S is not responsible for the fire alarm and there was nothing they were willing to do to help. Meanwhile, highly distraught women and children in the accommodation were struggling with the ongoing fire alarm. Charity personnel finally arrived and were able to stop the alarm after more than an hour.

Meanwhile, a support worker explained that fire and safety inductions appear largely inadequate for many of the asylum-seeking women. G4S would say that they have done an 'induction' with the women, but according to support workers this is not sufficient or adequate for individuals experiencing complex trauma, disorientation and other difficulties. Whilst instructions are often made available in various languages, these are not necessarily accessible to women who may not be literate or who may not be aware of the importance and/or existence of instructions in the first place. The absence of interpreters was reported as highly problematic in these contexts.

### DO YOU KNOW WHERE THE FIRE EXIT IS IN YOUR ACCOMMODATION?

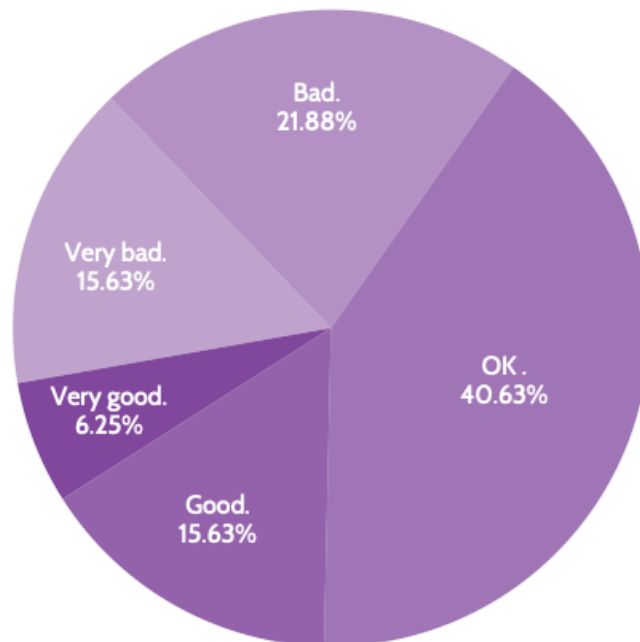


## LOCATION AND RELOCATION

Being located far from available services and support networks, including GP offices and amenities, risks adding additional complications and challenges for women throughout the asylum process and can lead to further isolation. In this context, 38% described the location of their current accommodation as 'bad' or 'very bad', while 41% found the location of their accommodation to be 'OK'. One woman said: *"Before, I stayed in an accommodation which was very far outside. There was nothing around, no accessible stores and as I had not enough money for transport this was a big problem."*

Other respondents raised concerns about having been moved around between accommodations regularly, and often at short notice. For instance, one woman reported that she was placed multiple times in houses completely unsuitable for her child with special needs. For instance, she was placed in a house where she could not sleep on the same floor as her daughter and she was not able to lock the door properly from the inside, which she felt posed a danger for her daughter, as she was at risk of running away at night.

### HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE LOCATION OF YOUR CURRENT ACCOMMODATION?



**"THERE WAS NOTHING AROUND, NO ACCESSIBLE STORES AND AS I HAD NOT ENOUGH MONEY FOR TRANSPORT."**

ANONYMOUS

A single mother of four was forced to move four times in a short period of time. She experienced this as a highly frustrating and stressful situation, not least because one of her children was a toddler and in addition she had a child with special needs. The same respondent also reported that she was moved after the school term had already started, which led to her being unable to find a place in a nearby school for her 11-year-old son who then had to travel long distances across town to attend school. A support worker reported concerns that developmental issues in children had been missed by 'post code based' health visitors when children were moved around. For instance, a 2.5-year-old who had developmental issues had been moved around so many times that his issues were left unidentified and unaddressed. As such, it appears that unnecessary moves can have significant knock-on effects on women and their children.

# SAFETY AND SECURITY

**“CONTRACTORS PLACE ALL ASYLUM SEEKERS IN ACCOMMODATION THAT IS NOT ASSESSED AS BEING UNSAFE, AS SET OUT IN THE CONTRACT, AND RESPOND TO ANY EMERGENCY ACTION REQUIRED WITHIN THE SPECIFIED RESPONSE TIME.”<sup>26</sup>**

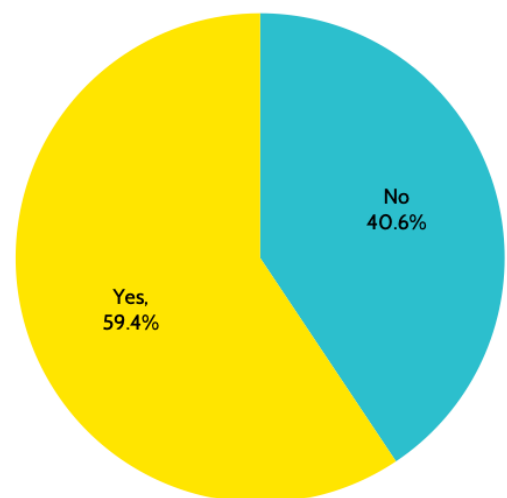
KPI 4: ACCOMMODATION STANDARDS [SAFE]



When asked about their sense of safety inside the accommodation, 59% said that they feel safe, while 41% did not feel safe in their accommodation. One key concern raised in multiple interviews were the relations with other residents, with some women reported feeling unsafe within their room or flat mates, often because of large numbers of people or quick turn over of residents. For instance, one woman said, *“I do not know how the number of people who live here because it is too busy”*. Another woman explained that the presence of unknown men made her feel unsafe: *“We are too many in the room and mixed sex live together in the same room.”*

One respondent explained that she felt unsafe due to the state of mental health of one of the other residents: *“[I don't feel safe] because there is another lady in the same accommodation who is putting her life at danger.”* Another woman explained that the presence of non-residents was a key concern: *“I feel am in hell in the house because where I live is not safe because it is too noise with many rough sleepers. Housing officers keep telling me to call the police. I have called till am tired.”*

## DO YOU FEEL SAFE IN YOUR ACCOMMODATION?

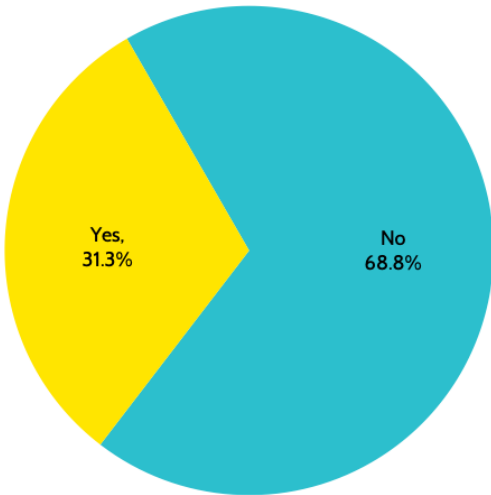


<sup>26</sup> <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmhaff/637/637.pdf>

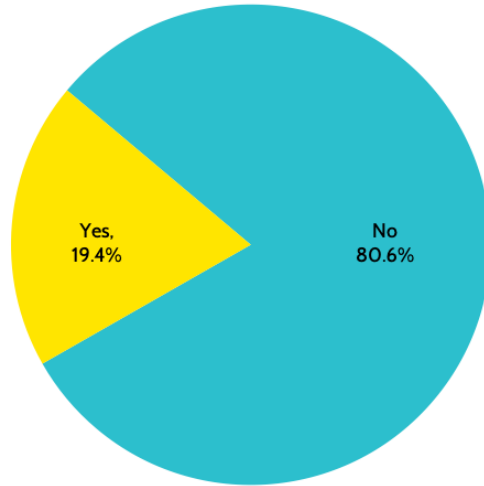


A whole 31% of respondents reported having witnessed violence within the accommodation. 19% had experienced some form of violence themselves.

**HAVE YOU EVER WITNESSED ANY FORM OF VIOLENCE WITHIN YOUR ACCOMMODATION?**

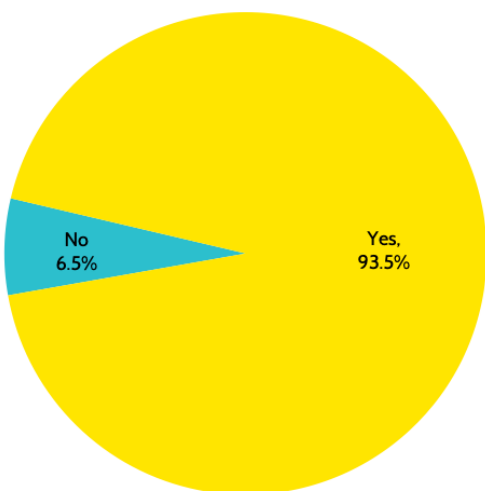


**HAVE YOU EVER PERSONALLY EXPERIENCED VIOLENCE WITHIN THE ACCOMMODATION?**



While the majority of respondents said that their door had a functioning lock, 7% said that they did not.

**DO YOU HAVE A FUNCTIONING LOCK ON YOUR DOOR?**



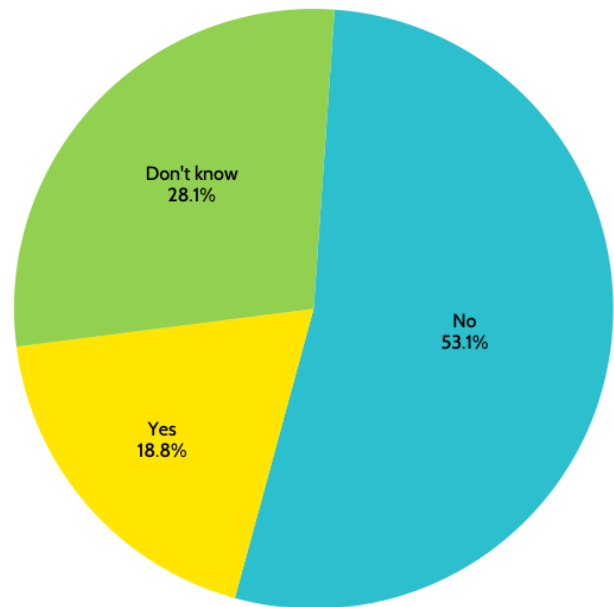
# INFORMATION, SUPPORT AND GRIEVANCE PROCEDURES

**“CONTRACTORS PROVIDE THE WAYS AND MEANS FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS TO RAISE COMPLAINTS, AND SEEK TO RESOLVE ANY COMPLAINTS WITHIN FIVE WORKING DAYS”<sup>27</sup>**

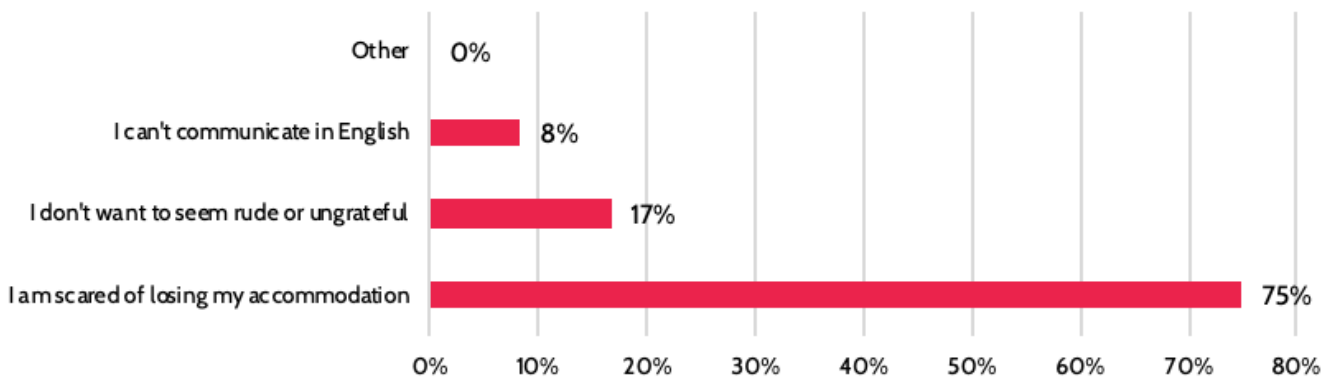
KPI 7: COMPLAINTS MANAGEMENT

As regards grievance procedures, 58% of respondents said that they feel safe raising complaints about their accommodation to their landlord or housing officer, while 32% said they did not feel safe to do so. When asked why they do not feel safe, the majority, 75%, said that they were afraid of losing their accommodation, and 17% did not want to seem rude or ungrateful. 8% were not confident in communicating in English and were not able to access adequate routes for grievances/communication with their housing officer in a language they could speak and understand.

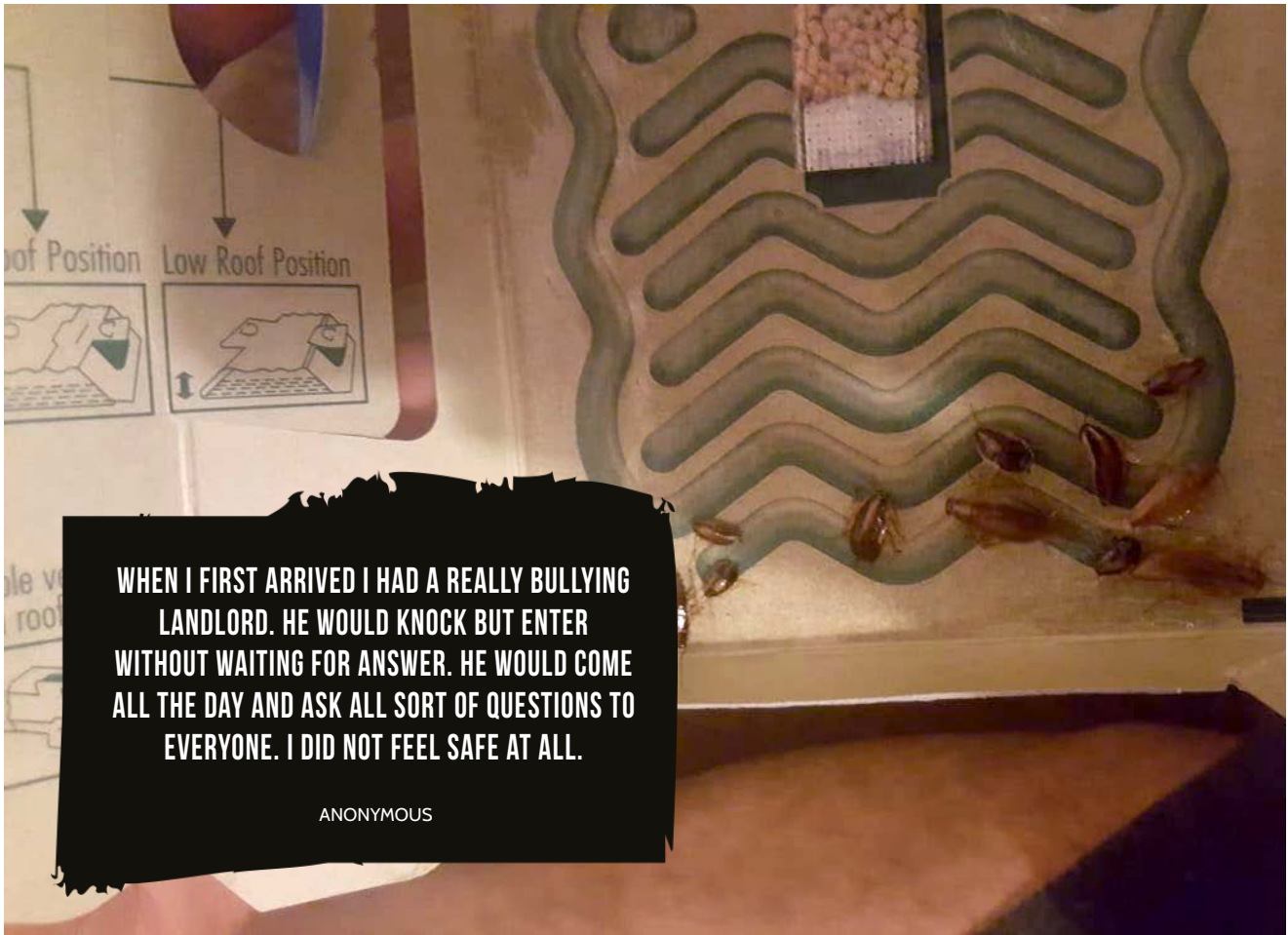
**WOULD YOU FEEL SAFE RAISING COMPLAINTS ABOUT YOUR ACCOMMODATION TO YOUR LANDLORD OR HOUSING OFFICER?**



**IF NO, WHY DO YOU NOT FEEL SAFE RAISING COMPLAINTS?**

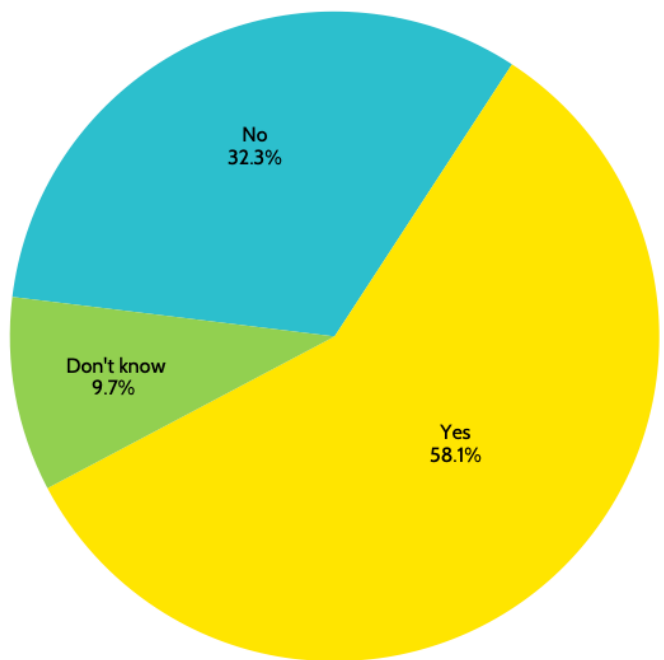


<sup>27</sup> <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmhaff/637/637.pdf>



While 61% of respondents knew where they could go for help if they have problems with their landlord, housing officer or accommodation, a whole 39% did not know where they could turn to.

**DO YOU KNOW WHERE TO GO FOR HELP IF YOU HAVE PROBLEMS WITH YOUR LANDLORD OR HOUSING OFFICER OR ACCOMMODATION?**

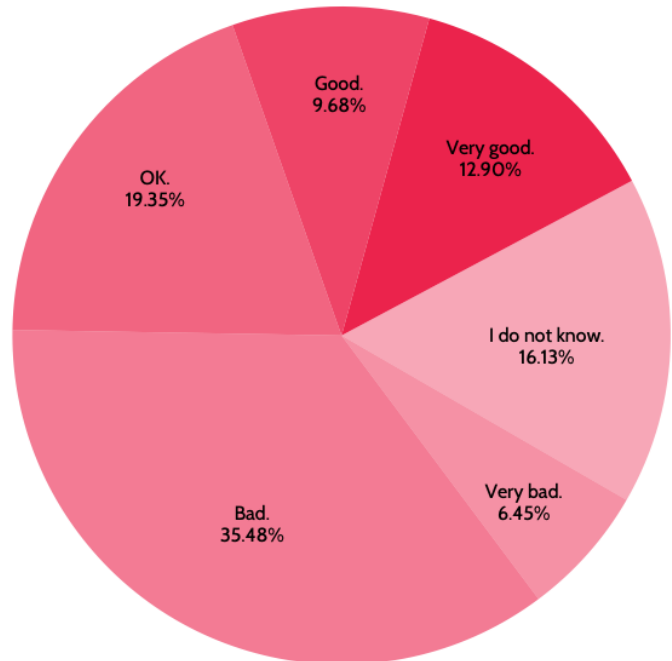




## OVERALL RELATIONSHIP WITH LANDLORDS AND HOUSING OFFICERS

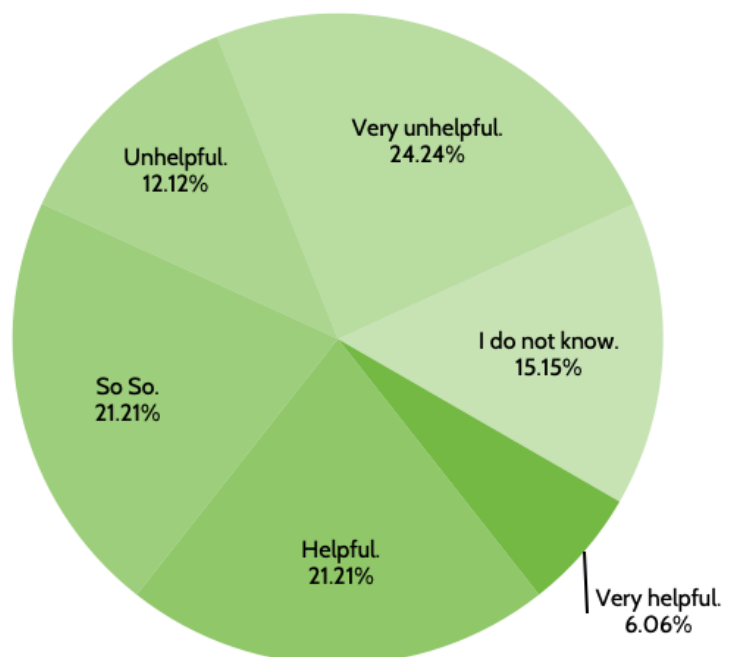
23% described their relationship with their landlord or housing officer as 'good' or 'very good', while 41% perceived it as 'bad' or 'very bad'. 19% described it as 'OK' while 16% said they 'don't know'.

### HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LANDLORD OR HOUSING OFFICER?



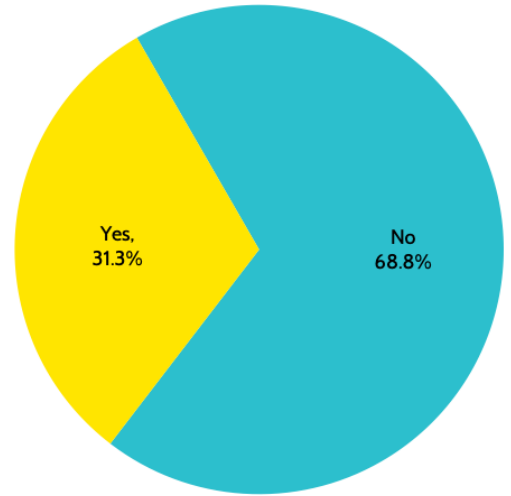
Meanwhile, 27% described their landlord or housing officers as 'helpful' or 'very helpful' while 21% said they were 'so-so' and XX% reported them to be 'unhelpful' or 'very unhelpful'. 29% of respondents reported having experienced bad treatment by their landlord or housing officer.

### HOW HELPFUL IS YOUR LANDLORD OR HOUSING OFFICER?



Of those who said they had experienced bad treatment by their landlord or housing officer, 18% reported 'bad language', two reported 'bullying behaviour', one woman had experienced landlords or housing officers knocking and entering before response, while one had had unannounced visits. The respondent illustrated the latter incidence as follows: "When I first arrived I had a really bullying landlord. He would knock but enter without waiting for answer. He would come all the day and ask all sort of questions to everyone. I did not feel safe at all." Another woman reported: "After I complained about fire safety issues, they started bullying me. They sent me a letter, saying I was aggressive, threatening me. One time, ten men showed up in my accommodation."

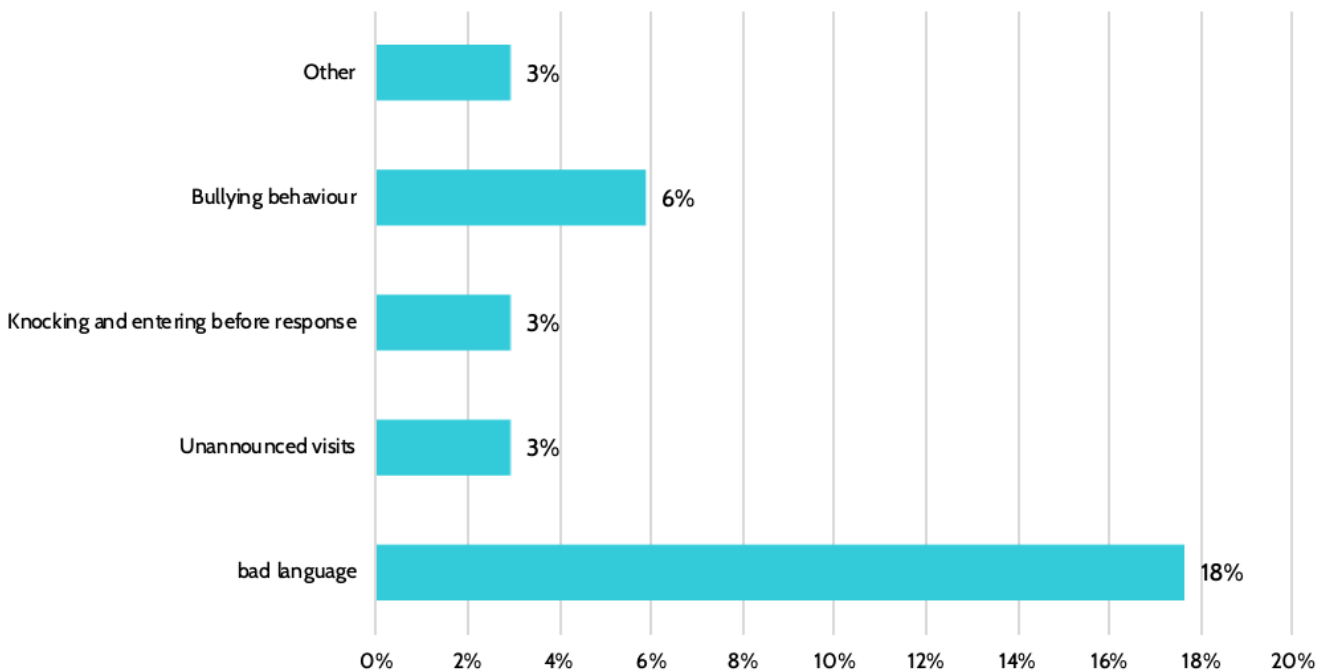
## HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED ANY BAD TREATMENT BY YOUR LANDLORD OR HOUSING OFFICER?



**"AFTER I COMPLAINED ABOUT FIRE SAFETY ISSUES, THEY STARTED BULLYING ME. THEY SENT ME A LETTER, SAYING I WAS AGGRESSIVE, THREATENING ME. ONE TIME, TEN MEN SHOWED UP IN MY ACCOMMODATION."**

ANONYMOUS

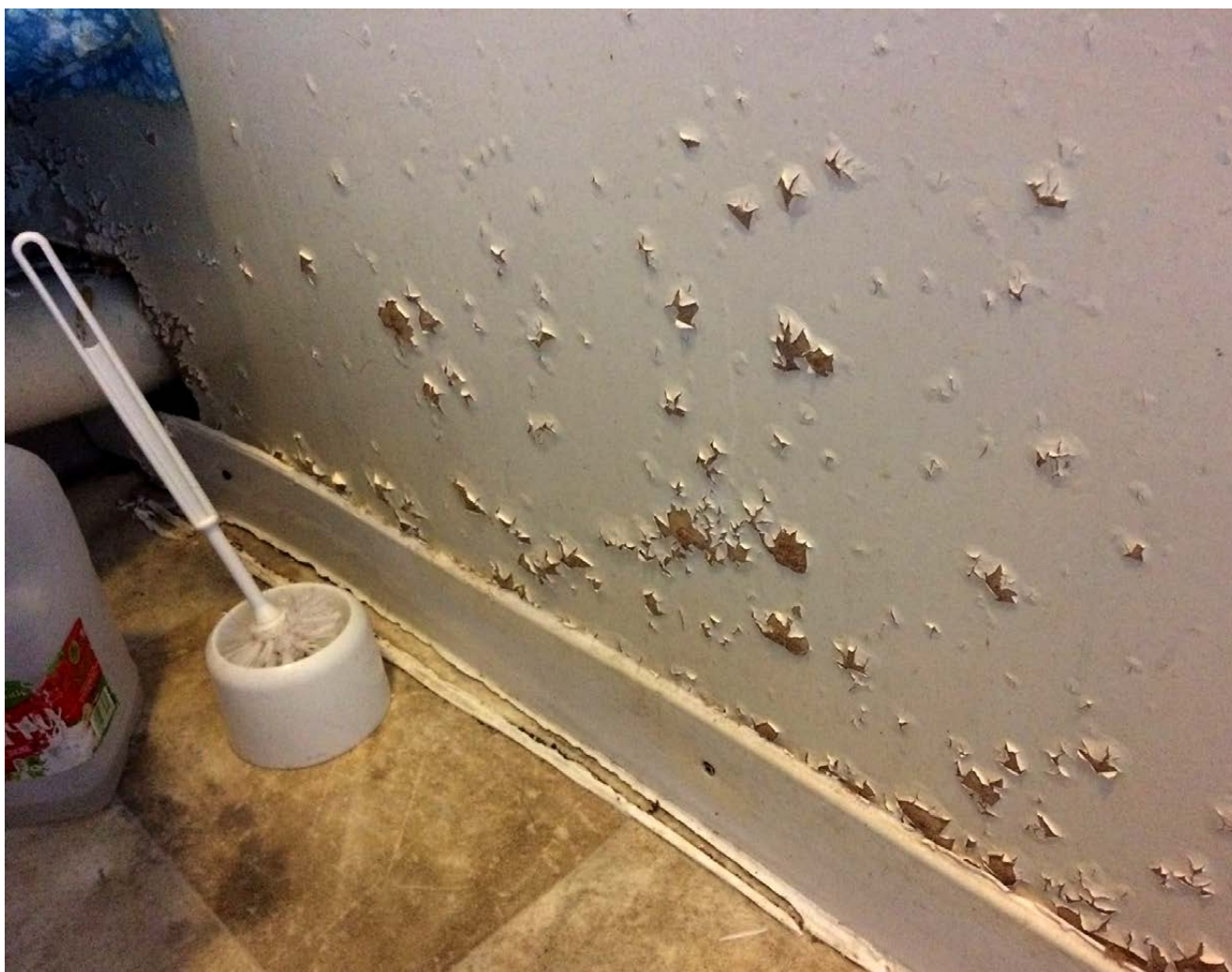
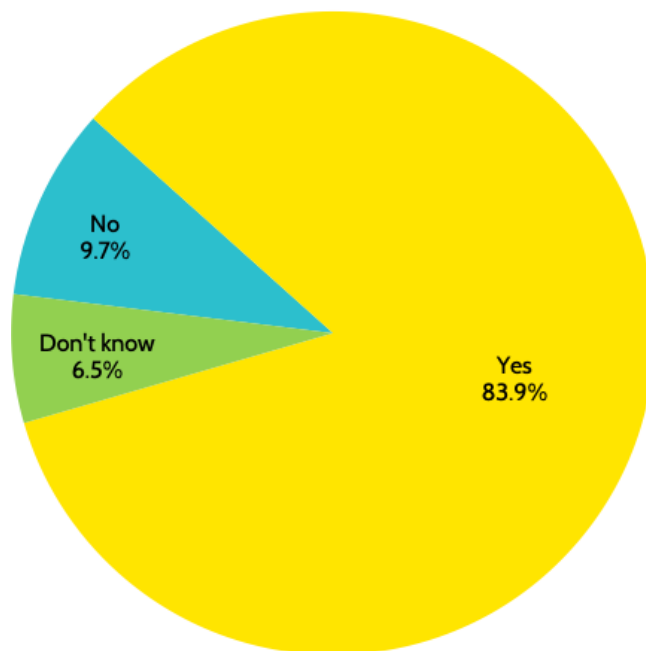
## IF YES, WHAT KIND OF BAD TREATMENT?



When asked whether they have a tenancy agreement with their landlord or housing officer, 84% said yes. 10% said they believed not to have one, 7% did not know.

Only 54% said they either had access to all documents in their native language or could access translator or other person to explain the tenancy agreement prior to signing. 31% said they did not have access to any of this, while 15% could not remember.

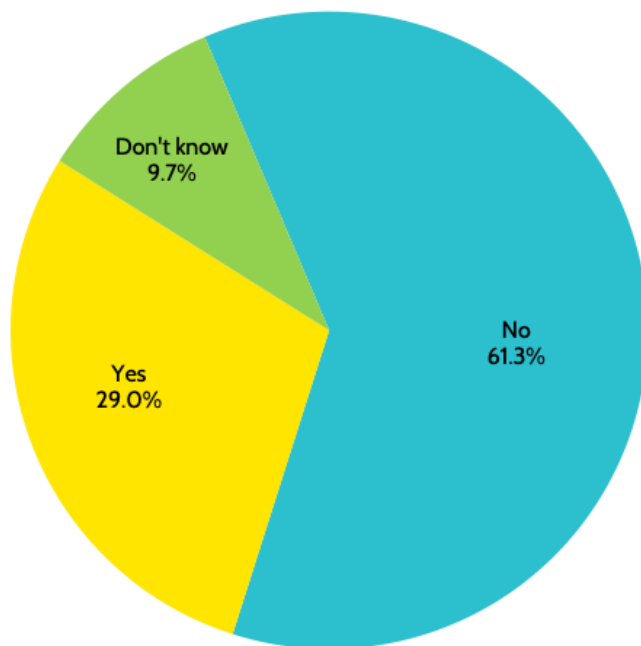
## DO YOU HAVE A TENANCY AGREEMENT WITH YOUR LANDLORD OR HOUSING OFFICER?



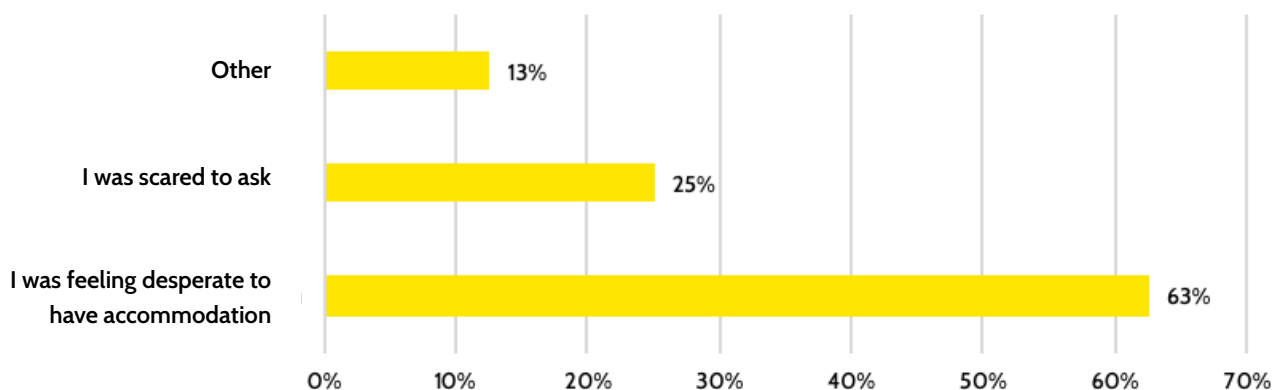


Worryingly, 29% of respondents said that they had signed document which content they did not understand, while another 10% said they were not sure whether they had signed something they didn't understand. 63% of those who had signed despite not understanding, said they had done so because they were desperate to have accommodation arranged. Another 25% had been too scared to ask any questions. One woman told researchers that she had asked for a copy of the contract, which she had signed without in fact understanding its contents, but was told that this was not possible.

## DID YOU SIGN ANY DOCUMENTS YOU DIDN'T UNDERSTAND?



## IF YES, WHY DID YOU SIGN DOCUMENTS YOU DIDN'T UNDERSTAND?



# MENTAL HEALTH

**"I WAS HOPING TO SETTLE HERE AND RAISE MY DAUGHTER BUT I AM SO STRESSED AND DEPRESSED. I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHY IT HAS TO BE SO DIFFICULT."**

WOMAN FROM ERITREA

Qualitative data from the survey and additional interviews, with both support workers and women themselves, suggest worrying degrees of poor mental health among women in asylum accommodation. Such issues appear to be exacerbated by difficult circumstances within the asylum accommodation, by lengthy and complex asylum procedures and by being frequently moved between accommodation locations. Researchers observed high levels of stress among the respondents, which was corroborated by team members at the Meena Centre, who moreover reported rising numbers of children and women who were self-harming.

One woman expressed her desperation as follows: *"[Life] in the UK is a nightmare. We live in a limbo. The system pushes you to commit suicide."* Several women highlighted the lengthy and difficult asylum process as a reason for heightened stress and mental health pressures. For instance, one woman said: *"The long waiting for Home Office decision drives us mad. It has greatly increased my depression level."* Another respondent said: *"The asylum process is very stressful. The process of getting my daughter's papers is hell. No one tells you what you do. Life is bad."* A further respondent added: *"I sleep with stress and get up with stress because of the immigration process."*



**"[LIFE] IN THE UK IS A NIGHTMARE. WE LIVE IN A LIMBO. THE SYSTEM PUSHES YOU TO COMMIT SUICIDE."**

ANONYMOUS



# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**“THE HOME SECRETARY MUST NOW LISTEN AND ACT - AS THE HOME AFFAIRS SELECT COMMITTEE RECOMMENDED - AND GENUINELY WORK IN PARTNERSHIP WITH LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND THE THIRD SECTOR, ON WHOM THE DISPERSAL SYSTEM RELIES, TO URGENTLY ADDRESS CONCERNS WITH THE CONTRACTS AND ENSURE THE SUSTAINABILITY OF THE ASYLUM DISPERSAL SYSTEM GOING FORWARD.”<sup>28</sup>**

In light of the research findings, combined with reports from the civil society sector and the Home Affairs Committee inquiry in early 2017, RRE presents a number of overarching recommendations for future asylum accommodation. Several of these recommendations were derived to a large degree from recommendations presented by Asylum Matters and the Scottish Refugee Council (see footnotes).<sup>29</sup>



## 1

### UPHOLD SAFETY AND GOOD LIVING STANDARDS

Decent and secure living standards must be ensured at all times during the asylum-seeking process. It is imperative that accommodation providers conduct regular checks to ensure that living standards are adequate and do not pose any risk to residents' health. Vermin, mould and other common problems ought to be addressed effectively as soon as they're reported to the management. Cleanliness of communal bathrooms and kitchens must be kept at reasonable standards through professional and appropriate cleaning; and overall, the accommodation must be clean when clients first move in. Broken or missing equipment must be swiftly repaired or supplied once reported, and residents must not be turned away or reprimanded when attempting to report major issues within the building. Training on fire safety must be strengthened, and delivered in languages and formats which are accessible to women in asylum accommodation.

As proposed in recommendations by Asylum Matters and the Scottish Refugee Council, the AASC contracts should be amended to ensure that no person seeking asylum is forced to share a bedroom in asylum accommodation, and the Home Office must work to reduce the use of large-scale Houses of Multiple Occupancy (HMOs) for the benefit of asylum seekers and local communities. If large-scale HMOs continue to be used, the Home Office must specify that vulnerable service users - including pregnant women, new mothers, victims of torture, physical or sexual violence or trafficking, and those with physical or mental health needs - should not be forced to live in large-scale HMOs.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup>. <https://cityofsanctuary.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Briefing-for-MPs-on-Asylum-Accommodation-Contracts.pdf>

<sup>29</sup>. <https://asylummatters.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/117/2018/09/Asylum-Accommodation-Contracts-Westminster-Hall-Debate-Briefing-for-MPs.pdf>

<sup>30</sup>. <https://asylummatters.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/117/2018/09/Asylum-Accommodation-Contracts-Westminster-Hall-Debate-Briefing-for-MPs.pdf>



## ENSURE ADEQUATE AND INFORMED SUPPORT SERVICES

Asylum accommodation should always be a safe haven for individuals awaiting the outcome of their asylum claim. The accommodation provider must therefore ensure that the wellbeing and dignity of its clients is safeguarded, and any allegations of bullying, violence, or gender-based discrimination must be addressed urgently.

Housing providers and staff must be able to respond effectively to the specific safeguarding needs of women, mothers and individuals with special needs, and therefore need to be trained in complex trauma as well as matters of rape, sexual and gender-based violence, trafficking and related issues. Women housing welfare officers and security staff must be appointed, as well as accommodation youth workers supporting individuals and monitoring the mental health of 18-25-year-olds.

Adequate support services must be made available, and this should be done in collaboration with civil society. Indeed, as

proposed in recommendations by Asylum Matters and the Scottish Refugee Council, housing providers must ensure that accommodation and facilities take into account asylum seekers' individual needs, and establish more effective pathways for identifying and responding to vulnerable people across both Initial and Dispersal Accommodation.

Information on accessible support services should be made available to asylum-seeking women throughout their process, and within the framework of their accommodation. Furthermore, asylum accommodation, where possible, should be located in accessible and well-connected areas to allow individuals to access available services.

On a related note, the Home Office ought to make better use of available information when dispersing people to different locations across Britain. Spouses ought to be brought back together rather than being placed in different cities. As such, 'intelligent dispersal policies' must be implemented.

## ENSURE WELL-FUNCTIONING GRIEVANCE PROCEDURES

A functioning grievance procedure must be made accessible to residents, including access to interpretation services. There must be effective routes to resolve grievances, and increased transparency throughout the entire process. Importantly, individuals must be afforded an opportunity to raise concerns about their health and safety, without being reprimanded or being referred to one actor after another without any response at the end of the referral line.

Potential incidents of inappropriate behaviour, including bullying and harassment, by staff members have to be followed up immediately and continuous and appropriate training on safeguarding should be obligatory for all staff members dealing with asylum-seeking women.



<sup>31</sup> <https://asylumatters.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/117/2018/09/Asylum-Accommodation-Contracts-Westminster-Hall-Debate-Briefing-for-MPs.pdf>

4

## ENSURE ACCOUNTABILITY OF SERVICE PROVIDERS

As proposed by Asylum Matters and the Scottish Refugee Council, devolved Governments to oversee the delivery of the AASC contracts and take responsibility for standards and inspection regimes and investigate safeguarding and vulnerability-related concerns, providing them with Home Office funding to perform this role. Similar arrangements should be made in England using appropriate local structures, such as Combined Local Authorities or Metro-Mayor

offices. Moreover, both the Statement of Requirements and 'Performance Management' regime for the new contracts should be placed in the public domain to allow for due scrutiny, increased transparency and accountability. Further, the Home Office must ensure that financial penalties are applied for contractors that fail to meet contractual obligations.

5

## INCREASE THE ROLE OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Again, in accordance with the Asylum Matters and the Scottish Refugee Council recommendations, Local Authorities ought to be given greater flexibility to determine where accommodation is procured, and it should be ensured that they have at least 5 working days to respond to property procurement notices in order to allow for appropriate

consultation with relevant services (as opposed to 72 hours at present). Where there are genuine concerns, the Local Authority should be able to refuse a request, and this should be respected by the Provider. Local Authorities should be resourced to undertake these procurement postcode checks and consultation with relevant local stakeholders.



6

## PREVENT HOMELESSNESS AND DESTITUTION

As proposed in the Asylum Matters and the Scottish Refugee Council recommendations, the move on period for newly recognised refugees must be extended to reduce the risk of homelessness and to support successful integration. In addition, AASC Housing Providers should be included in the list of public authorities with a duty to refer under the Homelessness Reduction Act.

In sum, Refugee Rights Europe, Meena Centre for Women and Children and the Baobab Project call on the British Home

Office to make every effort to urgently improve asylum accommodation and hold service providers to account. Asylum accommodation must not be part of the 'hostile environment'; it should be a welcoming, compassionate and supportive safe haven for individuals awaiting the outcome of their asylum claim. The universal right to an adequate standard of living, enshrined in Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, must become a reality for those seeking sanctuary in Britain, many of whom have fled unimaginable hardship in the country of origin and/or along their journey.

<sup>32</sup> <https://asylummatters.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/117/2018/09/Asylum-Accommodation-Contracts-Westminster-Hall-Debate-Briefing-for-MPs.pdf>

<sup>33</sup> <https://asylummatters.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/117/2018/09/Asylum-Accommodation-Contracts-Westminster-Hall-Debate-Briefing-for-MPs.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> <https://asylummatters.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/117/2018/09/Asylum-Accommodation-Contracts-Westminster-Hall-Debate-Briefing-for-MPs.pdf>





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