

Immigration and asylum

Asylum seekers crammed into rat-infested rooms

'Guest houses' provided by Home Office contractor unfit for habitation, say lawyers

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Hundreds of asylum seekers have been crammed into a network of “guest houses” provided by a [Home Office](#) contractor that are overrun by cockroaches, rats and mice, the Guardian has learned.

Lawyers shown footage recorded by the Guardian - which reveals that families of four are sharing small double beds and are being crammed into spaces so small that they are barely able to walk around their rooms - said that the conditions could constitute statutory overcrowding and an environment unfit for human habitation.

One lawyer branded the conditions “depraved” and accused the home secretary, Priti Patel, of being “slum landlord in chief”.

The buildings of the Maharaja Guest House in Southall, west [London](#), are infested with tens of thousands of cockroaches, which feed on the residents’ food. In one of the kitchens seen by the Guardian, more than 100 cockroaches scattered when just one cupboard was opened.

The managers, [Mylondonlets.co.uk](#), advertise rooms priced from £40 per night. The company is paid by the Home Office’s accommodation contractor for Wales and the south of England, Clearsprings Ready Homes, to house asylum seekers. The MyLondonLets website says it is “working in partnership” with a number of councils including Ealing, where the properties seen by the Guardian are located.

The website appeals for new properties and states: “HMOs (houses in multiple occupation) are far more profitable to run than other types of residential lettings with rental incomes often two to three times those of single households.”

But that profitability appears to come at a cost. Residents of the four buildings that constitute the Maharaja Guest House interviewed by the Guardian say that rats gnaw through the plastic of bottles of cooking oil to drink the oil, while mothers reported infestations of mice and say that large rats run up their children’s legs and walk across their faces while they sleep.

It is understood that there have been recurring issues with the property. The buildings were inspected earlier this year by UK visas and immigration (UKVI). Infestations were found but it was claimed that they had been cleared.

Ealing council said on Wednesday that it would be organising new inspections as soon as possible.

One mother of two said: “We are just breathing here, we are not living. The beds are not just where we sleep but our living room, our dining area, our laundry drying area and the study area for our children. The springs on the mattresses are oozing and they are full of bugs. The bed has become our whole world.”

She said that the accommodation providers expected her two children, a girl and a boy, aged eight and nine, to share a bed.

“I think the Home Office encourages this type of thing,” she said. “It’s all part of the hostile environment. It’s as if they’re sending a message to us saying: ‘if you can’t take it here go home’.”



▲ Hundreds of cockroaches roam freely in kitchen of Southall accommodation - video

The rooms seen by the Guardian are so overcrowded that typically an entire family’s living space is all but taken up by a double bed that they share. There is just one washing machine for hundreds of asylum seekers. A notice in the kitchen threatens anyone who leaves unwashed dishes in the sink with eviction. In some parts of the building up to 10 residents are expected to share one small bathroom.

Outside the property, piles of rubbish constituting a fire risk are stacked up behind a gate.

Conditions at the Maharaja Guest House have come to light at a time when the Home Office is implementing new accommodation contracts following

criticism of previous arrangements. In its investigation into Home Office accommodation published in January 2017 the [home affairs select committee](#) found that the contracts were not working after finding many problems with vermin, unclean surroundings and inadequate support for vulnerable people. It branded some of the accommodation a disgrace and said it was shameful to place vulnerable people there.

The Home Office is legally obliged to provide accommodation for destitute asylum seekers - most fall into this category. The department has just published a [booklet](#) for asylum seekers outlining what they can expect in their accommodation. According to the booklet “promoting your wellbeing” is a key priority.

Asylum seekers are told they can expect a table, one dining chair, one armchair or sofa seat per person and reasonable access to laundry facilities. Those amenities did not appear to be generally available to residents in the accommodation seen by the Guardian. Asylum seekers use suitcases as wardrobes in the absence of sufficient storage space and to protect their belongings from cockroaches.

Toufique Hossain of Duncan Lewis Solicitors said: “These conditions are depraved. The secretary of state is the slum landlord-in-chief. We are talking about deeply traumatised people. They have seen and experienced horrors that they will never shake. And here they are, in the United Kingdom, made to sleep with cockroaches. It is inhuman and degrading.”

William Ford, a specialist housing solicitor at Osbornes Law, said the conditions were “very concerning”. While he said that it was typically difficult to enforce housing standards for asylum seekers, he added: “The conditions described are likely to breach environmental health legislation as well as statutory rules on overcrowding.”

A second woman who has a baby and a seven-year-old is living in a small room. “We have had to go without heating or hot water for months at a time,” she said.

A third woman said that she and her two daughters aged four and seven were all forced to share a small double bed in a room so small they can only manoeuvre themselves around the bed sideways. It is impossible for the girls to play in the room so they have to play in the dirty corridor or on a filthy staircase.

An [official report](#) published last November into standards of asylum seeker accommodation said it had been challenging to extract necessary information from the Home Office. It found that the Home Office’s contract compliance team had just nine contract compliance officials to inspect 1,691 initial accommodation bed spaces and 11,719 dispersed accommodation bed spaces. Of 8,313 properties inspected over nearly two years just 1,988 - 24% - were compliant, with 43% assessed as “not fit for purpose” or “urgent”.

Alice Lucas, Advocacy and Policy Manager for [Refugee Rights Europe](#), which has carried out research on poor standards in Home Office accommodation, said the findings were “shocking”. “Worryingly, this does not appear to be an isolated incident,” she added. “It is high time that the UK government take urgent steps to improve conditions.”

A Home Office spokesperson said the department took the wellbeing of asylum seekers “extremely seriously”.

“We demand the highest standards from our contractors and their accommodation,” they said. “Where there is any suggestion they are not meeting the terms of their contract we will take immediate action.”

An Ealing Council spokeswoman said: “These four properties are licenced to house 80 people in total. We have not been made aware of any issues outside of a single, anonymous complaint in relation to uncollected rubbish and possible pests at one property. But with this information we will be issuing notices to inspect all properties as soon as possible.”

Clearsprings Ready Homes and MyLondonLets did not respond to requests for comment.

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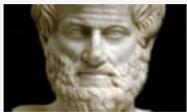
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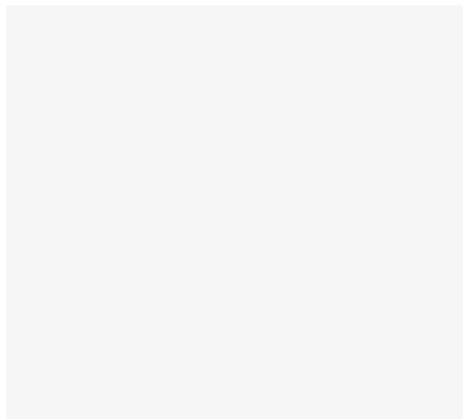
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Asylum Seekers Made To Live In ‘Guest Houses’ Infested By Rats And Cockroaches



By [Meka Beresford](#)
Freelance News Editor
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Rats, mice, and cockroaches are ruling asylum seeker ‘guesthouses’, where families are confined to small, overcrowded rooms with little sleeping space, that are being run by a contractor on behalf of the Home Office.

[The Guardian](#) gained access to and filmed inside of the Maharaja Guesthouse, made up of four houses home to hundreds of asylum seekers in Southall, where rooms cost £40 a night for a small double bed which would sleep a family of four.

Inside the buildings, the news outlet filmed rodents and insects that infest the homes, with one clip showing over 100 cockroaches scatter out of a kitchen cupboard.

The houses are managed by [My London Lets](#) and paid for by [Clearsprings Ready Homes](#), a Home Office accommodation contractor.

‘Rats Run On My Children’s Faces’



Image Credit: [Pexels](#)

Talking to the Guardian, families described the conditions that they were forced to live in, with one mother claiming that rats would run over her children's faces whilst they slept at night.

Another mother of an eight-year-old girl and nine-year-old boy, who have to share a bed, said that their mattress functioned not only as a sleeping area but also as their only living space.

"We are just breathing here, we are not living. The beds are not just where we sleep but our living room, our dining area, our laundry drying area and the study area for our children. The springs on the mattresses are oozing and they are full of bugs. The bed has become our whole world," she said.

Toufique Hossain, of Duncan Lewis Solicitors, commented on some of the films taken inside of the property and described the conditions as "depraved".

"The secretary of state is the slum landlord-in-chief. We are talking about deeply traumatised people. They have seen and experienced horrors that they will never shake. And here they are, in the United Kingdom, made to sleep with cockroaches. It is inhuman and degrading," Hossain said.

A Hostile Environment



Image Credit: [Flickr](#)

The mother believed that they were being subjected to the conditions because of [hostile environment policies](#).

"I think the Home Office encourages this type of thing. It's all part of the hostile environment. It's as if they're sending a message to us saying: 'if you can't take it here go home'," she said.

The "hostile environment policy" [was introduced](#) when now-Prime Minister Theresa May was the Home Secretary in 2012.

It is the name given to a set of administrative and legislative measures designed to make staying in the UK as difficult as possible for people who do not have a leave to remain – and to force them to leave voluntarily.

As a result, many migrants and families struggle to access the rights set out by the [European Convention on Human Rights](#) – and ratified in UK law under the [Human Rights Act 1998](#).

A spokesperson for the Home Office said that they took the wellbeing of asylum seekers "extremely seriously".

"We demand the highest standards from our contractors and their accommodation. Where there is any suggestion they are not meeting the terms of their contract we will take immediate action," they added.

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