‘Nobody can disturb us here’: Refugees start afresh in Manchester thanks to charity’s support

Boaz Trust, a member of one of the Guardian and Observer 2023 charity appeal partners, gets people back on their feet

Diane Taylor

At the end of a quiet cul-de-sac 10 minutes drive from Manchestercity centre is a house with a white front door. Inside it live five female refugees from Eritrea. The neat, terrace property, they say, has provided them with a lifeline.

Two of the women, Mariam and Helen (not their real names) said before arriving here they had spent short periods homeless and on the streets after the Home Office granted them refugee status.

“I don’t have words to describe how I feel to be able to live in this house,” said Mariam. “I know a lot of people suffering with

homelessness and it is particularly difficult and dangerous for women to have to sleep on the streets. This house is the best place. It is quiet and secure and nobody can disturb us here."

Their home is spotlessly clean and freshly decorated with a spacious communal lounge and a large kitchen with smart grey units and ample cooking and storage facilities. There is a decent-sized back garden with a table and chairs where the women will be able to enjoy the outdoors when the weather improves.

They have a cleaning rota to ensure everyone does their share to keep the house pristine.

Tsega Abreha, a support worker for the Boaz Trust, speaks to two of the women living at the property. Photograph: Christopher Thomond/The Guardian

It is one of 19 properties managed by the charity Boaz Trust, a member of one of the Guardian and Observer 2023 charity appeal partners Naccom. The lion's share of Naccom's share of appeal donations will be regranted to member organisations working on the frontline of refugee homelessness.

Boaz provides accommodation to a mix of refugees and refused asylum seekers who have no recourse to public funds. Rents in line with the local housing allowance are charged to refugees who have the right to work and access benefits and these payments subsidise the places for people.

The trust provides wraparound support to those it accommodates to help them get on their feet as quickly as possible. This includes everything from employment and benefits advice, registering with a GP and obtaining a travel document to finding a new immigration lawyer to prepare a fresh asylum claim for those whose claims have been refused.

The house the Eritrean women share is a stark contrast from both the type of accommodation often provided to asylum seekers by the Home Office. Unlike Home Office-procured accommodation, which uses a network of private companies, Boaz is not about making big profits.

Shared housing provided by Home Office contractors is in many cases of poor quality. Horror stories about damp, mould, collapsed ceilings and infestations of vermin are not uncommon. Use of hotels, along with mass accommodation sites such as Wethersfield airfield in Essex and the Bibby Stockholm barge moored in Portland, Dorset, has attracted criticism from asylum seekers and human rights campaigners and has been the subject of various legal challenges.

Sara Nathan, the co-founder of Refugees At Home, another of the charity appeal's 2023 partners, said the problems with Home Office provision of accommodation for asylum seekers were fixable: "If the Home Office made decisions quicker, there would be so much less demand for asylum seekers to be housed at all, let alone expensively in hotels.

She urged the Home Office to provide homes that are “dignified and appropriate”. She said: “If asylum seekers could work and pay their own way, some would not need accommodation, and for others the transition into refugee life when they get leave to remain would be smoother and more productive.”

Jon Featonby, the chief policy analyst at the Refugee Council, a third Guardian and Observer appeal partner, said: “Poor accommodation is a significant problem for those in the asylum system. What we have seen is a government that is all too willing to create more hardship for refugees, stripping away housing protections and introducing policies that negatively impact their health and wellbeing. It’s shameful to see people seeking safety treated this way in a country that has long upheld values of fairness and compassion.”

Ros Holland, the chief executive of the Boaz Trust, said there was no single solution to fixing the problems with asylum seeker and refugee housing, and that a range of options were needed. But with a combination of decent housing and wraparound support, which is bespoke for each individual, rapid progress can be made. “We see people transformed when they have a place to stay and a space to recover in,” she said.

Mariam moved into the Manchester house in August. Her English has improved and she has a driving test booked in the hope that it will allow her to get a job as a care worker looking after people in their own homes.

“Now that I’m a refugee and I have somewhere to live I want to help other people. If I pass my driving test I hope I can get a job in home care, helping elderly and disabled people,” she said.

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