



REFUGEE RIGHTS
EUROPE

A HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT?

**DOCUMENTING THE LIVING SITUATION
FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS IN LONDON**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DATES OF RESEARCH

13-15 January 2018

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Based on original branding by
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www.meandyoucreate.com

SPECIAL THANKS TO...

The Lush Foundation for their generous support towards our work, making it all possible.

Refugee Rights Europe team members, volunteers, advisors and Board for continued support behind the scenes.

And above all, sincere gratitude to the individuals who took part in the study.



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INTRODUCTION

British asylum accommodation has been heavily criticised for its living standards over the past few years.

In 2012, the British Home Office made a decision to switch contractual provision of asylum housing from a number of smaller providers to six regional contracts. It would be run by three private companies (Serco, G4S and Clearsprings Group), with little to no previous experience administering asylum accommodation. This was with the alleged aim of cutting costs by an estimated £140 million. The outsourcing was executed under so called COMPASS contracts, originally set for

a five-year period but later extended for another two years until 2019.¹

THE COMMONS PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE DESCRIBED THE ACCOMMODATION PROVIDED AS “UNACCEPTABLY POOR FOR A VERY FRAGILE GROUP OF INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES.”

Two years after these contracts were signed, the Commons Public Accounts Committee described the accommodation provided as “unacceptably poor for a very fragile group of individuals and families.”² In early 2017, the Home Affairs Select Committee (under the chairmanship of MP Yvette Cooper) reiterated the concerns once again, stating that the contract system was not fit for purpose. The Committee called for major reform, describing the asylum accommodation provided by government contractors as a “disgrace” and said it is

shameful that very vulnerable people have been placed in these conditions.³

Along the same lines, a research study with asylum seekers conducted by advocacy-group Migrant Voice in Birmingham found poor health, mental health issues and high levels of stress allegedly caused by the poor standards in the accommodation centres.⁴ Meanwhile, several media reports from Kilburn, London, where more than 200 asylum-seekers are living in a six-storey hostel waiting to hear the outcomes of their asylum application, have highlighted unacceptable living conditions, high levels of frustration, and a lack of channels to report grievances due to being “fearful of speaking out.”⁵

One year on from the Home Affairs Select Committee’s report on the COMPASS contracts and asylum accommodation, Refugee Rights Europe set out to investigate and document the situation of asylum accommodation in one of the main asylum seeker accommodation centres in London. The research findings are outlined in this report.



¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/oct/27/uk-asylum-seekers-living-in-squalid-unsafe-slum-conditions>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/housing-network/2017/feb/02/squalour-asylum-accommodation-mps-report>

³ <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/public-accounts-committee/news/asylum-accommodation-substantive/>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/housing-network/2017/feb/02/squalour-asylum-accommodation-mps-report>

⁵ <http://camdennewjournal.com/article/investigation-more-than-200-asylum-seekers-left-in-house-of-horrors-in-kilburn>

METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

Four Refugee Rights Europe researchers conducted 33 semi-structured interviews in Arabic, Dari and English. In total, 97% of respondents were men and 3% were women.

The researchers were hoping to interview several of the women allegedly living with their children in one of the buildings, but due to lack of official access we were unable to invite additional women to take part in the survey.

Each member of the research team had field experience of

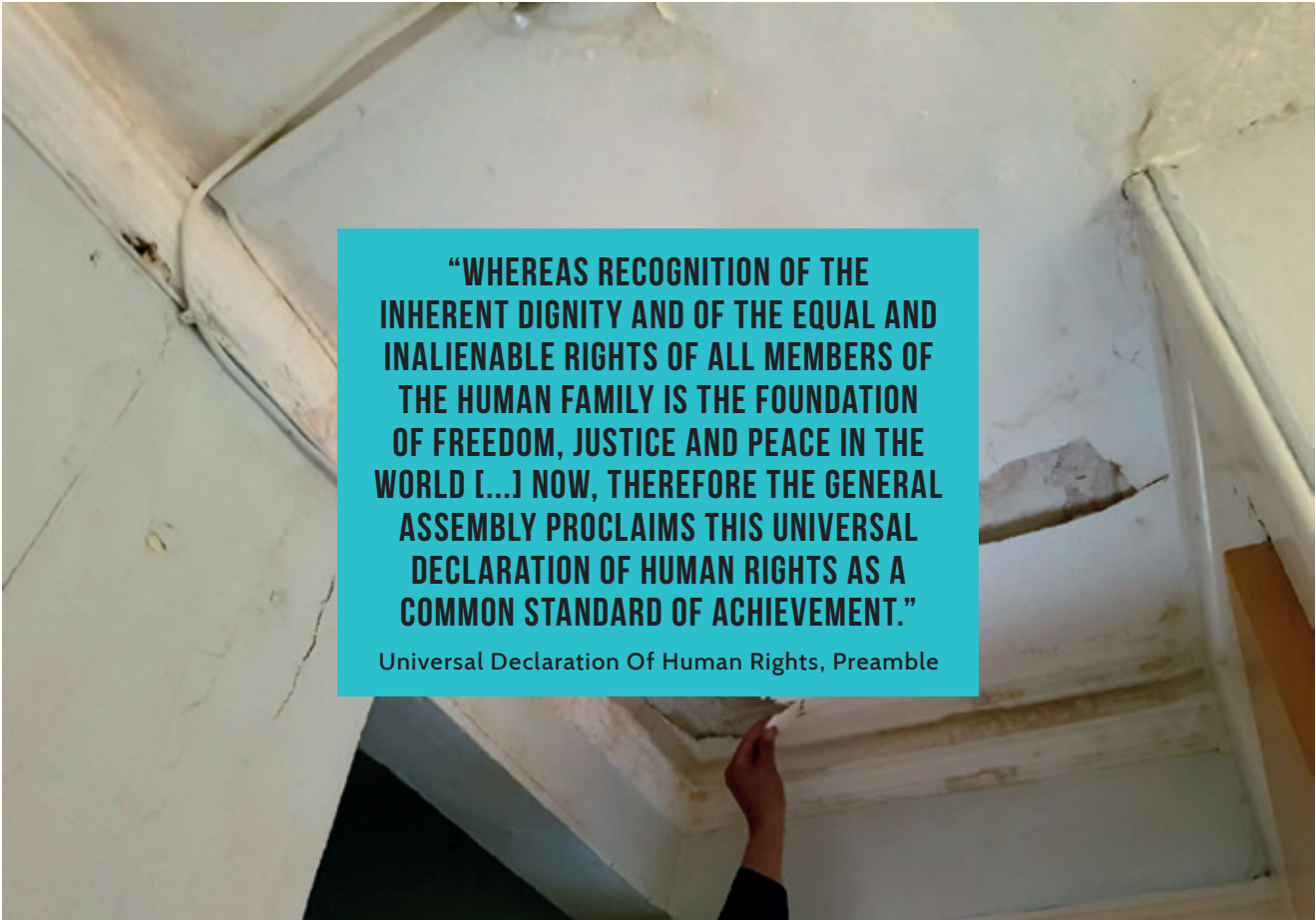
working with refugees and displaced people or similar groups. The researchers were recruited from Refugee Rights Europe's pool of researchers and included native speakers of all key languages. The study was guided by ethical checklists that were underpinned by data protection policies, child safeguarding policies and a risk register to ensure the security and dignity of all participants. Researchers were expected to ensure full and informed consent

EACH MEMBER OF THE RESEARCH TEAM HAD FIELD EXPERIENCE OF WORKING WITH REFUGEES AND DISPLACED PEOPLE OR SIMILAR GROUPS.

In most cases, Refugee Rights Europe adopts a methodology of random selection - using stratification and continuously monitoring

the breakdown of demographic groups within the sample throughout its research studies, to ensure that the final data is representative of a given situation. In the context of the asylum accommodation in London, we did not have official access to enter the building. We therefore surveyed as many individuals as possible outside the accommodation, using snowballing and bus stop methodologies. As a result, selection bias could not always be avoided, as we were unable to steer the sample as much as we would ideally have liked.

Nonetheless, we believe our research findings present several useful insights into the current situation for asylum seekers in Home Office accommodation in the UK, which has allowed us to develop a number of recommendations at the end of this report.



"WHEREAS RECOGNITION OF THE INHERENT DIGNITY AND OF THE EQUAL AND INALIENABLE RIGHTS OF ALL MEMBERS OF THE HUMAN FAMILY IS THE FOUNDATION OF FREEDOM, JUSTICE AND PEACE IN THE WORLD [...] NOW, THEREFORE THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY PROCLAIMS THIS UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AS A COMMON STANDARD OF ACHIEVEMENT."

Universal Declaration Of Human Rights, Preamble

A black plastic bag of trash is placed in a narrow hallway between a white wall on the left and a white radiator on the right. The floor is a grey, speckled material. The bag is full and crumpled, with its top tied. The hallway appears to be in a public building, possibly a school or office.

ARTICLE 1

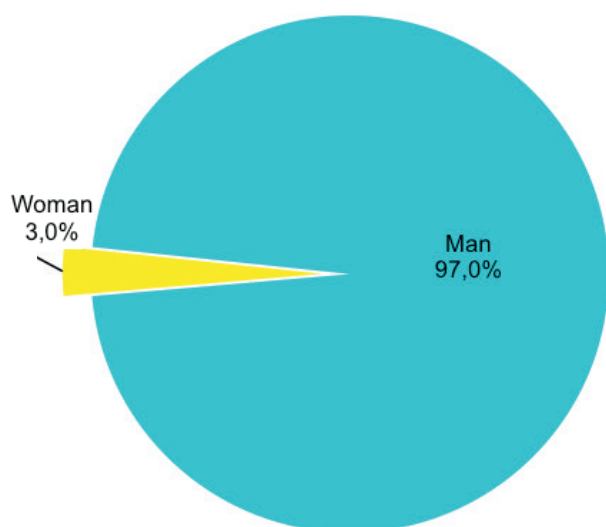
**ALL HUMAN BEINGS ARE BORN
FREE AND EQUAL IN DIGNITY AND
RIGHTS. THEY ARE ENDOWED
WITH REASON AND CONSCIENCE
AND SHOULD ACT TOWARDS
ONE ANOTHER IN A SPIRIT OF
BROTHERHOOD.**

ABOUT THE RESPONDENTS

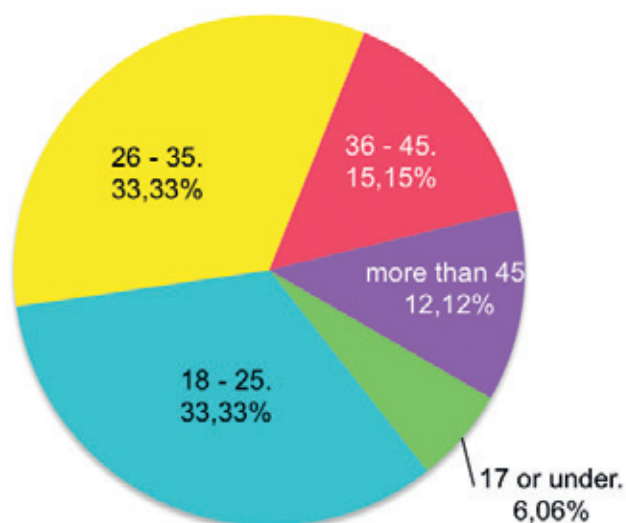
A total of 33 respondents took part in the study. 97% of them were men and boys, and one respondent was a woman.

The majority of respondents were aged between 18 and 35 years old. Two of the respondents said they were minors (17 and under).

ARE YOU MALE OR FEMALE?

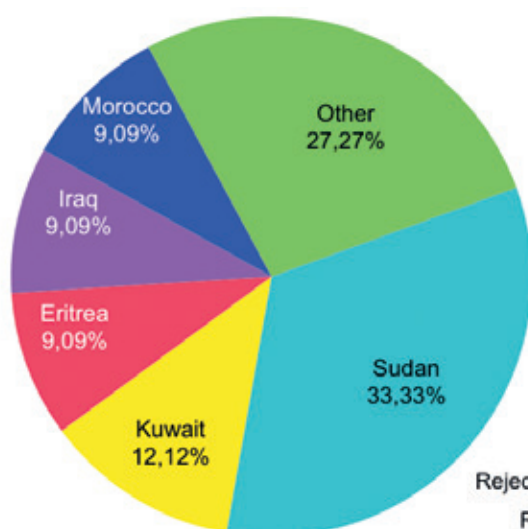


HOW OLD ARE YOU?

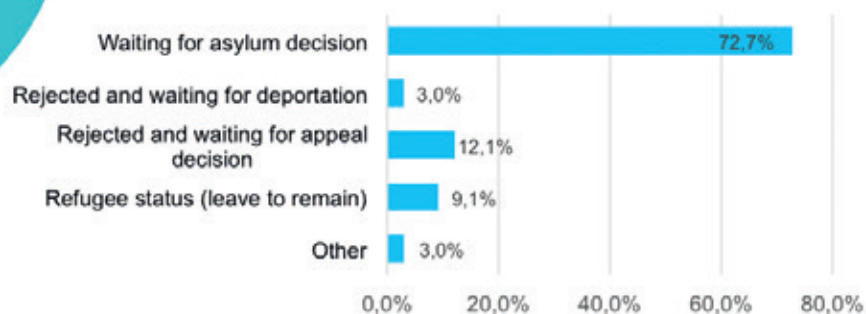


WHERE ARE YOU FROM?

33% of respondents were from Sudan, followed by 12% from Kuwait, 9% from Eritrea, 9% from Iraq, and 9% from Morocco. The sample included a small number of respondents from Afghanistan, DRC, Ethiopia, Iran, Nigeria, Sri Lanka and Syria.



WHAT IS YOUR CURRENT STATUS?



A photograph of a room with a window and a door. The window looks out onto a city skyline. The door is white and has some damage. A text box is overlaid on the image.

ARTICLE 3

EVERYONE HAS THE RIGHT TO LIFE,
LIBERTY AND SECURITY OF PERSON.



SAFETY AND SECURITY

When asked about their sense of safety inside the accommodation, some 16% said they feel 'safe' or 'very safe'. While 21% said they feel 'OK', it is concerning that a whole 64% felt 'unsafe' or 'very unsafe'.

One 17-year-old said: "I feel scared sometimes. I don't like this hostel, it is very bad." Another said: "I have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress because of what happened to me in detention in [my country of origin]. I don't sleep well here. It's very, very bad here for me – not just very bad."

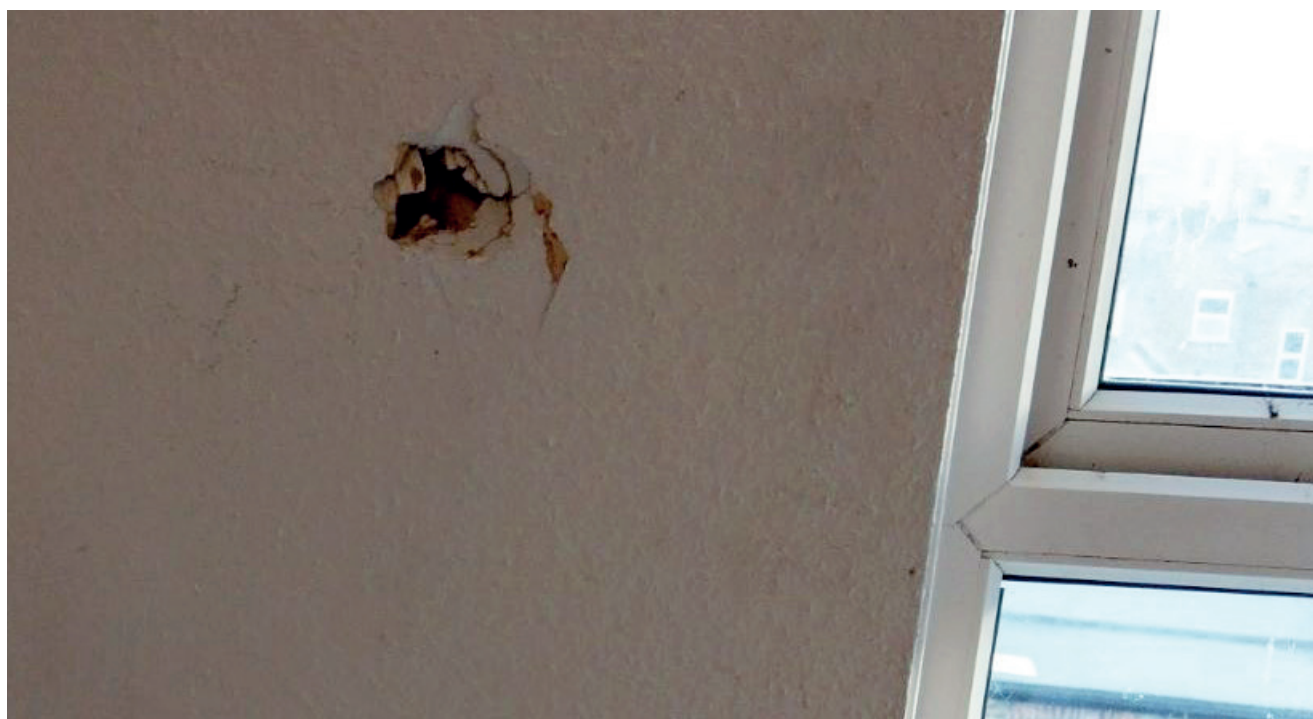
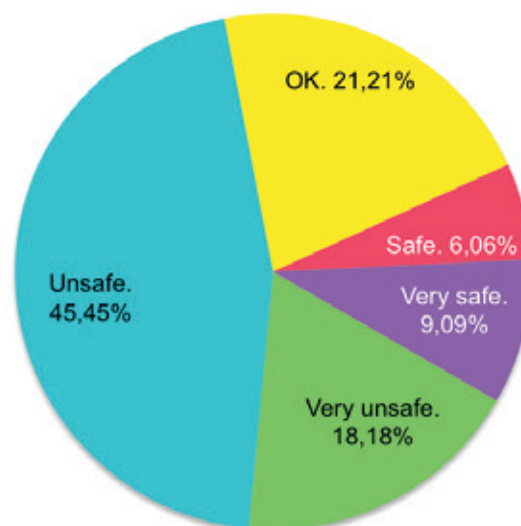
A KEY CONCERN THAT CAME UP IN MULTIPLE INTERVIEWS, WAS THE FACT THAT NON-RESIDENTS WOULD COME INTO THE BUILDINGS AT NIGHT.

A key concern that came up in multiple interviews, was the fact that non-residents would come into the buildings at night. On one occasion, someone who appeared to be a drug-user entered and attempted to commit suicide in one of the kitchens. "He didn't even live here. Blood was on the wall, the floor, everywhere; I was scared," said one of the youths we interviewed.

ONE 17-YEAR-OLD SAID: "I FEEL SCARED SOMETIMES. I DON'T LIKE THIS HOSTEL, IT IS VERY BAD."

On other occasions, non-residents would enter the building and threaten residents, or simply use the kitchens and hallways to sleep. For individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder, such events could be particularly difficult to cope with.

DO YOU FEEL SAFE INSIDE THE ACCOMMODATION?



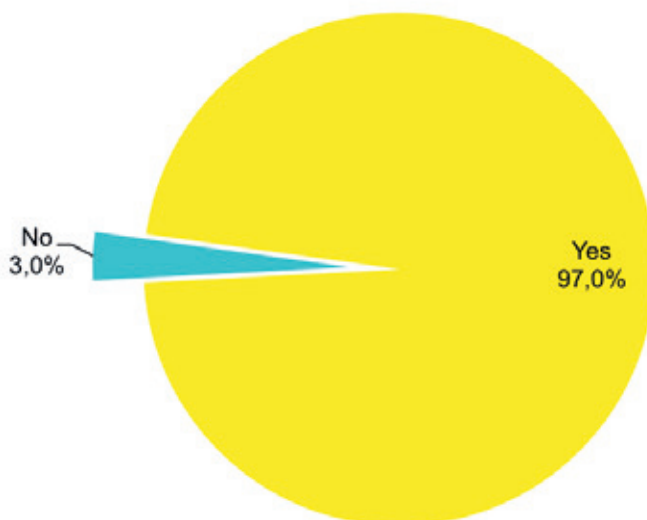
VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

97% had a functioning lock on their room. However, one respondent explained that this doesn't make him feel any safer, because one of his roommates was violent towards him. He had reported this to the management on a number of occasions, but they simply told him to call the police who would remove the roommate for a few nights before returning him to the accommodation again.

30% SAID THEY HAD EXPERIENCED VERBAL ABUSE IN THEIR ACCOMMODATION, BOTH BY FELLOW RESIDENTS AND BY THE MANAGEMENT OR STAFF.

30% said they had experienced verbal abuse in their accommodation, both by fellow residents and by the management or staff (such as cleaning staff). 30% said they had experienced verbal abuse in their accommodation, both by fellow residents and by the management or staff (such as cleaning staff). A number of respondents were under the impression that the cleaning staff may hold racist views. Sometimes this was expressed through abusive or hostile language in English, and other times the respondents were shouted at in a foreign European language which they couldn't understand.

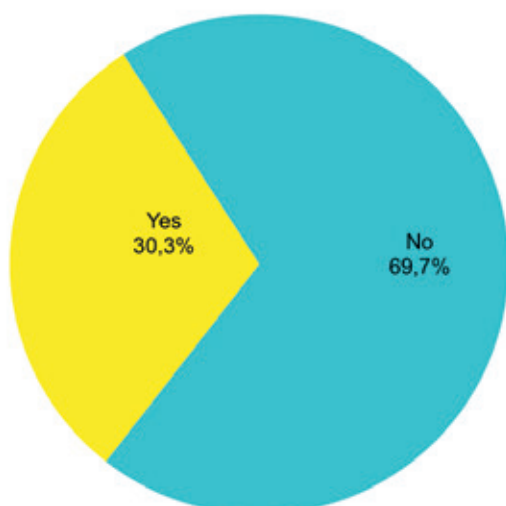
DO YOU HAVE A FUNCTIONING LOCK ON YOUR DOOR?



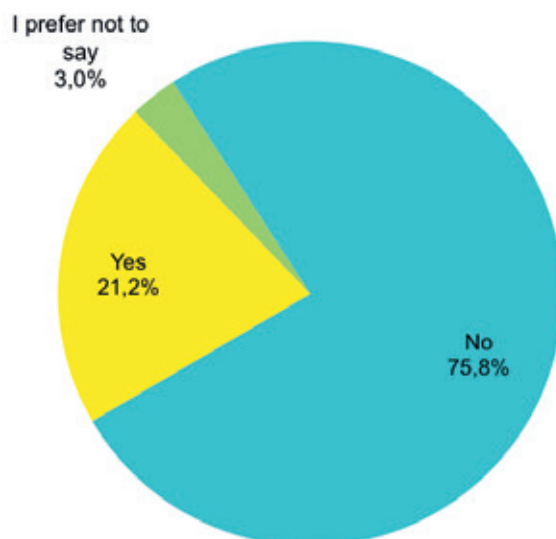
A NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS WERE UNDER THE IMPRESSION THAT THE CLEANING STAFF MAY HOLD RACIST VIEWS.

A slightly lower proportion, 21% said they had experienced physical violence inside the accommodation. 3% said they preferred not to say whether they had experienced physical violence. This type of violence had been perpetrated by other residents, and non-residents who would enter the building – usually at night – and threaten them. No physical violence by managers or staff was reported.

HAVE YOU EVER EXPERIENCED ANY FORM OF VERBAL ABUSE IN THE ACCOMMODATION?



HAVE YOU EVER EXPERIENCED ANY FORM OF PHYSICAL VIOLENCE IN THE ACCOMMODATION?



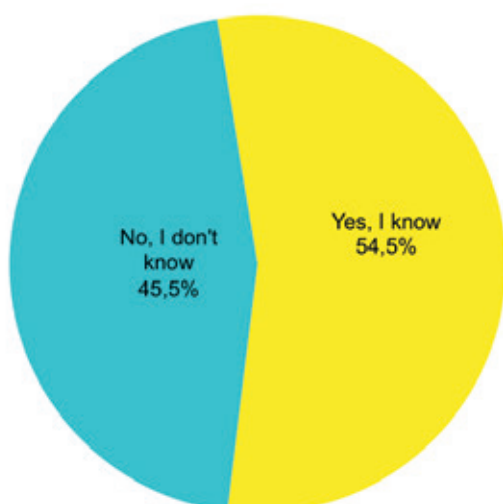
FIRE SAFETY

46% of respondents did not know where the fire exit was located. Our researchers were told that there are fire extinguishers in each kitchen, but some respondents were not aware of the positioning of these.

MULTIPLE RESPONDENTS HAD EXPERIENCED ONE OR MORE FIRES IN THE ACCOMMODATION.

Multiple respondents had experienced one or more fires in the accommodation. On one occasion, they explained, the fire started in a basement storage room and forced all residents to evacuate the building. Respondents described the experience as uncomfortable.

DO YOU KNOW WHERE THE FIRE EXIT IS?



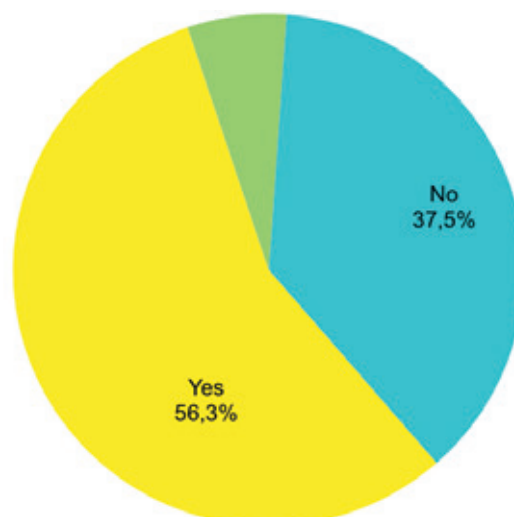
EQUIPMENT AND REPAIRS

At the time of the study, two washing machines were allegedly broken and out of use in the accommodation. According to the respondents, one had been broken for about six months, and the other one for two months. This had left the approximately 200 residents with only two working washing machines, which was reported to be a source of tension. Several of the hotplates on the stoves were not working, and respondents said this had been the case for an extended period of time.

One respondent reported that they had recently been left for some three days without hot water in the building, which made it difficult to take a shower during the winter months. A number of taps were broken in the toilets and bathrooms.

56% of respondents said something was broken in their room when they first moved in.

WAS ANYTHING BROKEN IN YOUR ROOM WHEN YOU MOVED IN?



VERMIN

There appears to be a widespread problem with vermin in the accommodation. 82% of respondents said there were mice in their rooms. One respondent explained how the mice used to climb up his curtains and crawl across his clothing. One respondent said: "There are too many mice. Look at this, they ate my bag!". 61% said they had seen one or more rats in the accommodation, but in most instances it appears that the rats were in the backyard rather than inside the building. Many respondents told the researchers about cockroaches in the kitchen.

One man said he sometimes finds cockroaches in the microwave oven or the cupboards. Others exclaimed: "There are bugs and

ONE MAN SAID HE SOMETIMES FINDS COCKROACHES IN THE MICROWAVE OVEN OR THE CUPBOARDS.

cockroaches. Too much in the kitchen!", and "The kitchen is full of cockroaches. It's very horrible."



MOULD AND AIR QUALITY

Respondents said there were mould and humidity issues in bathrooms and bedrooms. Photos shared with the research team appear to corroborate this information. One respondent explained that he is experiencing allergies and itchiness in his eyes and nose, which he believes is due to mould in his room.

RESPONDENTS SAID THERE WERE MOULD AND HUMIDITY ISSUES IN BATHROOMS AND BEDROOMS.

He said the symptoms worsened after one of the fires which filled his room with smoke and a strong odour that remained for several days. He reported his concerns about the mould to the management but they told him that this is a normal condition in the UK.



ARTICLE 25(1)

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 CARE AND
NECESSARY SOCIAL SERVICES,
AND THE RIGHT TO SECURITY IN
THE EVENT OF UNEMPLOYMENT,
SICKNESS, DISABILITY, WIDOWHOOD,
OLD AGE OR OTHER LACK OF
LIVELIHOOD IN CIRCUMSTANCES
BEYOND HIS CONTROL.



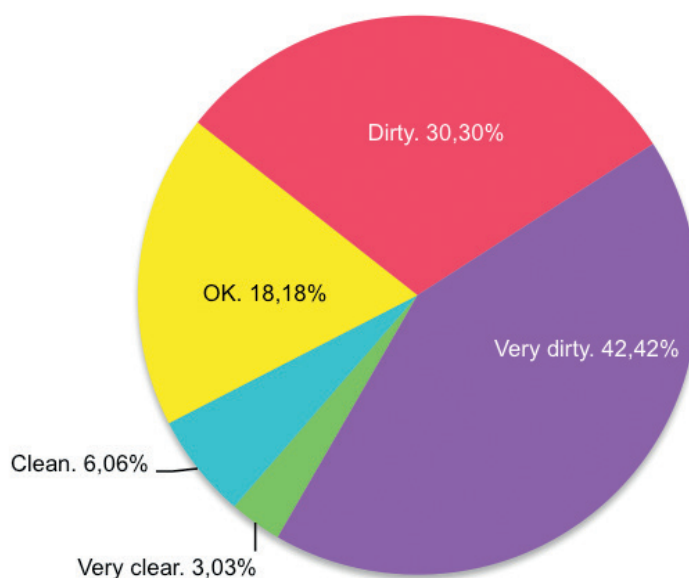
CLEANLINESS

73% said their accommodation was 'dirty' or 'very dirty' when they moved in. 9% said it was 'clean' or 'very clean', and 18% said it was 'OK'.

PHOTOS SHARED WITH THE RESEARCHERS APPEAR TO CORROBORATE THIS VIEW, DEPICTING UNSANITARY LEVELS OF MOULD AND GRIME ACROSS CEILINGS, DIRT AROUND WINDOWS, AND UNSANITARY BATHROOMS AND KITCHENS.

While the cleanliness of the individual rooms appears to be an issue of concern, respondents appeared even more worried about the state of the common areas, including the kitchens, bathrooms and hallways. Respondents said that cleaning staff attend the building regularly, but it continues to be below reasonable standards in terms of cleanliness. Photos shared with the researchers appear to corroborate this view, depicting unsanitary levels of mould and grime across ceilings, dirt around windows, and unsanitary bathrooms and kitchens.

HOW CLEAN WAS YOUR ACCOMMODATION WHEN YOU MOVED IN?



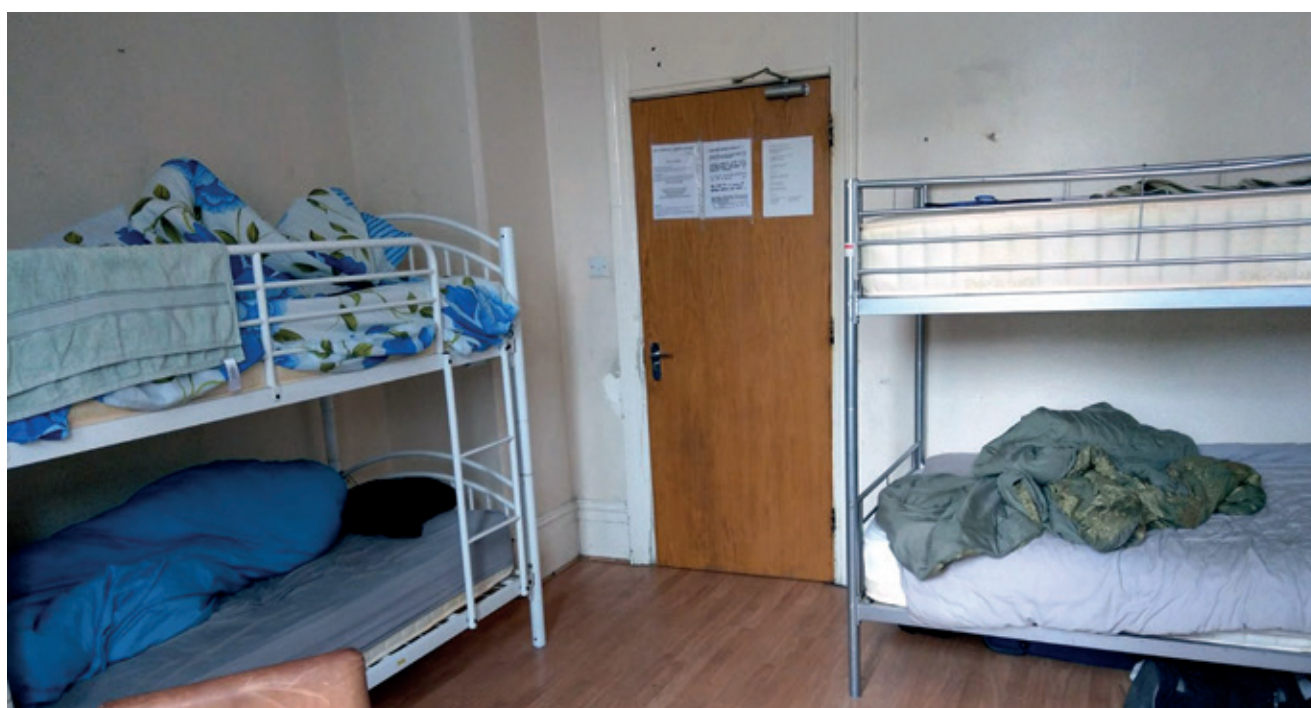
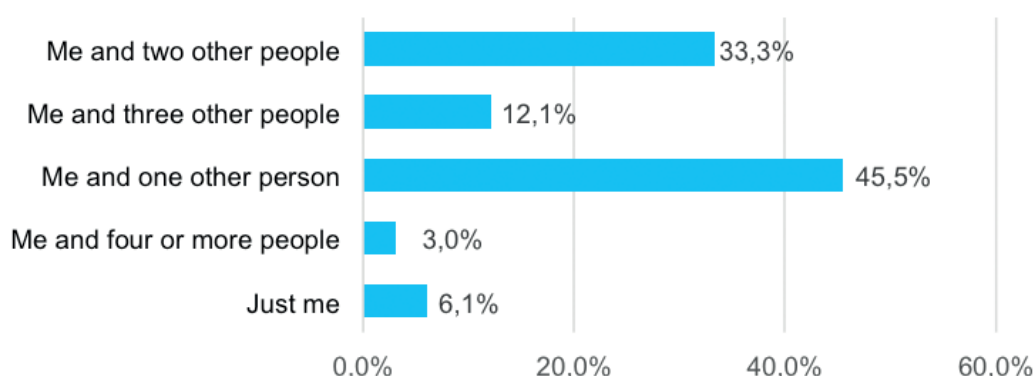
OVERCROWDING

There was a sense of overcrowding in the accommodation. One youth explained that he was sharing a small room measuring approximately ten square meters with one other, leaving little space for personal belongings. Only two respondents were staying in a room on their own; one of them explained that he had requested this due to his post-traumatic stress disorder which makes him shout in panic at night, and woke up his former roommates. He waited several months to be moved to his own room.

ONE YOUTH EXPLAINED THAT HE WAS SHARING A SMALL ROOM MEASURING APPROXIMATELY TEN SQUARE METERS WITH ONE OTHERS, LEAVING LITTLE SPACE FOR PERSONAL BELONGINGS.

Overall, the standard of living appears inadequate to the health, safety and wellbeing of residents. One respondent suggested: "We can't stay like this. I already asked my doctor to write to the Home Office. For me it's not good but they say it is good for us."

HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE SHARING YOUR ROOM?





ARTICLE 28

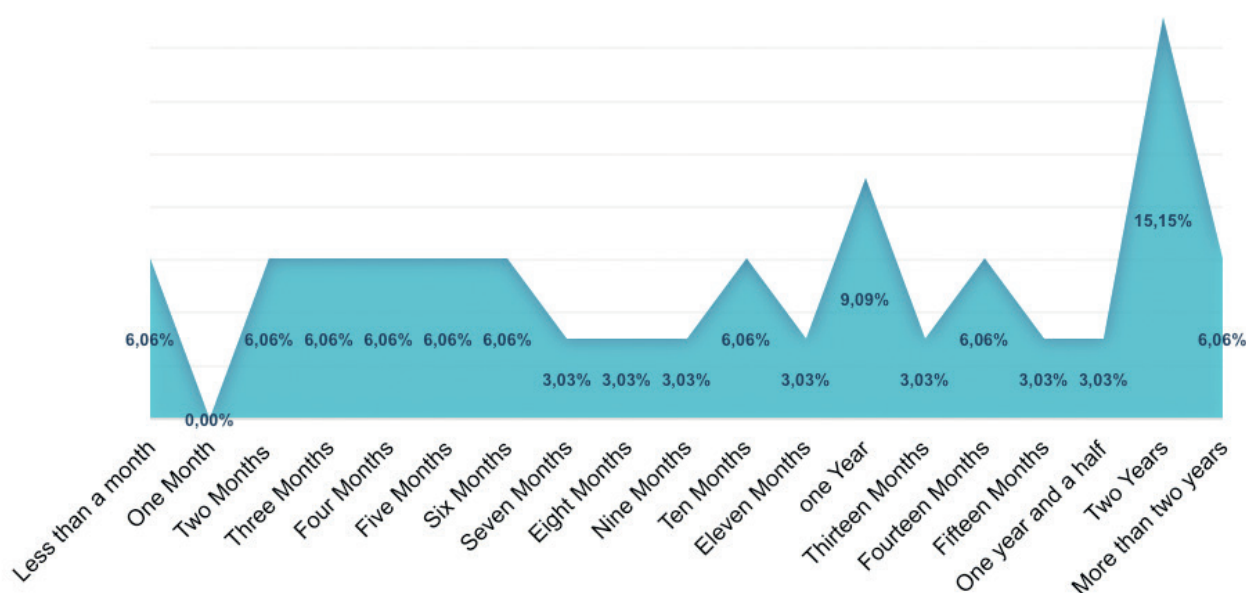
EVERYONE IS ENTITLED TO A SOCIAL
AND INTERNATIONAL ORDER IN
WHICH THE RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS
SET FORTH IN THIS DECLARATION
CAN BE FULLY REALIZED.

Due to all of the aforementioned factors, the accommodation appears highly unsuitable for anything other than 'emergency accommodation' or 'initial accommodation' for a small number of nights. However, it appears that respondents had been staying in the building for extended periods of time, with an average duration of 11.6 months.

49% OF RESPONDENTS SAID THEY WOULD NOT FEEL COMFORTABLE SPEAKING TO ANYONE ABOUT PROBLEMS EXPERIENCED IN THEIR ACCOMMODATION.

In addition, the asylum seekers interviewed appear to have little to no opportunity to change their current situation. 49% of respondents said they would not feel comfortable speaking to anyone about problems experienced in their accommodation.

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN STAYING IN THIS ACCOMMODATION?



For some, this hesitance was rooted in a fear of losing their accommodation, whilst others did not feel comfortable communicating in English. For most respondents, however, the main reluctance appears to have been caused by the fact that their previous attempts to report grievances had not had any positive outcome.

There appeared to be some confusion about the roles and responsibilities of different staff members operating in the building. Some respondents seem to have requested help from cleaning staff, who simply weren't in a position to address the more overarching issues. Others had sought help from security staff, whilst a number had attempted to

“THE MANAGER DOES NOT SPEAK NICELY TO US. THERE ARE MANY PROBLEMS IN OUR ACCOMMODATION BUT SHE DOESN'T LISTEN. [THE MANAGER] SPEAKS TO US LIKE CHILDREN AND SOMETIMES SHOUTS AT US.”

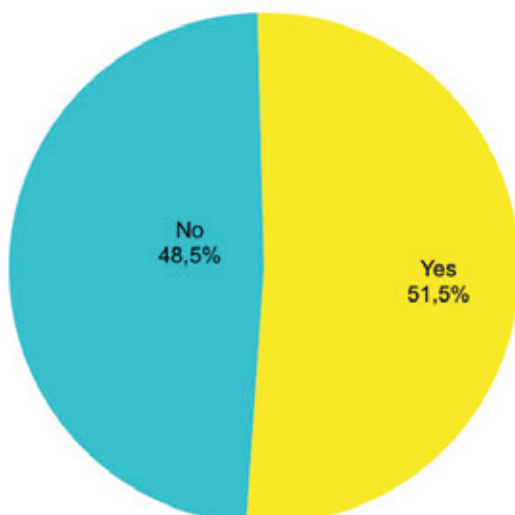
speak to the manager directly. The latter explained: “The manager does not speak nicely to us. There are many problems in our accommodation but she doesn't listen. [The manager] speaks to us like children and sometimes shouts at us.” Another respondent said: “The [manager] didn't understand the people here. The manager doesn't listen if you try to go and talk to them. They would give a [telephone] number for someone else and says it's not their job. Sometimes the security people help us.” A third respondent recounted: “When we ask them [the office staff] something they say they will do something but then they never come back.”

Respondents did not appear aware of their rights and opportunities to change their situation. The majority of respondents (82%) specifically recalled signing a document, some form of contract, upon moving in to the accommodation. Worryingly, only 44% of them said they understood the contents of the documents they had signed.

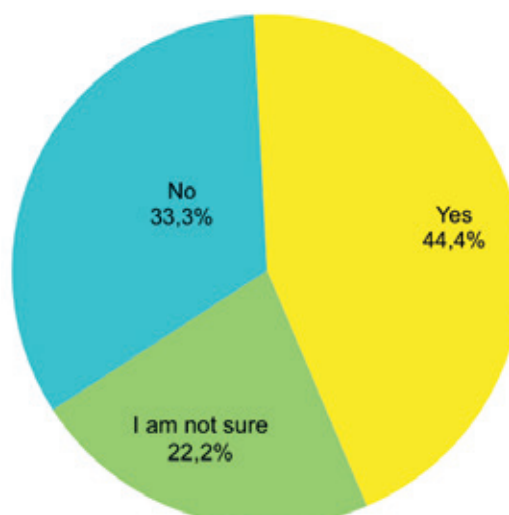
WORRYINGLY, ONLY 44% OF THEM SAID THEY UNDERSTOOD THE CONTENTS OF THE DOCUMENTS THEY HAD SIGNED.

A third of the respondents had previously slept in the streets since arriving in the UK, and therefore knew about such difficulties first-hand. The amount of time spent in destitution ranged from two nights to nine months.

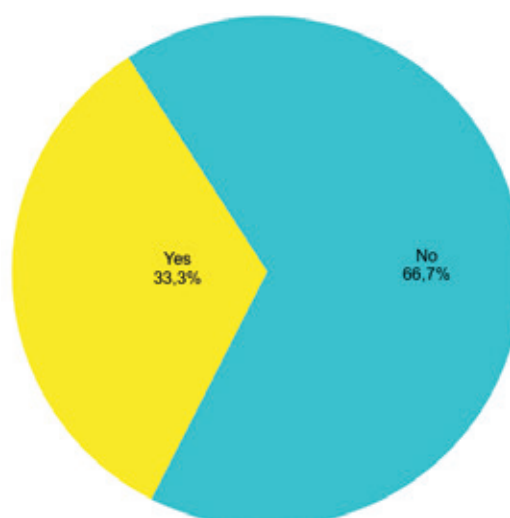
DO YOU FEEL COMFORTABLE REPORTING PROBLEMS WITH YOUR ACCOMMODATION?



DID YOU UNDERSTAND THE CONTENTS OF THE DOCUMENT YOU SIGNED?



HAVE YOU BEEN DESTITUTE (SLEEPING IN THE STREETS) SINCE ARRIVING IN THE UK?



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

One year on from the Home Affairs Select Committee's report on the COMPASS contracts and asylum accommodation, our research findings generated through this small pilot study indicate that a number of serious concerns remain unresolved.

Based on the research findings, a number of overarching recommendations are proposed in view of future asylum accommodation contracts issued by the Home Office:

SECURITY

Asylum accommodation must be a safe haven for individuals awaiting the outcome of their asylum claim. The accommodation provider must therefore ensure that the wellbeing of its clients is safeguarded. The accommodation must not be open to non-residents coming in to spend the

night in the communal areas, or use the premises for any dubious purposes. Residents must not be forced to share a room with someone engaged in criminal or anti-social behaviour; such residents must be removed and dealt with separately.

SAFETY AND LIVING STANDARDS

The building hosting asylum seekers must be inspected regularly for safety and security. Broken equipment, disintegrating ceilings and walls must be swiftly repaired once reported, and residents must not be turned away or reprimanded when attempting to report major issues within the building.

HEALTH

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 bathrooms and kitchens must be kept at reasonable standards through professional and appropriate cleaning.

INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

A functioning grievance procedure must be made accessible to residents. 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. Serious

concerns about criminal activity and serious threats must be listened to and addressed accordingly to ensure that the person reporting such incidents is not exposed to additional threats following their reporting.

LENGTH OF TIME IN EMERGENCY ACCOMMODATION

So-called 'initial accommodation' mustn't be used to host asylum seekers for an extended period of time. The Home Office must ensure that individuals are not exposed to sub-par living conditions for more than a short 'emergency' period. In sum, ahead of any new contracts being signed between the

Home Office and private companies taking responsibility for asylum accommodation in London and the rest of the UK, the issues highlighted in this report must be addressed to ensure any future accommodation provision for asylum seekers is dignified and humane.

ARTICLE 30

NOTHING IN THIS DECLARATION MAY
BE INTERPRETED AS IMPLYING FOR
ANY STATE, GROUP OR PERSON ANY
RIGHT TO ENGAGE IN ANY ACTIVITY
OR TO PERFORM ANY ACT AIMED AT
THE DESTRUCTION OF ANY OF THE
RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS SET FORTH
HEREIN.



