

"Finding Home: Navigating the Challenges of Housing for LGBTIQ+ People Seeking Asylum in the UK"



Introduction

The United Kingdom is known for its diversity, and many individuals seek asylum and refuge in the country due to the persecution they face in their home countries. In the vigorous journey for LGBTIQ+ individuals seeking asylum in the United Kingdom, the quest for a haven often hinges on a single, significant factor—accommodation. The quest for asylum is a harrowing journey intensified for LGBTIQ+ individuals fleeing persecution based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. In the United Kingdom, the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) plays a vital role in providing accommodation for refugees and people seeking asylum.

This article delves into the lived experiences of LGBTIQ+ people seeking asylum, underscoring the profound impact of housing and the imperative need for spaces that are not just shelters but sanctuaries. From the hurdles in specific accommodations to the strains on resources, we embark on a journey to understand the complexities of housing for this resilient community and advocate for reforms that echo the principles of compassion, inclusivity, and respect.

The Essence of Safe and Habitable Accommodation

Shelter as Sanctuary

Having a stable and safe accommodation that is fit for purpose is essential for the well-being of any individual or all individuals. For LGBTIQ+ refugees and those seeking asylum, having a safe and habitable accommodation can be the difference between life and death. Imagine fleeing a place where your very identity is considered a crime. For LGBTIQ+ people seeking asylum, safe accommodation is not just a roof over their heads; it's a sanctuary shielding them from discrimination, violence, and the haunting echoes of past traumas. A safe and habitable accommodation provides security, stability, and belonging. It can help LGBTIQ+ refugees and people seeking asylum feel more comfortable and confident in their new surroundings. It may be a make-a-break moment if a person does not have a place where they feel safe enough to call their house.

Mental and Physical Well-being

Beyond the physical walls, the quality of housing is a silent architect of mental and physical health. A secure and stable environment becomes a cornerstone for healing and rebuilding lives, reminding us that the importance of accommodation extends far beyond basic necessity. A safe space helps people seeking asylum/refugees feel more comfortable and at ease, which can improve their mental health.

This is why it comes as a big blow that the all-important course of action that is within the Awaab's law, i.e., to force landlords to fix damp and mould problems in social housing, does not include asylum accommodation contractors, because asylum accommodation does not fall under social housing. As reported by the Guardian,¹ Charities around the UK have described the action by the Home Office not extending Awaab's law to asylum housing as 'totally unacceptable' and that it will create a two-tier system. This singular act puts the people living in asylum accommodation at risk of harm, safety, and a decline in their overall health as if they were less human because of their immigration status and standing.

A safe and habitable accommodation should provide access to clean water, fresh air, and proper sanitation. These are essential for maintaining good physical and mental health.

¹ Diane Taylor, "Asylum accommodation to be excluded from social housing landlords crackdown," The Guardian, 15 January 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/jan/15/asylum-accommodation-to-be-excluded-from-social-housing-landlords-crackdown>. (accessed 16/01/24)



Fostering Inclusive Communities

Housing is not just about providing shelter; it's about creating inclusive spaces that embrace and respect diverse identities within the LGBTQ+ community. It's about fostering communities where everyone feels a sense of belonging and acceptance.

The Human Side of Specific Accommodations

i. Scrutinising Bibby Stockholm

The intelligence emerging from Bibby Stockholm tells tales of privacy concerns, safety hazards, and a lack of cultural understanding. In recent news, an Albanian person seeking asylum committed suicide while living at the Bibby Stockholm. We also saw different organisations warning us about how unsuitable it was to have people abide the boat. LGBTIQ+ people seeking asylum share their reservations, emphasising the need for housing that acknowledges and respects their unique identities.

In addition to the above, many LGBTIQ+ people seeking asylum/refugees report feeling unsafe and uncomfortable in their NASS accommodation. The Home Office puts them in houses with individuals who hold homophobic or transphobic views, which can create a hostile environment. The African Rainbow Family extensively in their Accommodation Report underscores experiences from LGBTIQ+ people seeking asylum and refugees in their NASS accommodation²

ii. Distance from Support Networks

Picture living miles away from the support networks providing solace and understanding for you. For LGBTIQ+ people seeking asylum, the geographical distance becomes more than just a logistical challenge—it intensifies feelings of isolation, hindering the crucial process of community integration.

iii. Neglect of Disability Needs

Accessibility is a universal right. However, within NASS accommodation, the unique needs of LGBTIQ+ individuals with disabilities are sometimes overlooked. Not considering these needs becomes an additional challenge for those already facing multiple hurdles.

² Adeniyi Balogun, Rohan Williams,

“The Experience of Home Office Accommodation by BAME LGBTIQ+ People Seeking Asylum in the UK: A Case for Improvement.” January 2024. <https://africanrainbowfamily.org/a-need-for-inclusive-home-office-accommodation/> (accessed 16/01/24)



Bridging the Gaps: Home Office responsibilities

- a. Availability of adequate accommodation.

The Home Office should take responsibility for distributing resources and providing more accommodation that will optimize the delays and suboptimal living conditions for LGBTIQ+ individuals who have received their refugee status. The lack of safe and habitable accommodations intensifies the hardships faced by this resilient community.

- b. Legal Implications and Protective Laws

Laws like the Human Rights Act 1998 and the Equality Act 2010 are more than complex legal frameworks. They are essential safeguards, defining the legal responsibilities of the Home Office to provide suitable and non-discriminatory housing and ensuring that every LGBTIQ+ person seeking asylum are treated with dignity and fairness.

The UK Equality Act 2010 prohibits discrimination based on protected characteristics such as sexual orientation, gender reassignment, and race. Landlords and other housing providers are required to ensure that their services do not discriminate against LGBTIQ+ individuals. The act also requires that reasonable adjustments are made in accommodation for disabled individuals, which includes those with mental and physical health problems. However, despite these laws, many LGBTIQ+ refugees and those seeking asylum still face discrimination and prejudice in the housing system. The inadequate and unsuitable accommodations provided by NASS can exacerbate this discrimination and make it even more challenging for LGBTIQ+ refugees and those seeking asylum to feel safe and secure in them.

Humanising NASS Accommodation

- Staff Training in Cultural Competency

Behind the institutional façade of NASS accommodation are individual members of staff who can make a significant difference. It appears that the comprehensive training programmes for these individuals are merely about ticking boxes. Adherence to enhancing awareness, sensitivity, and cultural competency to provide genuinely inclusive services is important.

- Collaboration with LGBTIQ+ Organisations

Imagine a collaboration that goes beyond paperwork exercise and regulations. Collaborative efforts between the Home Office and LGBTIQ+ organizations are about equipping accommodation providers with the knowledge and resources to offer services that are not just culturally competent but genuinely empathetic and inclusive.



Celebrating Multi-dimensional Identities

Intersectional Challenges:

In the beautiful tapestry of LGBTIQ+ identities, the threads of ethnicity, gender, cultural backgrounds, and (dis)ability intersect. Acknowledging and addressing these multi-dimensional identities should not just be an administrative checkbox. It should be about crafting effective accommodation strategies that resonate with the lived experiences of LGBTIQ+ individuals seeking asylum.

Voices from the Community:

The experiences of LGBTIQ+ people seeking asylum aren't just about statistics or regulations; they are about the voices of real people. Evidence and testimonies from LGBTIQ+ people seeking asylum provide first-hand insights, humanising the challenges they face and advocating for policies that are more than just guidelines—they are pathways to a more compassionate and inclusive future. The newly launched African Rainbow Family [Accommodation Report](#) offers some recommendations for positive policy changes.

Conclusion

A safe space, safe accommodation, and safe housing are significant for everyone. Politicians worldwide use the provision of excellent and secure housing as their campaign points in their manifesto. A famous quote says 'a home is where you feel the safest.' People seeking asylum, particularly those who are LGBTIQ+, need homes.

Home should be more than a physical space; it should be a sanctuary where every LGBTIQ+ individuals seeking asylum find safety, acceptance, and the opportunity to rebuild their lives. As the UK re-evaluates its approach to asylum, let us remember the human faces behind the policies and the human experiences behind the statistics. By weaving together compassion, inclusivity, and respect, we can embark on a journey towards a more compassionate and equitable asylum process that recognises the shared humanity in our quest for a place to call home.