FROM SURVIVING TO THRIVING:

Preventing homelessness in Greater Manchester among people recently granted refugee status

POLICY BRIEFING

boaztrust

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Following the refugee homelessness crisis that emerged in the summer of 2023 (caused by a combination of the Home Office's new streamlined asylum processing and an administrative change around the ending of asylum support), the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) developed their Refugee Welcome Programme. As part of this, Boaz Trust was funded by GMCA to provide tailored outreach support, designed to help individuals across Greater Manchester with refugee status to access private rented accommodation. This year-long pilot project was the Refugee Homelessness Prevention Project (RHPP).

This policy briefing is based on our report containing the findings of qualitative research with individuals who experienced homelessness after being granted refugee status, and who subsequently accessed the RHPP. It includes accounts of their experiences and challenges (related to housing and homelessness) upon being granted refugee status. It also includes the learnings and reflections of the RHPP team.

Those interviewed for this report had endured a difficult and depriving asylum process before finally being granted refugee status, and went on to experience a complex and unclear move-on period, often marked by poor communication and overwhelming complexity. As a result, participants became homeless due to vulnerabilities that were compounded by the asylum and move-on processes; specifically a lack of financial and housing access, as well as the knowledge and tools needed to begin an independent life in the UK.

After leaving their asylum accommodation (either dispersed accommodation or hotels) and becoming homeless, participants most commonly approached their local authority for support where they had varied experiences, particularly during their homelessness assessments. Most participants passed through some form of emergency or transitional housing provided by local authorities (some individuals were still experiencing street homelessness at the initial point of contact with the RHPP team) and went on to engage with the RHPP, predominantly via LA referrals.

None of the participants interviewed expressed a preference for social housing or privately rented housing at any point when asked, challenging the assumption that individuals with refugee status are solely seeking council homes. Additionally, across RHPP, most people wanted to stay in the borough they were granted refugee status in. However, participants also indicated a willingness to relocate if housing opportunities were available. Ultimately, all participants in the research were able to move into housing with the support of the RHPP.

The trauma-informed approach of the project was widely appreciated, especially when compared to previous experiences related to housing. Recommendations were made by participants to further improve and expand the service, including the need to reach people earlier, before exiting asylum support (accommodation and financial support provided by the Home Office).

A key learning that emerged from the study was the lack of effective social integration activities for individuals while in the asylum system. Participants identified this as a major barrier to engaging and integrating in their new communities, and beginning a productive life that could enable them to contribute to the economy and wider society. Being denied the right to work while in the asylum system, as well as the decimation of ESOL provision for people seeking asylum, meant that individuals had further and compounding challenges to overcome, which intersected with their ability to secure and afford housing options.

In the midst of a national housing crisis, there are clearly no easy answers. However, what this research shows is that regional place-based responses can help to meet very specific challenges that councils are facing. With the right kind of investment (in the broadest sense of the word) homelessness among people newly granted refugee status can be addressed and meaningful housing solutions can be found.

KEY FINDINGS

The move-on period is too short and too complex

The move-on period of 28 days (at the time of writing temporarily extended from 28 to 56 days) is not nearly long enough for individuals to set up necessary administrative functions (such as opening a bank account and a Universal Credit account), understand and navigate the UK housing system and, subsequently, find and secure housing.

Interviewees described a rushed and unclear move-on period, characterised by poor communication and overwhelming complexity. Individuals lacked the financial means to pay for housing deposits and rent advances, and spoke of being unable to provide references or guarantors for prospective landlords. In addition, most had limited or no knowledge of how to navigate the private rental market.

As a result of the complexities of the move-on period and the lack of support available to people during this transition period, many of the participants became homeless.

> *"After I have been granted the status I have been served with an eviction notice. I went to the council, they did not help as I do not have a priority. I did not know what to do. I just moved [in] with a friend in Oldham. At some point I had to leave the friend's house and stay at Oldham in the street."* **(Abi)**

People's experiences of homelessness assessments varied greatly

All participants except one had undergone a homelessness assessment and were subsequently classified as no-priority need for housing due to them being single individuals without any significant health diagnoses, or additional vulnerabilities.

The duration and depth of homelessness assessments varied significantly. Some participants received a face-to-face assessment, while others underwent a remote assessment by phone. We know from our broader support work with individuals with refugee status that people can often experience lengthy wait times (upwards of 2 hours) when telephoning for a homelessness assessment and that, as experienced by at least one person interviewed, it is not uncommon for individuals to be disconnected whilst waiting for their call to be answered.

Interviewees' experiences of the assessment varied; some described brief interviews while others spoke of lengthy, interrogative two-hour sessions. Some participants suggested that the process they went through was less trauma-informed than it ought to have been and one person even compared it to their substantive asylum interview with the Home Office, expressing a strong negative emotional response.

> *"My homelessness assessment took place over the phone and lasted about an hour and a half. They asked many questions about my home country, my journey to the UK, whether I had any dependents, my background, and where I wished to live. Then they explained the council's challenges, including financial pressures and a shortage of available housing. This left me feeling confused, though I remained hopeful that I had answered everything correctly. At the very end of the call, they told me they had no resources and advised me to approach another council. Honestly, the Home Office interview felt easier than this phone call."* **(Pezhad)**

Overstretched council resources result in overstretched services

Following homelessness assessments where participants were informed they had no priority for housing, there was little time for follow up, support or guidance. The repeated message from local authorities that they could not help added to participants' feelings of being alone.

When interviewees spoke about their interactions with council staff, a recurring theme was the lack of clarity as to what they should do after being identified as non-priority need for housing. Participants - wrongly or rightly - expected council staff to advise them of how they could find somewhere to live. There was also frustration expressed that some people experienced a more compassionate response, or that they knew of others who they believed to be in the same situation as them who had been housed.

After triangulating these findings with the RHPP team, it was understood that the negative encounters individuals reported with local authorities is often a reflection of the demand placed upon them. It isn't that councils do not want to help, but rather that the need for housing - and their services - far outstrips the current supply.

> *"With the council you feel it depends on your luck and your case worker, some people got houses, some people ended up being homeless and others never experienced homelessness; their case workers helped them. It didn't feel fair or equal or even understandable to what could make the same group of people have very different experiences."* **(Abel)**

Dedicated support workers can and do make a positive difference

Having a named support worker played a critical role in improving the experience of individuals interacting with local authorities, particularly for those with lived experience of the immigration and asylum system (or with other vulnerabilities). Notably, one participant highlighted that their homelessness assessment was significantly easier because the local authority they approached had a dedicated migration support officer. The officer provided guidance and sat with them throughout the process, helping to navigate the complex administrative and legal requirements.

With the right training, migration officers in local authorities can bridge gaps in understanding and reduce confusion - ultimately making service delivery more efficient and accessible. However, this support does not need to be provided exclusively by local authorities. The RHPP demonstrates the value of voluntary sector organisations working alongside local authorities to deliver effective, person-centred support.

For example, many participants spoke about meeting the support workers from the project and described that moment as one where a sense of hope emerged. Individuals also commented on the practical scope of support from accessing benefits and searching for houses to dealing with landlords and managing financial responsibilities.

A named support worker – whether employed by an LA or a voluntary organisation – can build trust with individuals and provide holistic support, based on an individual's personal circumstances. This, as shown through RHPP, can be transformational for individuals in not only finding housing, but in re-establishing their lives.

> *"I was in Bury when I have been given my decision, the council migration officer supported me as soon as I got my eviction notice and did a homelessness assessment for me, the officer then quickly helped me to speak to Elaine and Tsegaye and I got a house before my eviction notice ended."* **(Fana)**

Emergency housing options vary depending on the local council

Participants who were facing a night on the streets reported varied outcomes from their interactions with local authorities. Some were accommodated in short-term shared sleeping halls or other emergency or temporary accommodation for up to three months. In some cases, however, local authorities were unable to provide accommodation and individuals were forced to sleep on the streets, or on the floors of

shared bedrooms of friends.

Of those interviewed who experienced rough sleeping and street homelessness after receiving their refugee status, this ranged from five to 15 days. However, many other people we worked with through the programme spent much longer periods of time homeless. Participants described this period as 'tough', 'isolating' and 'destabilising.' Several individuals noted that their contact with local authority support services occurred when outreach workers conducted daily checks to verify those sleeping rough. Those who were street homeless described this as going through repeated assessments, where they were asked to provide the same information daily, yet received no clear outcomes or guidance. This process intensified individuals' sense of frustration and confusion.

> *"Then the council team member came to us daily for five days to check on us every morning to make sure that I am still there. On the fifth day she said 'we will get you a shared room', and that's how I got to a shared room."* **(Rakan)**

Homelessness is a traumatic experience with long-term effects

People's attitudes towards their experience of homelessness were predominantly marked by fear, frustration and disappointment. Nobody interviewed had expected to become street homeless after being granted refugee status and spoke of the stress and harm it caused. Individuals described physical, as well as mental, health impacts of homelessness. Some of those interviewed still experience anxiety and other mental health challenges and conditions, the onset of which – for some – coincided with the period of homelessness.

> *"When I was living outdoors, there was an occasion where I was sleeping outside and I had a piece of plastic to cover me whilst I slept. Ice began to accumulate on top of me, inside and outside of the plastic that I was wrapped up in overnight. It was tough and I can never forget that time, I still remember it."* **(Abel)**

People would like housing, not necessarily council housing, and misinformation is common

Regarding housing preferences, participants shared a common goal: to secure any form of accommodation that would allow them to move off the streets and feel safe. Furthermore, most participants did not understand the difference between council housing and private rented accommodation, challenging the misconception that people with refugee status only want or expect council housing.

There was also reported misinformation regarding access to housing. One participant described being told by another person who had faced homelessness that if they slept outside the local bus station, the local authority would be obliged to provide accommodation. This is a common form of misinformation that has frequently been reported to Boaz support workers and demonstrates the information voids that can be experienced by individuals facing homelessness, especially when official information is lacking.

> *"My expectation was that I could get accommodation. At this moment the main issue was lack of accommodation and being homeless, so, I did not care [about the kind of accommodation received]. I just wanted shelter."* **(Rakan)**

RHPP is a personalised comprehensive support package

The support provided by the RHPP was wide ranging. Participants reported being supported with additional tasks such as setting up bank accounts, communicating with the local authority and understanding documents written in English - indicative that the support offered by Boaz Trust was not limited to housing in and of itself. The RHPP support workers offered personalised support, catering for individual needs.

The project was viewed by those interviewed as more accessible and approachable, with more informative communication and less stressful engagement, than with local authorities. It is likely that in part this is because the RHPP support workers had more time and a smaller caseload than the services and subsequent pressures on local authority staff.

Furthermore, the project team used a trauma-informed approach when providing services. This was reflected in participants' descriptions of how they were respected, valued, listened to, allowed to share, validated and reassured, as well as given the time and space to utilise the service based on their needs. This arguably led to more trusted encounters and more positive outcomes.

> *"They have helped with so many things such as setting up my bank account. The support is not limited just to housing. They don't just help me, but others, too. I was feeling stressed about housing, so I reached out to them [and they] supported me a lot. They told me that I am always welcome to reach out as well as the other ladies in my house."* **(Fana)**

Empowerment and social integration are key for safety and independence

At the time of writing, all of the participants were in long-term accommodation, secured through the RHPP, and have tenancy agreements, most in privately rented shared houses. Interviewees noted that their preliminary housing goals had been met after working with the project team.

However, in addition to housing challenges, another issue raised consistently by participants was empowerment and integration into society. Most of those interviewed for this research had received their status in the last quarter of 2024. Once they had settled and begun to establish their lives, they faced a new challenge in accessing ESOL classes (due to the timing of when they received their decision, it meant they could not formally start learning English until the following academic year). Furthermore, the decimation of ESOL provision more broadly impeded their opportunities to access ESOL in an informal setting.

Consequently, participants who want to work but struggle to access opportunities due to language barriers or other challenges are arguably more likely to remain dependent on Universal Credit for longer.

Social activities are also a challenge for many participants who want to volunteer, find work, meet others, use and develop their skills, and become independent contributors within their community. While it was not a question that the facilitators asked during the focus group discussions, almost all participants raised the issue about volunteering and social clubs as a way of gaining experience and being able to integrate into society.

> *"I am a teacher back home. I used to teach in school. I wish I can learn English quickly so I can go back to work as a teacher. It will bring me back the joy of working and feeling independent."* **(Pezhad)**

RECOMMENDATIONS

01

Permanently extend the move-on period to 56 days

The move-on period, which at the time of writing was in a temporary extension from a 28 to 56-day period, ought to be permanently extended (to 56 days). It is clear from this research that reverting back to 28 days would not be nearly a long enough period for individuals to leave their Home Office accommodation, set up administrative requirements (such as opening a bank account, opening a Universal Credit account), and secure suitable housing.

02

Continue to fund, and further replicate, models such as the RHPP

It is clear that individuals interviewed for this report would have benefitted from a more accessible, user-friendly post-decision support system in place before they were at risk of homelessness. Therefore, projects such as the RHPP should continue to be funded, as well as replicated, as a service that is proven to contribute towards the prevention of homelessness for people newly granted refugee status.

Information should be provided to people as early as possible, including pre-asylum decision, to ensure a consistent focus on homelessness prevention. Replications could be delivered by charities or by local authorities themselves.

A holistic and person-centred support package tailored to the needs of individuals is needed. This includes helping individuals navigate key administrative processes such as accessing the eVisa account, setting up a bank account and applying for Universal Credit. Assistance should also extend to sourcing suitable private rented housing and ongoing support (where needed) with tenancy agreements. Strong relationships with private landlords, housing associations and letting agencies are crucial in being able to find and secure safe and stable accommodation.

03

Expand trauma-informed support models

Trauma-informed practice has a significant impact on people's ability to successfully find housing and live independently. Face-to-face appointments, giving adequate time and attention to people, and allowing flexibility is essential. It is recognised that there are limitations for local authorities, but it cannot be stressed enough how important a trauma-informed approach is to enable successful move on that can become sustainable.

Trauma-informed is a 'buzz term' at the moment, but it is essential that it is understood as a way of working. To be truly working in a trauma-informed way often means spending a considerable amount of time on support and interaction with each individual. This in turn often has positive impacts. People feel they have been given a better service, understand limitations/restrictions more easily and have more realistic expectations.

04 Standardise and improve homelessness assessments

A consistent, inclusive, and trauma-informed assessment process would ensure that people with refugee status, as well as anybody presenting as homeless, understand their rights and options. Clear, supportive assessments can reduce systemic barriers and improve outcomes. Furthermore, a follow-up pathway or adequate information for those with no priority need for housing still ought to exist, so that individuals can start to explore other suitable pathways out of homelessness.

05 Individuals with refugee status ought to be given the same level of financial support as others leaving institutional care

Affordability of rents is a significant issue. Nearly everybody when granted refugee status will start out on Universal Credit. Given people seeking asylum are not allowed to work, and even with the currently extended move-on period of 56 days, nobody the project worked with, at the point of leaving their asylum accommodation, had been able to secure employment. People concentrate on finding somewhere to live before taking the step of finding work. It is therefore essential that people can find affordable accommodation whilst claiming Universal Credit.

The majority of people do not have their rent covered by the Local Housing Allowance and have to pay the shortfall from their Universal Credit standard allowance (currently £400.14 per month for those aged 25 years and above and £316.98 per month for people under 25).

People with refugee status ought to be treated the same as those leaving institutional care e.g. care leavers, those leaving prison, those leaving temporary homelessness accommodation. Anyone leaving Home Office accommodation should equally be able to access the higher amount of Local Housing Allowance when renting in the private sector.

06 Deposits and advance payment policies and practices ought to be standardised across Greater Manchester local authorities

It would benefit people to know that regardless of which area they lived in when they gained their refugee status (within Greater Manchester), they would be given access to the same financial resources. It is very difficult to reconcile someone in one borough moving into a property debt-free (because advance payments are made as a grant), while someone in another borough would move into accommodation with substantial debt to repay (as advance payments are made as a loan). In current housing markets this is a significant amount, taking years to repay. Therefore, local authorities should consider standardising their financial practices across the region, giving grants rather than loans.

07 Reform aspects of the asylum system that impact on successful post-positive decision move-on

While it is clear that the broader asylum system in and of itself is in need of significant reform, there are key policy making decisions that, if implemented, would significantly improve the experiences of people newly granted refugee status. Allowing people the right to work if they have been waiting for a decision on their asylum claim for more than six months would doubtlessly facilitate a better post-decision move-on experience for many, owing to greater financial security (and already established associated administrative tasks) and savings for local authorities.

Likewise, more investment in accredited ESOL provision for individuals who do not speak English would act as a catalyst for their integration within society, opening up future employment, voluntary and educational opportunities.

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