Submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities - call for inputs on the human rights of migrants with disabilities

30 Oct 2026

Anaka Women's Collective, based in Belfast, is led predominantly by women with direct experience of the UK's hostile immigration system. Its network of over 450 women and families with 30 different nationalities who use their collective skills to educate, support, advocate and celebrate each other.

Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR) is a human rights NGO founded in Belfast in 2006. PPR supports people to use human rights as tools to fight for economic, social and environmental changes that improve their lives, in the areas of housing, mental health and more.

PPR has been organising alongside asylum seekers and refugees in the north since 2016 in a number of campaigns to improve housing, challenge enforced destitution and campaign against the employment ban. Working jointly with Anaka in asylum hotels from 2021, PPR's 'Kind Economy' campaign emerged in the spring of 2022, highlighting both asylum seekers' voices and the local solidarity offered to counterbalance the UK Home Office's hostile environment polices. Both organisations continue to support asylum seekers and refugees to access their rights in the face of a range of obstacles and challenges.

Anaka and PPR submit the following information to the Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities Ms. Heba Hagrass's call for inputs.

1. Key barriers and protection gaps for migrants with disabilities, including in migration laws, policies and practices and migration and asylum governance systems

Immigration and asylum are reserved matters by the UK government, under the remit of the UK Home Office. Devolved matters for the Northern Ireland Executive (the Executive) include justice, policing, health, transport and immigration.

Home Office (including Mears and Migrant Help)

With regard to the asylum system, under the current UK Home Office contracts, the private company Mears is responsible for the provision and quality of accommodation. The Home Office contract a voluntary organisation, Migrant Help for administrative arrangements (such as managing complaints about accommodation standards). This arrangement contains a critical conflict of interest, however, as Migrant Help is also the organisation which is also responsible for handling advice and eligibility matters around people's asylum claims. This conflict effectively acts as a deterrent to asylum seekers who do not wish to raise accommodation complaints to an organisation involved in any way with their asylum application.

In addition to the conflict of interest, Migrant Help's complaints system is long and complex (the 'issue reporting' part of schedule 2 (Statement of Requirements) from Migrant Help's Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility Support contract with the Home Office is 13 pages long, with a further 3 pages of flow charts in Annex D). This acts as another deterrent to people's ability to hold the Home Office to account for their conditions and treatment while in the asylum system.

Impact of the housing shortage: Home Office use of hotels as asylum accommodation

Amidst a growing housing shortage, from mid-2021 Mears began placing increasing numbers of people in hotels while their claims were being processed. Here they faced breaches of a host of rights. As PPR reported in May 2022, in the asylum hotels:

> "there appear to be numerous blockages to people's right to highest attainable standard of health… With regard to people with disabilities, at least one hotel (Camera House) does not have a working lift, yet disabled or mobility-impaired people have been placed there, with serious fire safety and other ramifications. In other places, wheelchair-bound people have been placed in rooms where there is insufficient space for their chair to move properly."

By early 2023 PPR and Anaka Women's Collective had supported residents to submit more than 50 complaints about their experiences directly to the Home Office, Mears Group, Migrant Help and the Executive. PPR also sent these to statutory oversight bodies (Public Services Ombudsman, Commissioner for Children and Young People, Human Rights Commission, Equality Commission).

PPR also engaged parliamentary authorities on these issues, for instance in a May 2023 briefing to the UK House of Lords:

> "accounts have included families of five and six people being housed in a single, windowless hotel room; **disabled people being placed in rooms that are only accessible by stairs**; **wheelchair-bound people being placed in rooms that are too small for the wheelchair to enter, requiring the person to be lifted about the room**

and into the bathroom by family members; children regularly going hungry at night due to early closing time of the dining rooms after the evening meal, coupled with the failure to provide milk or snacks; people on medication for serious conditions being physically prevented from taking food into their rooms to take with their overnight or early morning round of pills to prevent stomach upset, as per medical advice; lifts being reserved for staff only, despite the presence of elderly, pregnant and disabled residents; and outbreaks of skin ailments due to hotel management's failure to fix broken washing machines or provide alternatives for people to keep their clothes clean."

Devolved authorities

Access to adequate housing and support upon receiving refugee status. PPR's April 2024 response to the UNHCR Asylum Support Move-on Period survey highlighted its concerns for people living with disabilities amongst the community of newly recognised refugees:

> "Responsibility for housing people with refugee status passes to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive; both NIHE and Mears literally advise people to turn up at NIHE offices on the day of their eviction, with their families and belongings, and wait for NIHE to arrange something for them. People have done so only to wait the entire day. Many people are simply moved to different hotels – often far from their children's schools, or from GPs or consultants who are giving them much-needed care – with no access to kitchens or laundry facilities, and no money. People living with disabilities have been placed in unsuitable or inaccessible accommodation."

Despite purported information-sharing arrangements between the Home Office and the devolved statutory housing authorities, to this day there appears to be little or no preparation to take on the accommodation needs of refugees or their household members with disabilities. Once someone's asylum application has been granted, they must effectively initiate the battle for suitable accommodation adequate to their needs all over again.

PPR has repeatedly recommended measures by local authorities to avoid placing people in this situation. PPR's January 2025 submission to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights before the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland's February 2025 hearing said:

> "our work with families seeking international protection and newly-recognised refugees indicates that they would greatly benefit from provision of a social care assessment upon their arrival in NI. Many families we have worked with include disabled adults or adults with long term health conditions that need specific support to manage them, as well as physically disabled children and those of require additional support because of a learning disability, autism or other neurodiverse experiences. Despite this, we have on multiple occasions observed that Mears, the UK Home Office accommodation provider has failed to assess and provide for the needs of disabled people; examples are families with non-mobile children housed on upper

> floors, families with multiple wheelchair users confined to one room, inaccessible bathing and toileting facilities and individuals with heart problems housed on upper floors without lift access. To compound this, waiting lists for occupational therapy assessments are long, and families can often be left waiting several months before their needs are appropriately identified."
>
> "Families in and those newly emerging from the asylum system are subjected to very frequent moves. For too many families with particular needs – family members living with disabilities or chronic health problems, for instance – this means that they have to fight the same battles for suitable and accessible accommodation over and over again."
>
> "A mechanism for regular social care assessment would ensure that accommodation and other providers are fully informed of a family's situation and can take that into account in decision-making about their accommodation, without forcing them to begin the process from scratch each and every time they are moved. It would also ensure that people living with disabilities or health conditions would not risk falling through the cracks in the system, but instead have their needs fully taken into account by all duty bearers."

PPR recommended that the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights ask UK (and through them, devolved) authorities the following:

> "what steps will the Department of Health and Social Care take to ensure that the accessibility needs and rights to health of disabled people seeking international protection are met in a timely fashion?"

The question remains unanswered and the outcome unclear.

2. How does disability shape experiences at different stages of migration, including influencing … inclusion and access to essential services, support, labour markets and living conditions in destination countries?

As described above, with regard to access to health care, PPR's May 2022 reporting on conditions in asylum hotels – including placing of disabled people in multi-storey hotels without lifts or in rooms too small for their wheelchairs – focused on access to health care at that time:

> "In terms of health care provision, residents reported not having been given health cards or registered with GP services, so that the only available health care, even to address the above concerns, was A&E [accident and emergency]."

In the following months activists in the Lift the Ban and Kind Economy campaigns supported by PPR, and in Anaka Women's Collective, worked with hotel residents to begin their own

monitoring in efforts to hold local health, education, transport and other authorities accountable to both local and international standards. The same issue continued to be raised by residents in asylum hotels:

> "Some residents reported suffering from pre-existing medical conditions, which were made worse because they have been unable to access local health ca*re: "[my] husband has chronic disk and back pain issues but no help was provided"* noted one resident in a complaint to Mears Group."

Improvements in signposting residents in the hotels to public services and some efforts, particularly outreach to families with children under 5, resulted in asylum seekers facing fewer barriers in accessing GP services from late 2022. Yet other issues remained, even as the use of hotels as asylum accommodation declined from late 2023.

As PPR highlighted in its May 2026 joint submission to the Right to Food-UK Commission, high disability rates are amongst the factors driving higher persistent poverty here as compared to other regions of the UK, according to NI's Public Health Agency. The charity Trussell Trust's March 2026 Northern Ireland report noted (p. 35) that disability remained the most common factor underpinning food bank use in 2024; while 34% of the population as a whole were living with a disability, this was true of 79% of people referred to Trussell foodbanks.

In this context, women with experience of the asylum system, and participating in the Anaka Women's Collective, took part in a workshop organised and facilitated by Grow NI -- a community gardening organisation that combats the isolation of marginalised groups through safe, shared, socially inclusive growing spaces across Belfast -- in early 2025. The joint submission highlighted the issues the women raised, which included barriers (affecting even people without disabilities, but more impactful on those with) to accessing affordable halal food:

> "Halal shops are few, in some areas there aren't any (especially in West and East Belfast). Where there are Halal shops they are really expensive, usually at least double what you pay in supermarkets. It is sometimes **two bus journeys** to get to a Halal shop, (a day ticket is now almost £5) - this takes time and money so you go maybe once a fortnight or once a month. And if you're going irregularly and buying bigger quantities it is **so heavy to carry**. Supermarkets sometimes have a selection of Halal and other culturally diverse foods, however it varies greatly and even supermarkets are hard to get to if you don't have a car."

***

As demonstrated by the above, PPR and its partner organisations have tried to use a whole range of mechanisms to engage both UK and devolved authorities in improving the situation of asylum seekers and refugees with disabilities here. The work is ongoing.