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Briefing paper: children in the asylum system in NI

Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR) is a small human rights NGO founded in 2006, working with marginalised groups to help them turn international human rights standards into grassroots tools for economic, social and environmental change. Since 2016 PPR have been supporting people seeking international protection in NI to campaign for the opportunity to lead dignified and secure lives.

Findings from early work with asylum seekers

In November 2018, for instance, a group of refugees and people seeking asylum here carried out a survey amongst 70 asylum seekers in Belfast. The [findings](#) revealed that nearly four out of ten adults seeking safety were accompanied by their children. Amongst this group, 88% of parents stated they could not afford the costs -- basic items such as food and clothing along with transport, recreational activities, and school trips -- associated with raising a family. Over one third of parents said they had been forced to change their child's school due to relocation by the Home Office. As well as disrupting the child's education and integration, such moves caused financial hardship (the school uniform grant is only available once a year, so families made to relocate during the school year were forced to pay for the new uniform out of their weekly allowance).

Three quarters of those parents reported they experienced anxiety, isolation, and depression or felt they could not cope with daily activities. In part, they reported, this was because they struggled with being unable to afford things like extracurricular activities, sports and learning musical instruments. Parents said they believed that being able to participate equally in school and out of school activities was vital to their child's education, development, and integration into their new community; and they felt that their children did not respect them as they were unable to afford even basic things like school uniforms or bus fare. Additional sources reveal particular problems faced by older children and youths -- for instance in accessing funding for the higher education places they had won, due to their status as asylum seekers.

The emerging use of hotels as 'contingency accommodation'

At the time of the 2018 research, asylum seekers were generally living in 'dispersal accommodation' in houses and flats, mostly in Belfast. This began to change in mid-2021, when the Home Office (through its contracted asylum accommodation provider Mears Group) began placing people in hostels set up in hotels. In June 2021, according to Home Office information obtained by Freedom of Information request, there were 14 people in this 'contingency accommodation'; by December 2021 this had risen to 809 people (168 of them children under the age of 18). At end March 2023, Home Office statistics indicated that there

were 3,030 asylum seekers and dependents in NI, and of them 1,014 were living in 'contingency accommodation' across around 22 hostels around the north.

PPR began working with people placed in these hostels in late 2021 / early 2022, alongside Anaka Women's Collective. (It is important to note that at that point hotels had been recognised as wholly unsuitable for lengthy stays, particularly for families; the UK government's [Homelessness code of guidance for local authorities](#), for instance, called such accommodation "particularly detrimental to the health and development of children" and recommended it be used for families in particular "only as a last resort and then only for a maximum of 6 weeks". A 2021 [report](#) by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, published in May 2022, recommended that the Home Office "develop realistic plans to end the use of hotels for contingency asylum accommodation".)

Contact with families [revealed](#) that people placed in hotels were largely deprived of interaction with local neighbours. They lacked indoor or outdoor communal space or play facilities for their children; and in almost all cases were unable to store food or cook anything for themselves or their children. As the spaces are generally very small, families were often split up amongst several different rooms, at times even on different floors. Many children were not enrolled in school and felt acutely the lack of that comforting daily routine and structure. PPR and Anaka recognised that the resulting blockages to normal family life, local interactions and integration, and the inability to do the most basic things for themselves and their families, violated a host of internationally recognised human rights. The conditions -- which for some families continued for up to a year and more -- also risked causing additional harm to people who already traumatised on their journeys or by the events and environments from which they fled.

For Ramadan in spring 2022, campaigners and civil society allies hosted a series of weekly Iftar meals for fasting Muslims and their children in contingency accommodation. The last of the weekly meals was open by invitation, and elected officials, representatives from the Departments of Justice and Finance and people from a range of organisations heard first hand asylum seekers' accounts of the difficulties they were facing. These accounts helped to inform the important [work by Children's Law Centre and South Tyrone Empowerment Programme](#) drawing international attention to the issue. For its part PPR published a series of [reports](#) highlighting the emerging use of hotels as asylum hostels and the rights breaches reported by people placed there.

Over the summer of 2022 the emerging Kind Economy network of civil society groups worked to offer alternatives to the hostile environment fostered by the Home Office, engaging with asylum seekers in the hostels through art, [outings](#), [food](#) and other activities. By autumn 2022 residents felt it important to begin systematically documenting the range of human rights breaches they were facing in the hostels. Over 150 people took part in biweekly meetings collating and prioritising issues. A number of individuals wrote and submitted formal complaints about their experiences to the relevant authorities and oversight bodies.

On 14 October asylum seekers hosted a [meeting](#) of supporters as well as duty bearers including the Departments of Education, Health and Infrastructure and the Executive Office, as well as elected officials from Belfast City Council and the NI Assembly and representatives

of oversight bodies. Residents explained the main issues they were confronting and proposed recommendations for change. They described the impact of overcrowded, cramped and inappropriate [living conditions](#). (The hotel rooms are generally small, 2-person rooms. For families, this means that they face overcrowding; or that parents are split up, each in a different room with one or more children. In some cases, older children have been reportedly placed in rooms on their own. The rooms may or may not be in the same area or on the same floor of the hotel. This substantially disrupts people's ability to enjoy the right to privacy and to a family life. Even more serious, [widespread accounts](#) of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children going missing from UK hotels attest to the system's enormous failings in protection and safeguarding.)

People described their [health concerns](#), including weight loss and failure to thrive amongst children due to inappropriate food. Parents with babies reported having to go repeatedly to ask for bottles to be heated in the kitchen, for instance, while those with toddlers or older children found that they did not necessarily like the prepared meals, which could include fried, spicy or unfamiliar food; and that they frequently felt hungry between the set meal times. Parents struggled to ensure a varied diet for their children due to lack of readily available fresh fruit and other fresh food.

Parents also worried about the impact on children's physical and mental wellbeing and development of not having anywhere to play together, inside or out. (Hotel residents do not have access to communal areas other than the dining rooms during meal times. Parents report that children are not allowed to play in the corridors, and that there is no safe outdoor play space.) In some cases children with disabilities were placed in rooms [too small for their wheelchairs](#) or with other serious suitability and accessibility issues; families reported that their difficulties were also exacerbated by obstacles in fully accessing the health care and support they so badly need, due to lack of information sharing amongst authorities, inability to pay for transport to appointments and a host of other issues.

While residents reported some progress since the previous spring in securing school places for primary aged children, [secondary education places](#) for older children were still scarce; and lack of [transport assistance](#) remained an issue for older pupils (including those enrolled at College of Sanctuary Belfast Met), despite Education Authority efforts to provide monthly bus passes for younger children. [Poverty](#) remained an acute issue for parents frustrated at being unable to meet their children's basic needs on their weekly stipend (currently [set](#) at £9.58 per person. PPR worked with several pregnant women and women with newborns to access basic supplies of clothing.) Parents also reported the harmful impacts of failures to respect their [human dignity](#) and to provide [effective remedies](#) for breaches of their rights.

A [follow up meeting](#) on 22 February 2023 highlighted some progress in some areas -- but new information on deeply concerning issues emerged, including on failures in information sharing by the Home Office and Mears that has left local health and education authorities unaware of who exactly was being placed in their areas, when and where, hamstringing their ability to safeguard children and meet vulnerable people's needs.

More on the right to education for these children

All children, without discrimination, have the legal right to an education ([Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) article 28), and education is recognised as being [inter-related with promotion and protection](#) of a range of other rights. Yet the specific barriers facing asylum seeking children are poorly understood in NI and the current budget cuts are often used as justification for failures to respect, protect and fulfil this right. As with all economic and social rights, States are obliged to spend the maximum available resources to implement the right, and to ensure there is no backsliding or lessening of people's ability to access the right. However enormous concerns remain around access to education for children in the households placed in hostels.

The Education and Libraries (NI) [Order 1986](#) (para. 46) sets compulsory school age at 4 years, continuing up until the end of the school year in which the child turns 16. The reality for asylum seeker children is different.

During the 2021/22 school year, access to school places for asylum seeker children was [limited](#), particularly for those who arrived in the second half of the school year. In 2022/23 the Education Authority, with support from Anaka Women's Collective education officers, school staff and others, had far greater success, especially for primary aged pupils. Older children faced more obstacles, with key stage 4 (years 11 and 12, so 15- and 16-year-olds) by far the most [unlikely to find a place](#). (This issue features in recent [research](#) from QUB and the Nuffield Foundation (p. 27, 64, 65).)

A 2023 survey carried out by PPR and Anaka amongst 35 Belfast asylum seekers aged 16-25 who were out of education during term time revealed that 40% had attended high school before coming to NI and another 40% had completed it. These young people have high aspirations, and described themselves as working towards a wide range of professions and roles. But they need help in getting there: currently only 30% report attending English classes (despite the fact that over half have been here for six months or more). Two thirds of them described their level of English as beginner or pre-intermediate.

In response, beginning this summer (2023) Anaka and Kind Economy partners have organised a network of volunteer teachers from the local community and from amongst people seeking international protection here, to set up and provide classes in a range of subjects for young people unable to access what should be theirs by right from the State. Resources are very limited and yet people with nothing are volunteering their time and effort to fill the gap and invest in these children and young people's futures.