

PPR's response to the UNHCR Asylum Support Move-on Period survey¹

18 April 2024

Who do you work for?

[Participation and the Practice of Rights \(PPR\)](#) is a human rights NGO founded in 2006. PPR organises with a growing network of communities across the island of Ireland and the UK, supporting people to use human rights as tools to fight for economic, social and environmental changes that improve their lives. PPR has been organising alongside asylum seekers since 2016 in a number of initiatives to improve housing, challenge enforced destitution and campaign against the employment ban. Our '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' policies.

What geographical area in the UK do you cover? Northern Ireland

Would you like UNHCR to list your organisation as having provided information in the final report that we publish, or would you prefer not to be named? (Please note that we will not attribute specific comments or quotes to you or your organisation.) Yes PPR can be named

1. ISSUANCE OF THE BRP: Do you see regular issues with BRPs (i.e., incorrect photographs, errors with names, dates of birth, late receipt of BRPs). If yes, are these resolved in a timely manner or is asylum support extended/reinstated?

In the wake of Rishi Sunak's December 2022 [pledge](#) to "abolish the backlog of initial asylum decisions" by end 2023, PPR requested the relevant data under Freedom of Information legislation. The Home Office responded that, for Northern Ireland, "932 individual discontinuation of asylum support decisions were completed between the dates of 01/08/2023 -19/03/2024": 876 positive decisions and 49 negative ones, with the remaining 7 described as "unknown case types where we are unsure whether it was a positive or negative decision without a further interrogation of our data". This represents an unprecedented rate of Home Office decision-making here.

PPR have received numerous reports from some of the newly recognised refugees of BRPs either being delayed or being incorrect when they arrive. In some cases people had their asylum accommodation and support extended while this was resolved, but in too many others they have had to fight to remain in their accommodation until correct identification arrived.

2. DISCONTINUATION NOTICE: 2.1. When do your clients receive their letter of discontinuation? Is this before the BRP is received, and if so, what is the gap between the time that the two documents are received?

1

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScgceitRIVk1jHBvCIIho3kSk7UUDIHFpKUUJHK0Xle9iQKNw/viewform?pli=1>

Under new Home Office guidance (as contained in its 'Discontinuations FAQ' of 23 August 2023), The Home Office is meant to issue simultaneous letters informing of its asylum decision to the individual concerned and to its Asylum Accommodation and Services Contract holder company (in Northern Ireland, Mears Group. Those letters are meant to inform of the end date (by law, 28 days later) for the person's asylum accommodation and support). The FAQ acknowledges that this may result in people "appearing to have a shorter notification period to vacate properties" than before.

In practice this does not always happen. Some people's letters are delayed in the system or the post, or simply do not arrive.

In response to PPR's Freedom of Information request, on 28 March 2024 the Home Office clarified Mears' practice regarding notifying the authorities of asylum decisions: "our accommodation providers are directly working with the NIHE [Northern Ireland Housing Executive] to notify them within two working days of when an individual is due to have their asylum support ended. We are also working with accommodation providers to ensure that this is applied consistently and in a timely manner across all areas." However, this does not always happen either: in fact, one family reported being informed of their asylum decision by the Housing Executive, after Mears had passed on the information to that body -- before the family had received notification from the Home Office or from Mears.

2.2. Does the letter of discontinuation always confirm when the 28-day period commences? Where it does, does the date match with the point at which the BRP is issued and with what is set out in the letter confirming the grant of status?

No, the letters do not uniformly confirm when the 28-day period commences, and the dates frequently do not match.

2.3. Do your clients understand the content and intent of the letter of discontinuation?

No. People need help understanding what the letter means, contributing to their uncertainty and distress. The letters very frequently notify them of imminent eviction and cessation of support – for people who have been denied the right to work and support themselves and who as a result have no savings or financial cushion of any kind, being told that their asylum support has been or is about to be cut constitutes a very real threat to their wellbeing.

3. NOTICE TO QUIT: Do your clients receive the notice to quit within the 28-day period? And are they always given with at least seven days' notice?

Absolutely not. Receipt of the second formal 'notice to quit' letter – which in theory gives seven days' notice of eviction -- is very frequently delayed, so that people receive only two or three days' notice, or none at all.

The Home Office guidance in the Discontinuations FAQ says that in the event that receipt of the second letter is delayed, the person is still entitled to the 7 days' notice, but stipulates

that they must submit a “reinstatement request” – and only a further 7 days of support will be given. In practice, due to barriers to reaching Migrant Help, people struggle to get through to actually make the reinstatement request. This bit of the guidance is not realisable in practice.

4. ACCOMMODATION: 4.1. Do your clients find new accommodation before they have to leave asylum accommodation? If there are any that do not, how much time do they usually need to find suitable accommodation (counting from the day that the asylum support ended)?

No. 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.

4.2. What are the main barriers that your clients face in finding new accommodation? Can you please suggest any measures that would help address any barriers?

Because people have been unable to work, they have no savings. This means that the private rental sector is closed to them; even if they had been able to find a property and secure employment which would cover their rent, they would be required to make significant deposits and/or have someone act as guarantor, meaning that this option is essentially unavailable.

New refugees are therefore reliant on social housing, of which there is tremendous shortage in Northern Ireland; they are forced to join the [over 46,400 households](#) currently on the waiting list for a home (over 28,600 of which are officially recognised as homeless). In practice, the Housing Executive is lodging them in wholly inappropriate “non-standard temporary accommodation”, most often in hotel rooms dispersed around the north, frequently very far from where they had been living. They have no access to laundry or cooking facilities and, due to asylum support being cut off before Universal Credit payments have a hope of being received, no money with which to buy hotel meals – or anything else.

PPR are currently campaigning with homeless families, including recently recognised refugees, for an increase in the number of social homes through using publicly-owned vacant land for residential development. Our [‘Take Back the City’](#) Campaign focuses on a 25-acre site owned jointly by the Department responsible for housing, the local council and the NI investment body.

5. BANKING: Are your clients experiencing any problems with opening bank accounts? If so, what are these problems, and are they easily solved?

Due to having been denied the right to work and the extremely minimal cash support (under £10 a week for people placed in hotels), most people are not yet at the point of needing to open bank accounts – they’ve had nothing to put in them. Once reaching that point people struggle due to a range of factors. Northern Ireland’s banking system has stringent identity and proof of residence requirements which constitute a significant barrier for anyone, not to mention newly-recognised refugees. Northern Ireland has not historically seen significant inflows of asylum seekers, so newly issued documents stemming from a grant of refugee status are not among the identity documents functionaries here are used to dealing with. Another barrier is lack of a permanent address and the required multiple proofs of residence, due to (often ongoing) temporary hotel accommodation. Finally, many people are being placed in far flung hotels, often without access to public transport – for them even the fact of having to gather documentation and present themselves at a bank during the required hours is a real barrier.

6. UNIVERSAL CREDIT: Do your clients access Universal Credit before their asylum support stops? Please specify if any barriers are faced and what the average time to receive the first payment of Universal Credit is.

Due to the five-week wait for the first Universal Credit payment – a feature built into the UC system – there is no way, even if people somehow in practice received the full 28-day notice from the Home Office, that UC could be accessed before asylum support stops. The authorities’ decisions – both on the Home Office side and the UC side -- to impose the timeframes that they have make this impossible. Structurally, even assuming maximum efficiency and no mistakes, delays or obstacles in the transfer from one support system to another, people are made to suffer a new period of enforced destitution – a deliberate gap between when one form of support ends and another begins. What this means practically is that people – including children – go hungry and suffer extreme hardship and distress. This obviously compounds the trauma that the vast majority have already undergone in their country of origin, in transit to the UK and within the Home Office’s deliberately hostile and punitive asylum system.

6.2. Do any of your clients receive Universal Credit while still living in asylum accommodation?

No.

7. MIGRANT HELP: Are your clients able to get the support they need from Migrant Help?

No. Migrant Help are rarely present on site at many people’s asylum accommodation, and are extremely difficult to reach by telephone. Online systems are inaccessible or non-functional in practice. As a result people do not seem to view Migrant Help as a viable recourse for the support that is required by its Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility contract with the Home Office. People often report making multiple requests for support to Migrant Help without getting any resolution.

8. WORK: 8.1. Are your clients able to find work quickly after receiving their asylum decision? If not, please explain the main barriers they face at that point.

People are very frequently being placed by the Housing Executive in hotels in far flung areas, away from any community network or contacts with health services, schools or further education colleges that they may have been able to build up while in the asylum system. This is one barrier to people finding and being able to access work.

Another is the temporary nature of their accommodation – they are told by the Housing Executive that they will be moved somewhere permanent as soon as possible, but they have no idea when this will be, or even where it might be. People are literally being moved right across the north, from one day to the next. As such they are in no position to apply for work, even if an employer was willing to hire them in such uncertain circumstances.

Another barrier is transport. Northern Ireland is a car-dependent place; people do have public transport passes provided by the Department for Infrastructure on a pilot scheme, but the public transport here is very limited in scope and reach. Simply put, many people are being placed in hotels without access to public transport and without the resources to pay taxis to even get to one-off interviews, much less regular work.

Finally, parents face an additional obstacle in childcare. Families are moved out of area, away from their children's schools. They are told that the new placement is temporary, and at any rate, in this late stage of the school year finding a new school place is unlikely. So children are 'home' during the day instead of in school, meaning that parents are not free to look for work.

8.2. Does the need to find a new address impact their approach to finding work?

Yes – as discussed above.

9. GENERAL ISSUES: 9.1. Which areas of the discontinuation process do you or your clients currently find most challenging, and what do you think are recommendations or solutions that could be implemented to address these?

The Prime Minister's declared aim of tackling the backlog of asylum cases has led to a unprecedented number of positive decisions being issued in a short time. This translates to a significant new caseload transferring at next to no notice to a housing authority which is already facing a waiting list of over 46,000 households. In response the Housing Executive is making unprecedented use of hotels as emergency temporary accommodation – a stopgap to prevent people under its responsibility becoming street homeless. This is extremely expensive, at a time when resources would be far better allocated building or acquiring new social housing stock to increase the capacity of the social housing system to meet acute need. Additional support to the Housing Executive, with the explicit aim of increasing its permanent social housing stock, is required.

9.2. Are there any elements of the discontinuation process that you believe are particularly positive, and/or have recently improved?

No.