

Food experiences of people seeking asylum in London: areas for local action



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Introduction and background

In October 2023, Sustain's London Food Poverty Campaign launched a new project in partnership with the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) UK and Life Seekers Aid, exploring the food experiences of people seeking asylum in London. This project was developed following concern related to high risk of food insecurity for people seeking asylum, due to very low incomes making it difficult to afford food, along with other barriers such as lack of kitchen facilities.¹ This translates to issues around nutritional requirements and health, a lack of access to food people enjoy, and the eroded dignity of having a lack of choice and control over what one eats.

The project sought to raise the voices of people with lived experience of the asylum system to highlight the issues they face around food, promote any positive food environments they have engaged with, and identify actions they would like to see locally. We also learned from staff and volunteers in frontline support organisations, healthcare providers, and local authorities which have started taking action on improving food for people seeking asylum in their borough and used these learnings to form recommendations for local action.

Claiming asylum in the UK

The 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees² defines a refugee as a person who:

“owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”³

Some people whose home country is unsafe for them for reasons not covered by this definition may still be entitled to international protection in the UK and other countries.⁴ People arriving in the UK to seek safety must claim asylum and wait for their claims to be assessed before they receive recognition as refugees, or as otherwise in need of international protection.

In the UK, asylum claims are submitted to and processed by the Home Office. The Home Office is responsible for providing people in the asylum process with accommodation and enough support to meet their basic necessities if they would otherwise be destitute. In the UK, people in the asylum system are usually prohibited from working and cannot claim social security,⁵ under restrictions on recourse to public funds. If they are recognised as refugees, they are then legally

allowed to work and claim benefits, and normally have a route to permanent settlement.

If their asylum claim is rejected by the Home Office and the courts and they are declared 'appeal rights exhausted', then all support is cut off and they are made completely destitute while remaining banned from working. Many people declared appeals rights exhausted go on to make fresh claims – that is, to submit further evidence in support of their asylum claims – and are then recognised as refugees. This is in the context of a well-evidenced culture of disbelief within Home Office decision-making.⁶ Data provided by the Home Office in response to a Freedom of Information request by NACCOM shows that in 2023, 2,294 appeal rights exhausted asylum seekers were eventually recognised as needing asylum (or another form of leave to remain) after a fresh claim submission, and this number was even higher at 3,764 in 2022. This means that while some people are still eligible to receive asylum support⁷, thousands of people each year are made destitute while waiting in the asylum system for years on end.

Data-sharing between the Home Office, local authorities, and public services for immigration control purposes under the 'compliant environment' – previously termed the 'hostile environment' can also mean that people refused asylum feel unsafe to engage with support services.⁸ This further limits the contexts in which they can access food.

The current asylum system is in upheaval and subject to imminent change, as The Illegal Migration Act 2023, passed in July, creates what the United Nations High Commission for Refugees has described as "an asylum ban"⁹. If fully enacted, the Act would prohibit most people claiming asylum in the UK from having their claims heard at all and many of these would face indefinite limbo.¹⁰ It is estimated that the Illegal Migration Act would leave over 161,000 people seeking asylum unable to access protection they are entitled to and at significant risk of destitution within the first three years.¹¹ In this context, people seeking asylum in the UK may be put at an even higher risk of worsened nutrition and health outcomes.

Accommodation and food

According to Home Office statistics, there were 67,337 asylum applications (relating to 84,425 people) in the UK in the year ending December 2023.¹² Though having only recently become an area for asylum dispersal accommodation, London has a relatively high ratio of people seeking asylum to population (24.7 per 10,000) compared to many other parts of the UK due to the large number of asylum hotels, with the greatest number housed in the London borough of Hillingdon.¹³

The Home Office provides people seeking asylum with accommodation where required, on a 'no choice' basis meaning they cannot choose where to live. Once an

asylum claim has been fully determined, people will be expected to leave Home Office accommodation and can face homelessness.¹⁴

In London, Clearsprings Ready Homes is commissioned by the Home Office to provide catered and self-catered accommodation to people seeking asylum.

Accommodation falls under the following main categories:

Temporary or contingency accommodation

Contingency accommodation also sometimes called 'initial accommodation' is intended to house people in the short-term while longer-term accommodation is found. However, since 2020, people seeking asylum have increasingly been placed in hotels and other accommodation designed to be 'short-term' for longer periods, often several years. During the COVID-19 lockdown period, use of hotels and hostels became particularly widespread. Slow processing of asylum claims has created a backlog in dispersal accommodation: according to Home Office statistics, at the end of June 2023, there were 134,046 cases (relating to 175,457 people) awaiting an initial decision. Furthermore, people can be moved suddenly to a different area, which may happen multiple times during their claim process.

Contingency accommodation is usually provided by hotels and hostels, and residents typically have no access to kitchen facilities, although some may have access to some appliances such as a kettle or fridge. In these settings, breakfast, lunch, dinner, snacks, and drinks are to be provided by the accommodation provider, which should be nutritionally balanced and meet dietary requirements such as allergies and halal diets. At the time of writing, people in temporary accommodation receive £8.86 per week for each household member to cover all costs including food.

The growth in use of hotels and hostels to accommodate people in the asylum system happens alongside the novel use of large-scale, institutional, out of town asylum accommodation in disused military sites and barges. This report does not explore food experiences in these settings, but evidence exists regarding the issues with housing people in this way.¹⁵

Dispersal accommodation

Dispersal accommodation is a longer-term temporary accommodation which is self-catered. This is usually shared accommodation, which tends to have shared kitchen facilities so people can cook their own food. Poor conditions in asylum dispersal accommodation are a longstanding problem.¹⁶ At the time of writing, people in dispersal accommodation receive £49.18 per week for each household member to

cover all costs including food. An additional £3 per week is available during pregnancy.

In all types of accommodation, those with young children can apply for an additional £5 per week for children until their first birthday, and £3 per week per child aged one to three years old. Home Office funds are provided on an ASPEN card, which is topped up weekly and can be used like a debit card. People waiting for an initial decision on their claims, or a decision on an appeal, can use ASPEN cards to withdraw cash. Those on 'Section 4' support – primarily those waiting for a decision on a fresh claim – cannot.¹⁷ Until new claimants receive their ASPEN card, they have no source of funds.

Asylum Matters' 2023 report *Surviving in Poverty: A report documenting life on asylum support* highlights that *"living in this continuous struggle to meet their basic needs has a profound effect on peoples' mental health and wellbeing. It puts a huge strain on their lives, limiting what they can do."*¹⁸

Research approach

The research was designed to learn from lived experience as much as possible, as well as the experiences of people providing frontline services to support people seeking asylum and refugees.

We worked closely with the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) UK which works with people made destitute by the asylum process and with those in immigration detention; and Life Seekers Aid, a charity led by and for people seeking asylum and refugees, assisting people with practical support during their asylum claims. Life Seekers Aid work largely with people housed in camps, hostels and hotels.

Research was conducted between October 2023 and February 2024. This consisted of three focus groups with participants from diverse backgrounds and countries of origin, all with experience of the asylum system, and ten interviews with people with experience of working with people seeking asylum. We also held a workshop for London Authorities, Voluntary and Community sector organisations (VCS) and academics, to identify issues and areas for local action.

Focus groups

Three focus groups were held to explore experiences of food from people who had been in asylum accommodation or destitute, following refusal, across London. People supported by JRS UK or Life Seekers Aid respectively were invited to take part. Sampling was opportunistic and may not be fully representative of the diverse nature of food experiences of people seeking asylum in London. However, efforts were made to recruit participants from varied countries of origin, different parts of London, at varied stages of the asylum process and with varied experiences.

The focus groups took place in person and were held in two different locations in London. They each lasted for two hours and consisted of whole group and small group discussions as well as one-to-one conversations. They included set questions to explore particular topics as well as space for people to bring up topics they felt were relevant. The sessions were conducted in English, with interpreters present for those who were not confident to fully express themselves in English. All focus groups included a shared meal.

The first focus group included people currently in catered accommodation in hotels and hostels, the second group included people who were either destitute or in dispersal accommodation, and the third included mothers with dependent children in the UK across various stages of the asylum process. We supplemented this with a one-to-one interview with one person experiencing destitution following refusal of asylum, who had been unable to attend the focus groups but still wanted to share their experience.

We were also provided with notes from a focus group held by another charity in London. This group consisted predominantly of mothers with young children currently in catered hotels.

Interviews

We conducted ten interviews with people working with people seeking asylum in the following sectors:

- Voluntary and Community Sector organisations providing food support
- Healthcare providers
- Local authorities
- Academics
- The Greater London Authority

The interviews sought to gain a deeper understanding of food experiences for people seeking asylum from different sectors. Many had experience of frontline support, and some had experience of the asylum system themselves. Interviews were opportunistic based on reaching out to organisations known to partners, as well as having organisations reach out to us upon hearing about the research. One of the charities we interviewed provided specialist frontline support to LGBTQIA+ people in the asylum system.

We reached out to speak to Clearsprings Ready Homes, the Home Office commissioned accommodation provider for London on several occasions, seeking to understand challenges and opportunities from their perspective but they declined an interview.

Case studies

To highlight areas of good practice at the local level, we carried out longer interviews and where possible completed a site visit to form case studies of food projects which were valued and providing positive food experiences to people seeking asylum.

We also carried out interviews with six local authorities that were identified as having taken actions locally to improve food experiences of people seeking asylum.

Workshop with local authorities

In January 2024 Sustain hosted a hybrid workshop for participants including the Greater London Authority, London councils, voluntary and community sector organisations and academics from University College London's Institute for Global

Prosperity, who all shared their insight and helped to identify areas for local action. At the workshop JRS and Life Seekers Aid presented findings from the focus groups, and two speakers shared their lived experience around food while seeking asylum. We invited all London local authorities, and representatives from 18 boroughs attended.

We invited representatives from the Home Office to the workshop, but they declined to attend.

Findings

Focus groups

Focus group participants included a total of 29 people, from varied backgrounds and in different situations. This included people of mixed genders, aging between 18-69, from seven different regions of the world and living in different regions of London. People were at different stages of their asylum claim, and the first year of submitting a claim ranged from less than one year ago to more than ten years ago. Approximately half of participants had dependent children in the UK.

The first focus group explored experiences of people currently or recently living in catered accommodation. People had usually been in the hotels for long periods of time, with it now being standard to spend two years or more in this type of accommodation. Participants from this group were mainly male, of varied ages and from varied countries of origin.

The second focus group explored the experiences of people in dispersal accommodation or experiencing destitution. This group had largely been in the asylum system for a long time, in some cases over a decade. All of them had been declared appeals rights exhausted at some point. There was a high instance of long-term health problems, including diabetes, even though participants were not intentionally selected for this, offering anecdotal indication of the effects of a long period in the asylum system on physical health.

The third focus group explored the experiences of mothers at different stages of the asylum process. Some have been in the UK for a decade or more and were appeal rights exhausted, others had arrived and claimed asylum in the UK in recent years, so had recent experiences of staying at hotels and dispersal accommodations. Participants also included women who had received discretionary leave (with recourse to benefits) as recognised victims of trafficking—in some cases, they were also waiting on decisions on their asylum claims.

Additional notes and insight were provided by Unfold, a charity that offer mentoring and support to young people and mothers in Westminster and Kensington and Chelsea, including to people seeking asylum. Unfold hosted a focus group in December 2023 with women, many of whom were mothers, in catered accommodation. They shared their experiences around food with a representative of Clearsprings Ready Homes, who was in attendance. These notes were checked for key themes, which were largely in alignment with our findings from the other focus groups. Additional findings and quotes from their focus group have been incorporated below.

Headline findings:

- Participants reported finding it very difficult or impossible to meet their nutritional needs and those of their children in all accommodation contexts.
- The lack of agency around eating was highlighted as a problem in all groups.
- All groups highlighted the need for access to kitchen space, money, and ingredients to prepare their own meals, and where cooked meals were provided these should be freshly prepared and culturally appropriate.
- Inadequate food access was having a negative impact on physical health, linked to the inability to manage health conditions and in some cases development of nutrition-related diseases and hospitalisation.
- Experiences of food in the asylum system were broadly experienced as degrading and dehumanising, which had a negative impact on mental health, including for mothers who were unable to feed their children.

Focus group 1: Hotels and hostels

"A short time would be bearable but eating hotel food for 2 years is awful".

Key themes:

- Food in hotels was universally thought to be of a very low quality, with no concern for people's food preferences or medical dietary needs at all.
- There were strong indications of a variety of health and safety deficiencies in food provision, which had in resulted in illness.
- The structure and timings of meals at hotels were constricting. Religious considerations such as fasting were often not accommodated for.
- Little to no access to any kitchen facilities was frequently raised as a key issue.
- People reported the dining experience was unpleasant, with frequent hostility and in some cases abusive behaviour from staff.
- There was no effective or transparent complaints mechanism, or accountability for food standards. For people that had been in hotels for a long time, they had not seen any improvements.
- The experience of food in catered accommodation had a strong negative impact on mental health and the way people related to food, as well as marked physical health impacts including significant weight loss, food poisoning and development of diabetes.
- People wanted choice in what they ate, freshly prepared food, accountability for food standards, and access to a kitchen and ingredients to cook their own food.

Quality and type of food

Food in hotels was overall thought to be of a very low quality, and there was felt to be no concern for people's food preferences at all. Food was often reported as being unpleasant, too spicy, and meals were repetitive. Meals tended to be all from the same cuisine, which did not meet the vast majority of residents' preferences. Some food was so poor, or so inappropriate, that it was found to be inedible. Mothers reported their children would not eat because they found the food so unpleasant and went to bed crying with hunger while large quantities of food were thrown away.

Meal quality was not consistent across hotels, with some people reporting that breakfast was acceptable and others reporting all meals were very low quality.

There were multiple complaints about the quality of the fruit available as snacks, which were poor quality and, in some cases, rotting and attracting flies.

"Out of a whole batch of apples, there will always be only one good one, the rest are gross".

"With my limited money, I always go and buy fresh fruit, as the quality is so poor".

The quality and lack of vegetables was also a concern, with reports that often vegetables were cooked in large batches at the start of the week and then served up for several days, with the quality deteriorating as the week goes on. No fresh salad was available with meals, or salad was heated up along with the rest of a ready meal. It was also reported that some hotels used the same oil multiple times to fry up different ingredients for meals, resulting in rancid taste.

Participants reported they would prefer to buy their own food, but the £8.86 per week was not enough to do so. Several people were concerned about the quantity of food that was wasted, as many people couldn't eat it, and remarked on the amount of money being wasted which could be used to provide better quality food or fund people to buy their own food.

Health and safety

There were strong indications of a variety of health and safety deficiencies in food provision. These included:

- Poor hygiene e.g. staff not using gloves to serve food and hairs or other objects in food.
- Issues with food safety e.g. raw or undercooked meat including chicken, insects in food, mould, foul smells, with reports of some people being hospitalised with food poisoning.
- Being provided with food which was past its use by date or had deliberately had the use by date removed or concealed e.g. yogurts.

- Routine failure to accommodate medical dietary requirements including severe allergies, gastrointestinal health conditions and diabetes, even when these were repeatedly brought to the attention of hotel staff, medical letters were provided, and hospitalisation had occurred.
- Parents with infants not having access to facilities to appropriately sterilise, prepare and store infant formula, or store breastmilk.
- No support or additional snacks available for pregnant or breastfeeding mothers.

Structure of meals at hotels

All participants reported that the schedule of meals was inflexible in hotels which meant that people routinely miss meals if they have appointments. Some made an exception for children at sixth-form college arriving late, and some reported hotel staff were more flexible, while others reported if you were even a few minutes late you would be denied a meal. Some reported dinner being served at 5pm which they felt was too early, and no food being available until the next morning so they would be hungry at night.

There was variability around celebrations – e.g., some provided adapted mealtimes during Ramadan for people fasting, and offered foods which were traditionally eaten during Ramadan, while others made no allowance for people breaking their fast. Disturbingly, some mothers reported being asked to *'swear on your child's life'* that they were fasting in order to receive the Iftar meal, which was dehumanising, and others were denied the Iftar meal as staff didn't believe they were fasting. Christian participants reported not being able to access vegetarian meals during lent when they usually abstain from meat for religious reasons.

Access to kitchen facilities

Participants all reported very limited, if any, access to kitchen facilities. Some had access to certain items such as kettle and or fridge, others did not. Some hotels allowed people to bring in food from outside to eat in the dining room and/or store it in fridges, others did not allow any food in or out. People were not allowed to keep their own equipment such as a toaster or microwave in their room. Many participants missed being able to cook for themselves, particularly mothers who reported feeling a sense of powerlessness at not being able to cook food that their children would like, and all participants reported a desire to eat home cooked meals rather than ready meals.

Eating environment

Dining spaces were largely reported as not being an appealing environment, and in some cases, there was nowhere to dine communally, and people were eating meals on their beds. Many participants reported feeling like they are not treated as humans. One participant noted that treatment from staff is impactful; if food is served by a friendly staff member who smiles at them it makes a big difference to their day.

Concerningly, some participants reported mistreatment from staff serving meals. Examples of this included:

- People being denied food and having the meal thrown away in front of them, apparently performatively, if they were even five minutes late to the meal.
- Receiving racist and other abusive language from staff, and staff discriminating against people depending on their nationality.
- People being teased about gaining weight.

Lack of complaint mechanism

There was a universal consensus that there were no effective complaint mechanisms and people felt widely disregarded and ignored. Several people had made complaints to staff and via Migrant Health, including submitted medical letters explaining their medical dietary requirements, and had seen no changes.

"They just say tell Migrant Help, and nothing happens".

From the focus group held by Unfold, it was reported that the hotels were not aware of the complaints that had been made to Migrant Help about the food, and while there was someone at the hotel people could speak to about the food, no one knew who that was.

Language barriers made it even harder to complain or communicate food issues, and there were no interpreters available. Furthermore, there were indications that complaints or concerns may have been dismissed by hotel staff, or perhaps carried out with no transparency.

Health impacts

There were strong indications of significant adverse impact on health from food in hotels, including and especially for children. These included:

- Weight gain
- Development of diabetes or other metabolic conditions
- One adult with a digestive health condition was hospitalised multiple times due to issues caused by inappropriate food

- Not being able to take medications as directed with food
- Children losing significant amounts of weight and not meeting developmental milestones
- Children being hospitalised with food poisoning
- Concerns around unsafe infant feeding
- Deterioration of mental health linked to inability to enjoy food and no agency over diet
- Damaged relationship with food

Focus group 2: Dispersal accommodation and destitution.

“That food’s expired, we’ll give it to refugees. If it’s not okay to give to other people, why is it okay to give to refugees?”

Key themes:

- People seeking asylum do not have enough money to buy the food they need - neither people on asylum support nor people without any formal source of income could afford to meet their nutritional requirements. The situation has worsened during the cost-of-living crisis, as the cost of food and other essential needs has increased. Some also reported a reduction in direct food provision from the third sector in recent years.
- Those refused asylum were experiencing destitution and experiencing severe food insecurity, generally relying on charities for food.
- People not only had to eat poor quality food, including expired food, but also skip meals and go hungry.
- Travel to get food was prohibitive due to lack of money. In addition, any essential travel such as attending home office appointments took away from money for food.
- People had very little choice or control over the type of food that could be accessed.
- People had a lack of access to kitchen facilities and food storage.
- It was problematic to manage medication with food, especially for those who were sofa-surfing or street homeless and did not have regular mealtimes.
- Many were reliant on charitable food aid, which was helpful but also came with issues, as food banks could be difficult to access, and the food provided was not always appropriate.
- People were unable to participate in celebrations and religious observations.
- Negative food experiences were linked to feelings of dehumanisation.

- Issues with accessing appropriate food had serious impacts on physical and mental health.
- Issues around food cannot be isolated from wider issues of the system.
- People without immigration status may not feel safe approaching the council for help.

Gaps in asylum support deepen food poverty

Asylum support must cover all essentials so, to eat, people seeking asylum must sacrifice other essentials. Both on asylum support and without it, people explained that buying food meant they couldn't buy other essentials, and the limited weekly income was not enough.

Several participants reported experiencing issues with their ASPEN cards, which are usually the only source of income people seeking asylum. For example, someone explained waiting a long time for their ASPEN card to arrive, someone else explained losing it and having difficulty in getting it replaced, leading to having no source of income at all for a period.

For those not receiving asylum support, they have no money for food and are reliant on charity.

For people who spend a long time in the asylum system, being refused and then submitting fresh claims, it is common to cycle between periods on asylum support and periods without any support at all, during which they may be street homeless, or sofa-surfing. People who had experienced periods of homelessness after refusal reflected on these as times when they really struggled with food:

"When I was homeless after I lost my case – it was difficult [to get food]."

Travel

Participants reported it was necessary to travel to get food where you could afford it, and where it was culturally and nutritionally appropriate. This was itself very expensive, leaving less money for food and other essentials, as well as being time-consuming and difficult. The need to pay for transport to report to the Home Office was highlighted as a cost that impacted on ability to buy food.

"After transportation to and from, you can't get all you need. Where I live, I can't get what I need in the market. I have to travel...roughly 1 hour."

Being without any support was especially hard as they had no money for public transport.

One participant reported that before receiving assistance from JRS, they had to travel long journeys to get to different food aid providers. Even though it was a lifeline, it was difficult to travel to the centres and access food.

Lack of choice

Participants reported being unable to access food from their countries of origin and expressed a real sense of loss over this. Limited sources of food were highlighted, with lack of money severely restricting choice. Many were reliant on charitable food aid which often have a limited range of food available, may not meet cultural preferences or medical requirements, or may require kitchen facilities people do not have access to. One participant recommended that charities and food banks should provide money for destitute people rather than food parcels.

“Sometimes you want to choose the food you’re used to. Food bank food you can eat but you don’t get the food you like. It’s not the same. It’s just for your survival anyway.”

ASPEN cards also limit choice as they can only be used in retail outlets which accept VISA payments, and people on section 4 conditions are not allowed to withdraw cash¹⁹, which limits where they can buy food, particularly places like markets which may sell more culturally appropriate food.

Supermarket vouchers were appreciated but still limited choice as they have to be used in specific shops which may not sell the food people want. One participant spoke of the challenge of not having money to buy food from African shops, which is not available in supermarkets.

While people said they are grateful not to be starving and to be provided with food from charities, this typically doesn’t meet their needs of having a balanced, healthy diet and food they enjoy.

Lack of kitchen facilities

“If you are staying with a friend, cooking might be a problem because of the bills, the friend might be whingeing, but you get raw food [from charitable food aid providers].”

Some people didn’t have a kitchen they could use or hadn’t had this at certain times since claiming asylum. One context for this was homelessness or sofa-surfing – in the latter case, actual access to kitchens varied.

Government policy enforces destitution among people seeking asylum whose cases are declared “appeal rights exhausted.”²⁰ Sofa-surfing is common among people

whose asylum cases have been declared are appeals rights exhausted. Often, people struggle to use the kitchen where they are staying as they may not be allowed or may be concerned about energy bills.²¹ People also referred to not having a kitchen when in catered accommodation, and how hard that experience had been.

For those in asylum dispersal accommodation, there is usually access to some kitchen facilities, but this is not set up in a way that helps to manage food well. For example, there is limited equipment and storage space. Participants commented that there is very little freezer space, so if you want to save money and buy food about to expire, you cannot freeze it.

Reliance on charitable food aid

Food banks were a strong recurring theme within this group, with people expressing gratitude for them as otherwise they would have nothing and expressing that the government should better fund food aid projects. However, experiences of receiving charitable food aid were complex. Some people reported positive experiences, such as feeling less isolated, and receiving food parcels during the lockdown period of the COVID-19 pandemic which had been very helpful. However, some noted that food available from charities wasn't what they wanted and didn't fully meet their needs.

Multiple issues related to reliance on food aid were reported including:

- The food provided is usually long-life food which was felt to be nutritionally insufficient in the long-term and was specifically mentioned as inappropriate for diabetes management.
- It was difficult to prepare the food if you didn't have access to a kitchen.
- There was insufficient choice in the items you receive.
- People have to travel to get to food banks and can't afford to.
- Many food banks do not understand about people seeking asylum's eligibility to access food, which meant some people struggled to get food at food banks, and where they did, this was often after being singled out and made to wait to speak to a manager. The need to advocate for oneself to get food suggests particular problems for those with language or communication barriers. This is linked to broader barriers and lack of dignity in reliance on charitable food provision;

"Issues with Food Banks in my experience is they don't have category for asylum seekers... They ask me what type I am – they have homeless. I was excluded. I have to wait 15 minutes until the manager explains to them – they don't have this type: "asylum seeker". This is difficult, I feel embarrassed or shy."

Celebrations and religious observances.

"My main event for the year is Christmas. But I've never enjoyed Christmas for the past 14 years [i.e., since seeking asylum]. It's like any other day. But I would love to enjoy it with family and friends, but I've never had a special meal on Christmas Day. It's just like any other day. Even on my birthday I forget about it..."

Participants didn't feel they were properly celebrating festivals such as Ramadan or Christmas respectively. This was partly to do with not getting enough of the right food, and also partly to do with other isolating aspects of the asylum process. It is significant that the wider asylum process impacted people's experience of food – you don't enjoy food in the same way if you're isolated and in limbo - *in addition to* poor food contributing to the overall negative experience of the asylum process and being a key missing piece at celebrations.

"Just pretend just to fit in. Just for that time... You can't have a proper celebration until you are free from this bondage of immigration."

Dehumanisation

Repeatedly, we heard that the ways that people seeking asylum are forced to experience food – being expected to accept a low quality, not having access to food that meets cultural and dietary requirements, struggling to celebrate birthdays or festivals - was dehumanising and had a negative impact on mental health. There was a sense that this was deliberate and demoralising.

"They don't care about you eating. Forget this propaganda they show you on telly. People are dying. They don't care. You can just buy what you can afford to buy. I want to tell them to add more money."

Expired food

"If you complain about expired food, they say 'this is all we have'."

People reported receiving expired food from charitable food aid, and when shops give away food. Participants said the food they ate sometimes made them sick, and they were routinely worried it would. Having to eat expired food, and having no choice, felt dehumanising and disempowering.

Impacts on health

"To access food that is good for me, healthy, is a challenge sometimes. The food I find is not always good for my health."

Several participants had chronic health conditions and felt the lack of access to nutritious food had contributed to this and was having a negative long-term impact on their physical health. People taking medications struggled with the lack of nutritious food and not being able to eat at certain times, making it is hard to meet medical dietary requirements. This was especially prominent among those in destitution, for example someone sleeping in a homeless hostel explained he could only be there overnight and struggled to have a regular meal in the afternoon. Several participants reported developing nutrition-related disease such as diabetes which they knew was linked to their diet. One participant had applied for extra financial support to help manage their health condition, but this had been denied.

One participant who was destitute, sofa-surfing and living purely off support from charities explained that he needed to eat at regular times for his medication, but this often wasn't possible:

"I'm diabetic and a heart patient. I'm on 14 tablets medication. How can you take your medication with enough – well, most times I don't eat but I just have to take it. If I don't take it for two days, it's serious effects on me. I've had two heart attacks."

The subject of food cannot be isolated from wider issues with the asylum system

"When we came to the UK, everything changed for us, including the type of food and having access to food".

Issues of food insecurity are linked to other challenges faced by people seeking asylum, and the discussion touched on several other issues:

- The ban on work means people cannot earn money to support themselves.
- Companies contracted to provide asylum support made money out of people seeking asylum, and the length of time they are kept in the asylum system. This money could be better used to help people; *"We are the holy cash cow"*.
- The racism with which they were treated – both in food provision and in general.
- The lack of culturally appropriate food, and the whole way food was experienced, was described as one piece of the broad disorientation felt when arriving in the UK to seek sanctuary.

- The nature of the asylum system meant that people within it don't experience food as positively as they did before.

Focus Group 3: Mothers

"My children want broccoli, but I cannot give them that, I feel guilty as a parent for not being able to provide for them".

Key findings:

- Not being able to provide adequate food for their children had a serious negative impact on mothers' mental health.
- Free School meals were very positively experienced, but some parents faced barriers to accessing them.
- Participants felt dehumanised by their experience of food.
- Mothers wanted to be able to provide fresh, healthy food and choice for their children.
- Food provided at hotels is completely inappropriate and does not meet nutritional needs of children or breastfeeding mothers.
- There are serious issues with safety of food in hotels and it is not appropriate for people with allergies, nor is support or equipment provided for safe infant feeding.
- There was non-responsiveness to complaints, requests, and questions in hotels.
- Self-catering for families is very challenging financially while living on asylum support in dispersed accommodation as asylum support levels are too low.
- In various types of asylum accommodation, children and families' eating space is limited and also serves as their sleeping and playing space at the same time.

Catered accommodation

"It was hard to find food for my children. You don't get to choose... [The food] was hot but not cooked good, my children don't like the vegetables that come."

Participants felt their nutritional needs could not be met by the food provided by hotels and it was not appropriate for them to live there long-term. Not having nutritious food for themselves and their children affects mothers' physical health and mental health. Participants described a lack of appropriate food being provided

for young children, in some cases only yogurt, and there was no special provision for babies. Some described hotels refusing to provide milk for young children.

The £8.86 provided is not enough for parents to buy food outside of hotels, particularly with rising food costs. The small amount of money requires strict budgeting and buying the cheapest and often unhealthy food. There were instances where mothers had to borrow money to buy food or milk and use unsterilised tap water from the shared bathroom to make formula for their babies. There were no facilities to prepare simple food items like noodles or sandwiches for children, or kettles to sterilise bottles.

"It's not enough – [about] £1 a day only. Food is so expensive, you try and spend only £9 [a week] and you will see. You can buy the cheapest noodles (70p) and the processed hot dogs."

Serious issues with food safety were also raised, with issues such as undercooked meat and expired food being provided. This was especially a concern for pregnant and breastfeeding mothers and young children.

"Hotel food is always too spicy,...it hurts my stomach, nothing changed after complaints; I was breastfeeding at the time, and I just couldn't eat the food".

No information was available on how food is handled and prepared, so parents were not reassured it was suitable for children with severe allergies:

"You don't know how the food has been prepared, I don't know how the food has been handled, I can't risk my daughter eating that – I needed to go to a friend's house instead. If you can't tell me how the food has been prepared, I can't risk it, I don't want to end up in hospital."

Complaints that had been made about food were ignored, some participants described being asked to give feedback about menus and no changes being made. People had been directed to Migrant Help but felt they had not received any help. There were reports of a charity that had come into the hotels and asked people not to complain about the food, but they were not sure who this was. Troublingly, this points to a culture in which people are pressured not to complain. One participant described being moved around different kinds of temporary accommodation with her children, and sometimes receiving virtually no food provision:

"After the hotel, I stayed at a BnB. I was not allowed to cook inside, even when my kid was sick and vomiting, I couldn't do anything, just had bread and butter."

Participants felt dehumanised by their experience of food, and felt that poor provision for them was considered acceptable because they were seeking asylum:

"Maybe you are working in the kitchen, but no one checks [the standard], maybe [because it is] for asylum seekers";

"[They should] treat people like humans not animals."

Self-catered accommodation

Providing for a family on asylum support is extremely challenging, with £49.18 per household member each week to cover all essential needs including food, transport, clothes and school uniforms, nappies and baby products, toiletries etc. For the few mothers that had permission to work due to their specific immigration condition, the high cost of childcare was a barrier to entering employment.

There was a strong awareness around which supermarkets had cheaper products, and mothers would travel to access those, but even so participants struggled to feed their children adequately with foods which were healthy and appealing. For people who have no money but receive vouchers, their options of shops are limited, and they face the additional hurdle of having to commute to get to the shop where they can spend the voucher. Poverty left parents with difficult choices around celebrations. One described getting a birthday cake for her children, but then not being able to afford anything else to celebrate their birthday.

Some participants made use of charitable food aid as a source of food. One participant whose child had a severe allergy reported problems with accessing necessary allergen information when receiving food from charitable providers or community meals, which were a key source of food due to lack of money.

Eating environment

Parents told us that in both hotels and shared self-catered accommodation, eating space is cramped: they only get one room with their children, so they eat, sleep, and play all in the same space, often eating on their beds. They explained that their children's mental health was affected, as shown in their behaviours (e.g. scratching, crying, lost appetite, trouble breathing).

"We live in a shared house, shared kitchen, there is only one room. There is no room for play. We eat and play and do everything in there."

School food

Free School meals were positively experienced, but some faced barriers to accessing them.

For parents with school-age children, free school meals were viewed as helpful and nutritious for their children. However, schools and other public institutions are not always familiar with relevant asylum policies for people's entitlement. For example, one school had refused a child on Section 4 support and the parent had to take the school to court to access the meal, and one mother was not aware her child should be getting a free school meal at college.

A consultation conducted by Praxis in 2022 suggested that precarious immigration status remains a barrier to free school meals, even though eligibility had been extended to people without recourse to public funds: parents were required to share immigration status to obtain free school meals for their children, which could dissuade them from applying due to fear of enforcement, and there was insufficient public information to let people know they were eligible.²²

One mother had been refused asylum and had no formal support, and she and her daughter lived with family:

"It is very difficult – I have no support, nothing from the home office, nothing, I have support from my brother only."

Overall, mothers felt a toll on their mental health from not being able to provide adequate food for children.

Key areas for improvement from focus groups

Across all focus groups, participants identified areas for improvement. Recurring themes were:

Don't create poverty in the asylum system and improve the asylum and immigration system

- Asylum support levels need to be higher so people can buy the food they want.
- People seeking asylum should have the right to work.
- People trapped in asylum limbo need a way to regularise their status.

- People should only be in asylum hotels for short times, especially families.

Improve provision in catered accommodation

- Provide access to kitchen facilities.
- Provide access to ingredients and/or money for people to buy and prepare their own food.
- Catered food should be freshly prepared rather than microwave meals.
- People should be given a choice of meals and have input into menus.
- A clear complaints system and accountability for food standards is required, with regular environmental health inspections; the Home Office should hold contractors accountable for the food they deliver.
- Provision should be made for people with religious or medical dietary requirements, and during pregnancy and infancy.

Improve support systems

- Charities and public bodies providing support for people in the asylum system should seek to support people's agency where possible: money is preferable to food parcels; agency and culturally appropriate food is important; and where vouchers are provided these should be redeemable in a wide range of shops.
- Local authorities should support charities to deliver community food projects, and charities should be funded to do so; however, there were equally reservations about whether charities should all be publicly funded, and whether people in the asylum system could feel safe in government funded contexts.
- Councils should work with schools to ensure they are informed about free school meals entitlement.

Interviews

A total of ten interviews were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of food experiences of people seeking asylum in London and examples of positive local action. In some cases, the people we were interviewing had experience of the asylum system themselves.

African Rainbow Family

African Rainbow Family supports people seeking asylum and/ or refugees who are LGBTIQ+ and are people of African and/ or of Black, Asian and minority ethnic heritage. We conducted an interview with team members from African Rainbow Family.

Key points:

- Some food from food banks does not meet cultural preferences.
- Some people struggle to cook the food they get from food banks as they live in Home Office accommodation without access to kitchens, but many people seeking asylum are reliant on this.
- Many people seeking asylum identifying as LGBTQIA+ have experienced aggression and violence towards them because of their identity, which affects their confidence to access support services.
- LGBTQIA+ identifying people seeking asylum may not feel comfortable attending charitable food aid providers particularly when held in places of worship, if there is a perception that they “preach against them”, linked to past experiences of discrimination. This presents an additional barrier to accessing food alongside the general lack of access to money, food, kitchen facilities and language barriers often faced by people seeking asylum.
- Some specific projects exist as safe spaces for LGBTQIA+ migrants e.g. Cafe Queero which is specifically designed for LGBTQIA+ persons to spend time together, cook a meal, and eat together. However, there are few of these projects in London.

Unfold

Unfold are a charity providing mentoring and support to young people and mothers. They are commissioned by Westminster City Council and Kensington and Chelsea Council to provide support to young people and families who are seeking asylum, housed in contingency hotels. We conducted an interview with a staff member at Unfold about their experiences providing support to families in asylum hotels in these boroughs.

Key findings:

- Hotels are not suitable for people and particularly families to be housed in beyond a maximum of a few weeks.
- Across the board the food provided is not appropriate for children, with food being described as too spicy, unpalatable, and not nutritious.
- For families particularly, the ability to prepare their own meals is extremely important. It is dehumanising for people not to be able to have choice and agency of what they are eating and feeding their children for long periods of time, and being able to sit down and eat together as a family is an important part of how families function.
- Parents have shared that many children are losing weight and becoming malnourished, with several being referred for paediatric support due to nutritional issues.

- There is no additional support for infant feeding in terms of additional nutrition for breastfeeding mothers, or with equipment for sterilising and storing bottles.
- There are frequent reports of food which is past its expiry date, or visibly looks and smells expired being served.
- There are very limited fruit and vegetables available for children, with the fruit always being a banana, apple or orange with no variation.
- As a minimum people should have communal space with microwaves where people can warm up their meals and sit down together outside of their bedroom and eat. Having to eat in bedrooms is a driver of recurrent pest infestations.
- Some hotel staff are supportive and well-trained, while others receive no training in safeguarding or trauma-informed practice, meaning support received is inconsistent.
- There are a lot of services for families but there is a gap in support for single people with accessing food outside of the hotels.

Local actions Unfold have taken include:

- The feedback mechanism for residents to comment on the food was not accessible, so Unfold worked with the hotels to make this visible and accessible at the reception. There are still barriers to accessing the form to do with language skills and literacy, as the form is very long and complicated.
- Unfold attends monthly meetings with representatives from Westminster Council, a representative from the Home Office, a representative from Clearsprings, and other VCS organisations. This monthly platform is a beneficial way for stakeholders to raise issues and coordinate responses.
- Unfold are part of a working group of VCS organisations, the family support services of the council and local GP surgeries, which are creating a weekly plan of different places in the community that people can go to cook, access food, and eat community meals.

A London-based healthcare provider

An interview was conducted with a healthcare professional that works with people seeking asylum in several contexts, including people in contingency accommodation, and people experiencing destitution who are undocumented or have had their claim rejected.

“We are supplementing children with nutritional supplements and vitamins because we know that people aren’t getting enough. Earlier this year, they changed the milk provision from whole milk, proper milk, to powdered milk, and that was purely made on a financial decision, so that people stopped drinking as much milk cos it was costing too much.”

Key findings:

- As a healthcare provider, they are frequently treating people with digestive issues related to hotel food such as Irritable Bowel Syndrome and acid reflux, and frequently prescribing medication to people who could be treated with dietary changes.
- The lack of agency around food and lack of ability for parents to feed their children properly deteriorates mental health.
- Insulin-dependent diabetics can’t manage their blood sugar levels without adequate diets.
- Healthcare providers routinely refer people to food banks, but the food is not appropriate as it requires cooking. Some places provide hot meals, but these services are not available every day of the week.
- Having access to kitchens is key and there are good examples of community kitchen spaces – this is the most sustainable option.
- People shouldn’t need to access food aid as adequate meals should be provided in self-catered accommodation.
- The immediate health implications of not having access to a good diet are visible; people with vitamin deficiencies, weight gain, development of pre-diabetes and diabetes, this is not considering likely long-term health outcomes such as cancer.
- It is difficult and sad as a health professional to know that people are being malnourished and parents are not able to feed their children.
- Accommodation providers need to be held accountable for the food that they are delivering. We (taxpayers) are paying for a service, and this has been done well by some providers, and in other places it is not to an acceptable standard – this should be addressed.
- Local authorities should work with local VCS organisations to provide access to community kitchens, meals, and food provision and communicate these services to people seeking asylum.

“The shame is the patients in...[catered accommodation] , they shouldn’t have to be accessing food, they should be provided with food, and by referring them to the centres, we may be taking away food as well from other service users who actually aren’t provided with any food and it’s a really, really difficult one”.

Workshop with local authorities

In January 2024 Sustain held a workshop to identify key areas for local action. The workshop was held at University College London campus with an option for hybrid joining to increase accessibility. 21 people attended in person and 21 attended online, with representatives from 18 London boroughs, as well as the Greater London Authority, VCS organisations, academics, and people with lived experience of the asylum system. Three additional interviews were conducted with local authorities that were not able to attend the workshop but wished to contribute, and information from these interviews have been incorporated into findings from the workshop.

Issues with food access for people seeking asylum

Similar issues that were identified in the focus groups and interviews were highlighted, with concern around food insecurity and physical and mental health outcomes for people seeking asylum, particularly during pregnancy and infancy. There was a strong sense that people seeking asylum are made to feel they do not have a right to expect more, and that there was a sense of cruelty that food is being deliberately used to demoralise and dehumanise people.

It was strongly felt that, on the level of national action, minimum nutrition standards for food in catered accommodation needed to be set for food in line with school food standards, with nutrition and food hygiene standards being monitored and enforced. This again closely echoed calls from people seeking asylum for accountability and quality standards for food in catered accommodation.

To improve food in catered asylum accommodation, suggested actions for local authorities were:

- Urgent reviews of safety of infant feeding in asylum accommodation.
- Work with Environmental Health teams to inspect asylum accommodation and identify if health and safety standards are not being met and take measures to address this.
- Work with hotels to ensure there are effective and accessible feedback mechanisms related to food provision, including an anonymous feedback option.
- Work collaboratively with accommodation contractors and the Home Office to continue a regular dialogue and identify local issues.

To improve access to food for people seeking or refused asylum outside of a catered accommodation context, participants suggested:

- Food strategies and action plans and work of food partnerships should incorporate food access for people with no recourse to public funds including people seeking asylum.

- Local authorities should support and signpost to community food projects that provide access to food and positive food environments.
- Improving access to kitchens was an area of high priority, with current provision not meeting demand. This priority echoed the strong desire, heard from people seeking asylum, to be able to cook for themselves.

Overall, there was an emphasis on collaboration as a productive way forward, both for joint action and in order to gather evidence to shape future policy:

- To prioritise a joined-up approach bringing together a network of local stakeholders to work collaboratively on food and other issues faced by people seeking asylum. This includes relevant council departments and particularly Public Health and Environmental Health teams.
- Establish a space to share resources and good practice between London boroughs.
- Work with local healthcare providers to gather evidence of malnutrition to support making the case for changes at a local and national level.

Barriers faced by local authorities

Local authority representatives' awareness of issues around food and desire for local action was high, but challenges around lack of funding and capacity made this difficult. There was a feeling that local authorities are left to fill gaps at a local level with time being dominated by 'firefighting' against crises such as people being evicted from contingency accommodation at short notice, which overshadowed ability to focus on food. The fast-changing policy landscape was challenging to keep up with, and despite having an awareness of high needs, funding is inadequate to meet this, and provided only on an annual basis making it difficult to plan ahead and retain staff. A key challenge reported was the issue of people being moved at short notice, when the local authority has invested time and money into supporting them, and once moved to a different local authority they can no longer work with them.

Local variation with different providers and uneven standards across accommodation sites were also cited as challenges. Some reported having good relationships with certain hotel managers which made a positive impact on ability to make changes, while others had challenges engaging hotel managers. Many also reported not being aware of good practice in other boroughs.

To support local authorities to work at their best, it was felt changes were needed at the national level. In particular, it was important for the Home Office to:

- Improve notice time around changes to policy, hotel closures, and funding.

- Increase funding to local authorities for work with people seeking asylum and refugees in line with need and provide funding for a minimum of 2-years at a time.

Case studies of good practice

As part of the research, we collected case studies of local action that illustrate aspects of good practice.

Local authorities

Several London boroughs are already working to take local action to improve food experiences of people seeking asylum in the borough, and to work towards being a welcoming place for migrants. Many have become officially recognised as a Borough of Sanctuary through national charity [City of Sanctuary](#).

In this section we include a selection of case studies based on learnings from local authorities we spoke to over the course of the research.

Newham Council – leading on local action

Newham council used funding received to support Ukrainian refugees to develop the Welcome Newham team. This team was later pivoted to also support people seeking asylum in Newham from all countries of origin. Welcome Newham apply a whole-systems approach to providing support and work closely with various council departments, local VCS, and healthcare providers, collaborating on strategic and operational work to support people seeking asylum in the borough. Their work provides a sense of what is possible with strong, joined-up local action, but also the difficulty of picking up national policy failings at the local level. Newham Council have raised the importance of ensuring food safety and nutrition standards are met, while also working to enable positive food experiences, with connections and enjoyment around food. Many people seeking asylum will go on to become permanent residents, and the trauma experienced around food while going through the asylum process will have long-term negative impacts on these future citizens who should be welcomed and supported.

'We try to create a culture and practices of welcome.'

At the time of publication there were four asylum hotels in Newham, with the fifth having recently been closed by the Home Office. Three of these are self-catered, and issues with food in hotels was flagged as a priority to the council. Newham Council are part of several working groups related to health, including one particularly focussed on food for people seeking asylum. This working group included local VCS partners that regularly go into hotels providing support, and can offer insight from what they observe. The council has an attitude of working together with hotels to support and guide them, as well as holding them to account as they are commissioned to feed Newham residents appropriately. The council

meet monthly with the Home Office and Clearsprings Ready Homes to discuss any issues, including around food.

Local actions taken by Newham council and local partners are summarised below:

- The team were receiving reports from GPs of nutrition-related health concerns among people in asylum hotels, and one GP was supported by the Public Health team to carry out a simple audit, evidencing health issues linked to the food provided in hotels.
- The Commercial Environmental Health team applied food safety and hygiene standards ensuring all hotel sites are inspected and statutorily up to date. The team identified a food hygiene rating score for one hotel cater as 1 star - "major improvement needed".
- The health audit and hygiene rating were levers for change and resulted in a new catering provider with an appropriate food hygiene rating, as well as an adjusted meal system to provide a buffet style meal giving residents more choice of what they ate. Feedback on this change has been positive.
- Newham council work closely with Newham Food Alliance, an alliance of 41 organisations locally working on community food provision, including food banks, food clubs, community meals and community kitchen spaces. The council work with and support organisations to identify underlying problems and offer holistic support, in providing positive food spaces where people feel comfortable. They work with Newham's Social Welfare Alliance to offer wraparound support 'to make the food parcel the start of a journey away from needing direct food support'. This includes support for refugees and people seeking asylum in Newham.
- Newham use a place-based approach to signposting people to support services based on community assets near the hotels, ideally within walking distance. There is a dedicated lead in the public health team who works closely with all voluntary partners. The most success is seen when community kitchens and/or free hot meals are close to hotels, and the council has funded and supported these. This gives people the autonomy to cook their own meals, as well as the chance for social and cultural connections around food. The community kitchens and food clubs are also held in community spaces and provide additional activities such as games, arts and crafts, yoga, and Wi-Fi, creating a positive community atmosphere around food.
- To try and address the challenges that some hotels are not near community kitchens, a six-week project delivered by Nutrition Kitchen was trailed, where portable hobs were set up in a community space people seeking asylum were already attending and trusted. This provided space for 12 people each session to cook, and people would cook food for their family which they could take away. Feedback for the project was positive.

'What are we welcoming people into?... [We should] emphasise how important food is in people's lives, and that hotel living is inadequate, how it doesn't create the right kind of welcome to people in this country, how we're adding trauma to trauma by doing this badly.'

Based on their experiences, Newham council have prepared a checklist to support boroughs with people seeking asylum living in Home Office contingency hotels: Improving Food Standards and Safety in Contingency Hotels. This can be accessed by contacting Newham Council's Public Health Team - Matt.Bury@newham.gov.uk .

Waltham Forest Council – local joined up work, partnerships and schools

Waltham Forest launched their Borough of Sanctuary Framework in December 2023, through the national charity [City of Sanctuary](#), and is working closely with other London boroughs that had already achieved this. They have developed a 3-year action plan, incorporating the knowledge, expertise, and experiences of a range of local voices alongside key areas of need and opportunities to empower people seeking sanctuary in the borough. The council brought together key local actors to form a steering group with accountability for the action plan being delivered, including action on food.

Waltham Forest Council work jointly with local VCS partners to offer a variety of support and opportunities for people seeking asylum in the borough, including around food. This includes partnerships with The Hornbeam Centre (see case study) providing kitchen space and ingredients, and with Organiclea, an organic farm and training facility in the borough which offers horticulture training. They worked with local food banks to provide food that was accessible and appropriate for people in asylum hotels, including food that didn't require cooking. Several people volunteered at local food banks to improve their English and other skills, and some food banks with kitchen space enabled cooking sessions. During celebration periods such as Ramadan and Christmas, the council worked with local charities and mosques to drop off food at asylum hotels and provide community Iftar.

At community events open to all residents such as the council-hosted Refugee Week party, people seeking asylum were provided with vouchers to spend with different food vendors. These are the same vouchers provided to staff and volunteers at the events so there was no stigma attached to the vouchers and this enabled people to choose what they wanted.

Waltham Forest Council have worked closely with schools in the borough, reaching out to identify if any eligible children are missing out on free school meals, and inviting people to free breakfast clubs. A weekly evening community meal was also hosted by the catering team at a local school, open to all people seeking sanctuary.

The council works closely with Home Office contingency hotel accommodation providers in the borough, and coordinates a fortnightly meeting with Clearsprings Ready Homes and the Home Office, which were initiated due to safeguarding issues. This regular dialogue has enabled raising of issues and collaborative working to address these. By providing robust evidence in partnership with local healthcare providers about nutrition-related health concerns among children, and food not meeting contracted standards, they were able to support some hotels changing their catering provider. These hotels now provide a hot buffet which residents prefer as they have more choice over what they eat.

Hackney Council – funding community kitchens

Hackney Council has a dedicated team which works with refugees, migrants and people seeking asylum in the borough. In July 2023, a [motion was passed for Hackney to become a Borough of Sanctuary](#) for those fleeing violence and persecution in their own countries. The Council is working with local partners to make Hackney a welcoming place for those seeking sanctuary, which will be reflected in the Council's forthcoming Equality Plan. The Council has also taken steps to tackle food insecurity and inequalities in the borough by passing the [Right to Food motion](#).

There are approximately 800 people in Home Office asylum accommodation in Hackney while they await the outcome of their claim. Several issues have been raised by partners about the quality of hotel food provision and the lack of access to cooking facilities which have resulted in a range of health issues for residents.

Providing access to kitchen facilities was flagged as a priority issue to give people choice and autonomy over what they eat and improve health and wellbeing outcomes. In response, Hackney Council has allocated grant funding of up to £80,000 for not-for-profit organisations to deliver a community kitchen project close to asylum accommodation to support people seeking asylum to cook independently. The project will begin in Spring 2024 for up to 12 months, subject to successful delivery.

Brent Council - sharing meals and cultures

Brent council funds and organises a regular men's group for people in asylum accommodation in the borough. The group is held at a community venue close to an asylum hotel, and offers a safe space where the men can come together and socialise, as well as having access to health information and other support. Each week they cook together, sharing recipes from each other's cultures and a nutritious meal, which they plate up and eat together in a social space. As well as

food, they share music, stories, and memories of home and happier times. Staff members meet the men at their asylum accommodation, and they go food shopping together and walk to the venue. This helps motivate groups members and feel supported to attend.

At first it was difficult to engage people in the group, but trusting relationships were built up over time, and people soon became regular attendees. The group members now look forward to the weekly activity, with about 15 men attending each week.

Westminster City Council– raising residents’ voices

The Early Help team at Westminster City Council sits within Children’s Services and supports young families across the six asylum hotels currently in the borough. They work closely with the charity Unfold in supporting families and children seeking asylum. Collaboratively, they held a focus group at a local children’s centre for women in asylum hotels, which was funded by the Council. This gave mothers the chance to voice their experiences and concerns to a representative from Clearsprings Ready Homes, who was in attendance. Interpreters were present, and a shared, culturally appropriate lunch was provided.

Participants reported raising complaints about food but hearing nothing back and not being able to access the feedback form, and it became apparent that hotels had not been made aware of feedback and complaints made via Migrant Help. Participants raised several issues around food quality including concerns around lack of support or equipment for safe infant feeding. This resulted in the agreement that people would be notified ahead of visits by the Outreach Officer from Clearsprings Ready Homes to hotels so they could provide direct feedback, as well as a QR code to be provided to a feedback form, and a follow up meeting with Unfold and the Council being scheduled.

Learnings shared by the Council included:

- Unfold is a trusted provider and the children’s centre was a space that people were familiar with and felt safe in, this was important for engaging people, particularly due to emotive topics being discussed around inadequate food provision for children.
- Childcare was provided so mothers could bring their children, and this wasn’t a barrier to participation.
- Language barriers were a challenge, and having interpreters available was vital so that everyone present could understand and express themselves.
- Providing a buffet-style meal to share which was enjoyable and culturally appropriate was an important part of the experience.

Voluntary and Community Sector organisations

In this section we include a selection of case studies based on learnings from community food projects we spoke to over the course of the research, which are supporting people seeking asylum to have positive experiences with food.

The Hornbeam Centre (Waltham Forest)



[Image credit: Isabel Rice]

'The pace of life here is very fast, but in my country, we love to cook, breakfast, lunch and dinner, cooking is so important to us.'

The Hornbeam Centre in Walthamstow is a community food hub focused on redistributing surplus food and empowering communities to mutually support one another. They operate a food redistribution network, a community café and People's Kitchen, as well as coordinating several food cooperatives and other community food projects. They are a founding member of Waltham Forest's Food Partnership.

With funding and support from Waltham Forest Council, Hornbeam open their catering kitchen weekly to provide a positive kitchen environment for people housed locally in asylum hotels who have no kitchen facilities. The project is supervised by staff with food hygiene training, some of whom are multilingual. The project is advertised at the hotels with an email address which people can contact to book a slot, either for individual households or groups. Each household are provided with £40 to spend on ingredients, as well as access to surplus food and staples such as oil and spices available at the centre. They can eat the food there and/or take it away with them, often they are keen to share the food with others.

This project is extremely popular, and demand far outstrips availability of the kitchen, as the funding only allows to open the kitchen one day a week. Additionally, as Hornbeam is a vegan café they do not allow service users to cook meat, which can be an issue. They are exploring working with other community spaces such as

religious spaces, schools and community centres to allow more people to access the kitchens and cook a wider range of meals.

Hornbeam offers weekly bags of surplus food groceries to people seeking asylum, including produce such as vegetables, herbs, fruit and eggs. This is popular, but compared to the People's Kitchen the food offered in the weekly bags does not involve choice.

During the summer, in partnership with Waltham Forest Council, the Hornbeam Centre helped to host barbeques for people seeking asylum to choose what they wanted to cook (including meat products), share the meals together, as well as games and communal time outdoors, which were also very popular.

Granville Community Kitchen (Brent)



[Image credit: Granville Community Kitchen]

Granville Community Kitchen (GCK) is a community-centred organisation in South Kilburn based on principles of dignity, equity and justice, care and integrity. They run a community kitchen, an urban garden and their Good Food Box scheme, offering different sizes of weekly organic, culturally appropriate veg bags. Produce is currently procured from Better Food Shed, local suppliers and their own urban garden, with a 3-tiered solidarity pricing model to allow more people to access the scheme. They also offer a small surplus food aid delivery offer to certain groups including those who are housebound and people with no recourse to public funds.

In partnership with In the Mix and another Sufi organisation, GCK run twice weekly community meals on a Wednesday and Friday at 6pm. These originated at the Granville and until recently took place there, but now due to redevelopment they run from temporary locations in the area. Each Wednesday, refugees and people seeking asylum come to use the kitchen and cook a variety of dishes from their cultures. Ingredients are provided to the volunteer cooks who specify what they

want to cook, and staff with food hygiene training are on site to support. The cooks are celebrated for preparing a delicious meal and able to share food from their cultures. This weekly event supports people seeking asylum in local temporary accommodation who often do not have access to adequate kitchen facilities or income to buy food to cook the meals they want. However, the meals are inclusive of refugees and people seeking asylum, and at the same time open to anyone and everyone in the local community.

The weekly community meal has a positive and fun atmosphere, sharing not only nutritious food, but music, laughter, and games. As well as connecting around eating, it helps with social isolation, and offers a safe space where people can get help from trusted people with tasks like filling in forms, making appointments, or signposting for support. GCK also supplies SIM cards, which are often overlooked as an essential, and has connections to organisations that offer support such as free clothing. GCK are predominantly funded by grants from organisations such as the Roddick Foundation and Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, as well as some private donors. They have had financial support from Brent Council in the past through Brent Health Matters.

EASE Ealing

EASE Ealing are a registered charity working with refugees and people seeking asylum in Ealing. EASE was set up by the community in January 2022, as it had been identified there was a gap in support for this community in the borough. EASE has grown from providing a small weekly drop in to supporting over 130 people each week, with a variety of activities including legal advice, English classes and signposting to support services. EASE were recognised as one of the Mayor of Ealing's 'chosen' charities in 2023-24.

Issues around food have been flagged to EASE, with people reporting lacking access to kitchen facilities, money, food, and communal dining spaces, leading to demoralisation and feeling disempowered. This is particularly painful for mothers who are not able to cook for their family.

"[The situation with food] really contributes to feelings of isolation and being stunted, held back, and the negative long-term impact goes against fostering a sense of society and community and makes people feel negative about being in the UK and part of the community. It's a lot more than just changing how they eat; it's how they go on to perceive living in the UK."

EASE run several food support projects at a church in Acton, including lunch at each weekly drop in. People volunteer to cook and choose the dish they want to prepare, allowing people to share meals from their culture with others. These are shared in a

communal dining space with a friendly atmosphere, allowing people to relax and enjoy a positive, convivial food experience. This encourages social integration and a feeling of togetherness, particularly important for people in asylum accommodation who may not have many opportunities for socialising. Feedback for the meals is overwhelmingly positive, with the volunteer chefs being proud to be able to share their food with others, and the guests feeling satisfied after a delicious meal. During Ramadan they provide meals for people to take away and break their fast with.

EASE provide free groceries based on surplus food received from the Felix Project and City Harvest, as well as providing rice, oil, tinned tomatoes, and pulses, which were identified as key staples that people would like the security of receiving weekly. Additionally, EASE provide supermarket vouchers to enable choice, and are exploring providing vouchers for local shops with a wider range of ingredients from different cultures. They work to ensure groceries are split fairly.

EASE host workshops to support people with the transition from receiving asylum support and living in asylum accommodation, to having their claim accepted. This can happen suddenly, and EASE have seen several people made homeless as they may receive a short eviction notice, which does not give them adequate time to access benefits and housing support which take several weeks to set up. EASE work with local charities to give people seeking asylum volunteering opportunities, allowing them to practice English and other skills, as well as offering enjoyable and sociable experiences.

EASE work closely with the homelessness team in Ealing Council, with caseworkers attending the weekly drop in and EASE referring people directly to them. EASE are keen to work with local stakeholders and Council departments to raise the agenda of issues for people seeking asylum in the borough.

Hear Our Voices – The Big Listening Project (Barnet)

In the London Borough of Barnet, there are five asylum hotels hosting with approximately 6,000 meals a day being provided. Local VCS organisations providing support to people seeking asylum have come together to try and make change with and for the community. This includes:

- Barnet Citizens, the local chapter of [Citizens UK](#), who run a number of ongoing campaign projects including catering and free bus travel for people seeking asylum.
- One of the members of Barnet Citizens is [Finchley Progressive Synagogue](#), whose support includes a weekly drop-in for hotel residents and developing an allotment for growing fresh food.
- [New Citizens' Gateway](#), who provide front line support, including emergency support, cooking sessions and an allotment for growing fresh food.

- The Persian Advice Bureau, who provide front line support including Legal Aid Immigration and Asylum advice.

Led by Barnet Citizens, in April 2023 they started The Big Listening Project, to learn which key issues are faced by people in asylum accommodation, in order to determine how volunteers could assist the residents in improving their living conditions through grassroots campaigning. 100 residents of the hotels shared the challenges they faced living in the hotels, then voted on the principal issues they wished to focus on, one of which was food. Specific concerns reported included poor taste, low-quality ingredients, and lack of fresh food. Further grievances related to the meal service included limited variety, small portions, and culturally inappropriate meals. Serious health implications were reported, with case studies collected including a child which was so short for their age that their school uniform was not available in their size, and a mother and baby both being admitted to hospital due to malnutrition.

The team worked with residents to collect evidence of issues with meals, with images collected showing meals that were not as described and visibly sub-standard, in some cases having insects, undercooked meat, or mould present. Meals were not consistent across hotels, with some having a better food provision than others. Evidence was also collected relating to malnutrition and health concerns related to food. This work was co-produced with hotel residents, and some of the those involved have now gone on to be employed by the charities. The evidence compiled was presented to the Council and to Clearsprings Ready Homes, and will be used to campaign for change. One hotel has already responded positively to the research, and has set up a monthly dialogue with the hotel manager and chef to discuss the menu for next month with residents and take their views into account. This has not cost the hotel extra money, but importantly has allowed a channel for feedback. An additional outcome of the campaign work is that the Council now convenes regular meetings with local charities, hotel managers, Clearsprings Ready Homes, and Council officers including members of their Public Health team, to look specifically at the issue of hotel food.

JRS UK (London)

Some partners involved in this research have experience of providing food support to people seeking asylum: [JRS UK](#) provides food to people refused asylum and declared appeals rights exhausted, as part of holistic support, through a "shop" where those receiving support from JRS UK can come and choose the food they want. The selection includes both cupboard staples and fresh food, and special provision is made for medical dietary requirements. JRS UK also provides a hot meal cooked by a team of refugee volunteers twice a month at a Social Drop-In; and

regular hardship grants on prepaid Equals Cards that function as credit or debit cards, and with which cash can be withdrawn. Service users explain that they find agency in being able to choose food, rather than simply given a parcel and in having an Equals Card.

Recommendations

This research sought to learn from people's lived experiences of food in the asylum system, to highlight issues across different types of accommodation, and to identify key areas for local action to improve people's food experiences and access. We recognise that resources and capacity are often overstretched, and local authorities are operating within a challenging and rapidly changing national policy context.

While this research has focussed on London, several of the good practice examples and recommendations are applicable in other places. Additionally, while the research focusses primarily on recommendations for local action to improve food access for people seeking asylum and refugees, the national policy context greatly impacts on the extent to which local actors can improve access to healthy food. Therefore, we also identify recommendations for national action.

We also heard in our research that food insecurity and malnutrition sit within the wider context of an asylum system that is too often inhumane, denies people dignity, and forces them into poverty. Our hope is that addressing the vital issue of food insecurity and malnutrition may be part of building a more welcoming asylum system.

Recommendations for local action

We recommend The Greater London Authority to:

- Support opportunities for local authorities and other key local actors to convene and share good practice around food access and health.

To develop collaboration, we recommend councils to:

- Bring together local stakeholders, including relevant council departments (e.g. public health, environmental health, children's services and homelessness teams), VCS organisations, and public health bodies for joined up work on improving food access and health for people seeking asylum in the borough, and include work on food support in council plans and strategies.
- Convene regular meetings with accommodation contractors and the Home Office regarding local issues, to enable collaborative working.
- Work with local healthcare providers on nutritional health audits of patients that are seeking asylum to inform nutrition standard monitoring and evidence areas of concern. Care should be taken that audits are de-identified and do not involve personal data.
- Consider applying to become a Borough of Sanctuary via City of Sanctuary UK, and ensure that food and nutrition is included in Borough of Sanctuary action plans.

To improve provision of food in catered asylum accommodation and ensure robust accountability we recommend councils to:

- Work with their Public Health team to urgently review safety of infant feeding, complete an infant feeding checklist with each hotel every 6-9 months and provide supporting guidance and resources to hotels.
- Work with the Environmental Health team to carry out health and safety inspections, and work with hotel managers to replace any providers which are not meeting food hygiene standards, and ensure hotels have systems in place for reporting food-related illness.
- Support hotel managers with the setup of effective feedback mechanisms around food, including anonymous mechanisms and focus group spaces.

To ensure precarious immigration status is not a barrier to accessing healthy and nutritious food we recommend councils to:

- Widen the eligibility criteria for existing financial support programmes to include residents without recourse to public funds.
- Widen the eligibility for council-funded community food so that they are accessible to residents without access to public funds. This should include breakfast clubs, holiday provision, and food aid.
- Work with schools to ensure they are aware of free school meal eligibility for people without recourse to public funds, measure uptake and support registration.
- Provide targeted financial and/or in-kind assistance for people without recourse to public funds, which enable people to access food meeting cultural preferences and dietary requirements.
- Ensure commissioned VCS organisations can negotiate contracts that preserve their independence and protect the confidentiality of their service users.
- Ensure robust data protection policies, and clear communication to people seeking support how their data will be used.

To increase provision of food we recommend councils to:

- Fund and support projects and organisations supplying food, particularly those providing access to kitchen space and home cooked meals. Develop a directory of these projects in the borough which can be shared in asylum accommodation and with frontline services.
- Support emergency food aid providers and/or community food projects to include foods from a variety of cuisines which are appropriate to diverse cultures, and work to ensure food aid is accessible to people seeking asylum.
- Consider introducing vouchers schemes such as Rose Vouchers to improve access to fruit and vegetables, which can be redeemed in a variety of shops and markets.

- Create targeted support for food insecure families with infant children, including people seeking asylum, as outlined by [UNICEF UK in their guidance to local authorities](#). This should include support to access infant formula.

We recommend food partnerships and alliances to:

- Invite local actors working with people seeking asylum to contribute to partnership work, and to include food support for people seeking asylum in plans and strategies.

We recommend contracted accommodation providers to:

- Ensure hotels have a regular dialogue with residents using at least two types of feedback: anonymous and regular small focus groups. Focus groups should bring together people with common social and cultural needs.
- Collaborate with the council and other local stakeholders by attending regular meetings to address issues.

Recommendations for national action

We recommend the Home Office to:

- Address the root causes driving food insecurity and malnutrition by increasing asylum support rates, allowing people seeking asylum to work, and expanding Healthy Start to people without recourse to public funds. Ensure people refused asylum can access support, including by empowering local authorities to support to them.
- Work with contracted accommodation providers to urgently instate processes to assess whether food meets Home Office standards of hygiene and nutrition particularly during infancy, childhood, pregnancy and for breastfeeding mothers, and for people with medical dietary requirements.
- Raise catered food standards to meet the school food standards.
- Reduce the amount of time people spend in hotels and hostels, particularly families with children. People seeking asylum should be housed in accommodation with kitchen facilities and integrated in local communities.
- Allow people with Section 4 support to withdraw cash from their ASPEN cards to allow wider food choices.
- Address the precarity of funding for local authorities by providing funding on at least a 2-year cycle to enable effective allocation of funding and increase overall amount of funding.
- Improve forward planning so that asylum accommodations are not closed without adequate warning to local authorities and residents.

- To remove barriers to people with precarious immigration status accessing nutritional and financial support, end data-sharing between public bodies and other organisations, and the Home Office for immigration purposes.

We recommend the Department of Education to:

- Help drive uptake of free school meals among people without recourse to public funds by implementing a data-sharing firewall to prevent local data on free school meals eligibility from being shared with the Home Office and invest in a communications campaign for schools and local authorities.

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About JRS UK

The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) supports refugees and forcibly displaced in 50 countries worldwide. [JRS](#) in the UK works with people who have been made destitute by the asylum process, and typically have experience of a range of different types of asylum support; and with people in immigration detention. Supporting destitute people seeking asylum across London, JRS UK runs a drop-in providing food and other essential items, a legal advice service, activities, a hosting scheme (At Home), a house for destitute asylum seeking women, and a house for destitute asylum seeking men; detention outreach services to Heathrow Immigration Removal Centre; and a post-detention support project. They also conduct research on the asylum system and immigration detention. Their centre is based in Wapping, East London. For more information, contact sophie.cartwright@jrs.net.

About the London Food Poverty Campaign

The [London Food Poverty Campaign](#) is funded by [Trust for London](#) and works collaboratively with the Greater London Authority, London councils, food networks and food justice organisations to promote policy and practice that tackles the root causes of food poverty, with our Beyond the Food Bank approach. As well as the annual [Good Food Local: the London report](#), the team supports councils year-round with developing joined-up and strategic food poverty work, and runs projects focussing on the lived experience of minoritised groups at higher risk of food insecurity, to develop good practice recommendations. For more information contact isabel@sustainweb.org.

About Life Seekers Aid

Life Seekers Aid is a new organisation, run by people seeking asylum and refugees. It began life as CROP, short for Camp Residents of Penally. This was the residents' union organised in 2020 inside Penally Camp, one of the Ministry of Defence sites used by the Home Office as contingency accommodation for asylum seekers during the COVID-19 lockdown. After the closure of Penally Camp, they reinvented themselves as Life Seekers Aid, and turned to try and help people seeking asylum in the UK. Life Seekers Aid currently works for the welfare and rights of people seeking asylum housed in camps, hostels and hotels during their asylum claims and cooperating with local and national charities, legal and medical organisations, and official bodies.

**Contact: Isabel Rice, London Food Poverty Campaign Coordinator, Sustain.
isabel@sustainweb.org**

Sustain is a powerful alliance of over 100 member organisations, and communities, working together for a better system of food, farming, and fishing, and cultivating the movement for change. www.sustainweb.org

¹ Asylum Matters: COVID-19 Briefing: Asylum Seekers and the Right to Food 2021. <https://asylummatters.org/2021/09/06/asylum-and-food-security-our-briefing-with-sustain/>

² In this report, we refer primarily to 'people seeking asylum' to refer to those waiting for a decision on their claims, and people who are navigating the fresh claims system. The term 'asylum seeker' is also commonly used.

³United Nations Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951): https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_CONF.2_108.pdf

⁴ <https://freemovement.org.uk/what-is-the-difference-between-refugee-status-and-humanitarian-protection/>

⁵ Refugee Action (2020) <https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Lift-The-Ban-Common-Sense.pdf>

⁶ Freedom from Torture, *Lessons not learned: 15 years of failure to improve asylum decision-making* (2019). <https://www.freedomfromtorture.org/news/lessons-not-learned-report-september-2019>

⁷ Under (Section 4 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999)

⁸ <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/ln-2018-0064>.
<https://www.qherson.com/blog/what-is-compliant-environment/>

⁹ UNHCR (2023): <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/what-we-do/uk-asylum-and-policy-and-illegal-migration-act/uk-asylum-and-policy-and-illegal>

¹⁰ <https://www.irsuk.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Briefing-JRS-UK-and-SVP-The-Illegal-Migration-Bill-Lords-committee-stage.pdf>

¹¹ Briefing: Assessment of Impact of inadmissibility, removals, detention, accommodation and safe routes (2023) <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/information/resources/illegal-migration-bill-impact-assessment/>.

¹² Home Office (2023): <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-december-2023/summary-of-latest-statistics#how-many-people-do-we-grant-protection-to>

¹³ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn01403/>

¹⁴ <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/latest/news/thousands-of-new-refugees-face-destitution-and-homelessness-after-being-told-to-leave-their-accommodation-at-short-notice/>

¹⁵ For detail, see JRSUK (2023) :https://www.irsuk.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/JRS-UK-Report-Napier-Barracks-the-inhumane-reality_March-2023_WEB.pdf; and Helen Bamber Foundation (2023): https://www.helenbamber.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/HBF%20HRNF%20Ghettoised%20and%20traumatised_report%20on%20Wethersfield_December23.pdf

¹⁶ Asylum Housing in Yorkshire: a case study of two dispersal areas (June 2022): https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10177550/1/Report_Online.pdf ; and Asylum Accommodation Replacing Compass (House of Commons, December 2018): <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmhaff/1758/175803.htm> .

¹⁷ For more details see <https://righttoremain.org.uk/toolkit/asylum-support/>

¹⁸ Asylum Matters: COVID-19 Briefing: Asylum Seekers and the Right to Food (2021):<https://asylummatters.org/2021/09/06/asylum-and-food-security-our-briefing-with-sustain/>

¹⁹ <https://www.migranhelpuk.org/pages/faqs/category/aspen>

²⁰ JRS UK (2018): <https://www.irsuk.net/out-in-the-cold/>

²¹ Limited or no access to the kitchen whilst sofa-surfing was a recurring theme in surveys JRS UK conducted with destitute people refused asylum, in London, between September-November 2023. Publication of the findings of these surveys is forthcoming.

²²Praxis (2022): https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d91f87725049149378f82/t/63186861cca3cf5bdab6afde/1662543970104/FSM+and+children+with+NRF+briefing_September+2022+public+2.pdf