GMIAU

REFUGEE HOMELESSNESS IN GREATER MANCHESTER

BRIEFING

OCTOBER 2025

Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit (GMIAU) has over 35 years' experience of supporting people across the North West who are subjected to immigration control. We offer immigration legal advice and representation, as well as housing/homelessness advice to people facing destitution. We are embedded in the voluntary and community sector in Greater Manchester, with trusted relationships with housing and homelessness organisations and community groups, as well as regional policymakers.

In 2024, we produced a set of expectations for Greater Manchester politicians, which over 45 organisations have signed up to. These expectations lay out what local leaders need to do to support residents where immigration control cuts across ambitions for the region. This briefing speaks to a central theme in those expectations: **home**.

Refugee homelessness: What is happening?

Everyone resident in our communities, whatever their background or immigration status, should have the right to a safe, stable place they can call home. However, across Greater Manchester, as in the rest of the UK, there is a worsening homelessness crisis, with people either sleeping rough, sofa surfing, or living in hostels, B&Bs or temporary accommodation. Local authorities do not have enough accommodation to address the crisis, and exorbitant rents put the private rented sector out of reach for many.

Among those facing homelessness in our region there are large numbers of people who have recently been granted refugee status. Some were living in Home Office accommodation in Greater Manchester at the time they received their status; others were in asylum accommodation elsewhere in the UK and have moved here after getting their status. However long they have been in our region, they are here now and many will stay. Local authority homelessness services have been put under acute pressure, especially in Manchester. As a result, there are widespread reports of gatekeeping by council officers, including barriers to getting a homelessness assessment. Many of those receiving an assessment, especially if they are young men, are likely to be deemed 'low priority', even if they have well-documented vulnerabilities. More positively, some local authorities offer to fund deposits on private rental properties and a first month's rent, but there is no consistent offer across the city-region.

Voluntary and community organisations are supporting people through varying degrees of advocacy with local authorities, including legal challenges, and managing people's expectations about what is realistic.

Responses include:

- The homeless day centre Mustard Tree has a history of supporting people who have claimed asylum, and since 2024 has been running a Welcome Hub for refugees facing homelessness which includes support around access to the private rented sector. While this work is funded by Manchester City Council, the duty to carry out homelessness assessments remains with the council.

- Refugee Action is carrying out briefing sessions in asylum hotels, funded by the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA), which include information on the move-on process after people get refugee status.

- The Boaz Trust was funded by GMCA in a pilot to support people into the private-rented sector (see this report for learnings from this work).

This is all important work, but cannot fully address the scale of the crisis. For many living in desperation, there is a lack of trusted information about rights and entitlements, allowing misinformation and magical thinking to spread. For example, people may refuse to believe that they are not eligible for housing if they were previously living in another local authority. Such situations demand not just the provision of information, but long-term work to **develop trust** between those experiencing homelessness and those in authority.

There has been particular controversy around the homeless camp in Manchester city centre, which was initially located outside the Town Hall. Some may have had an expectation that this would help them get accommodation. The council has forcibly evicted the camp several times. We understand that people had tents and documents taken from them during the evictions.

One eviction earlier this year was challenged by Greater Manchester Law Centre (GMLC). When it transpired that the council had not carried out homelessness assessments, camp residents were assessed and, ultimately, 46 of the 49 people with refugee or humanitarian protection status that GMLC represented were placed in interim accommodation. Of these, 27 have been made final or temporary accommodation offers. The rest, 18, are still in interim accommodation pending a decision or outcome of a review, save for one that can now be subject to appeal in the County Court.

Despite the repeated evictions, the camp has continued, with new residents arriving. Residents of the camp have built solidarity with each other and organised politically. They have held several protests against the council's failure to house them. One of these was also directed against Mustard Tree, in the belief that it is colluding with the council in its Welcome Hub work.

<u>We are concerned that:</u>

1 Homelessness, in whatever form, further harms the wellbeing of people who desperately need to settle and rebuild their lives. People sleeping rough in visible locations face additional risks of exposure to racist abuse and far-right figures filming them.

2 For people fleeing war or persecution, who have already endured months or years warehoused in hostile asylum accommodation, it can be retraumatising to feel like they are facing gatekeeping and to be refused housing by the council. The violent eviction of camp residents, with the seizure of property, is still more so. Such experiences sit uncomfortably with local political commitments to welcome, including Manchester's accreditation as local authority of sanctuary.

3 Where trust is limited or absent, the crisis breeds blame. Local authorities might blame refugees coming from outside Manchester. Refugees and voluntary-sector groups might blame local authorities for failing to accommodate them. They may also blame other voluntary sector organisations for colluding with the council. In our view, this risks missing the bigger picture and, where there is a breakdown of trust between people experiencing homelessness and local services, it becomes still harder to address the crisis.

Why is this happening?

People who come to the UK fleeing war or persecution must first lodge an asylum claim with the Home Office. While this claim is pending, they generally have no right to work, claim benefits, access social housing, or rent. Instead, they are warehoused in a parallel accommodation and support system run by the Home Office and outsourced to private providers. If their asylum claim is successful and they are granted refugee status, they become eligible for mainstream housing and welfare, as well as gaining the right to work. At the same time, they are no longer eligible for Home Office support, and face eviction from their accommodation.

This system has been in place since the early 2000s. However, in recent years, the **numbers of those facing homelessness following a grant of refugee status has increased**, especially in Greater Manchester. The current crisis stems from the collision of two sets of central government policy choices, one recent, the other going back decades.

First, the recent acceleration of asylum decision-making means there are increasing numbers of refugees in need of housing. During and after Covid, Home Office decision-making stalled, creating an artificial 'backlog' of people stuck in asylum accommodation. The previous government exacerbated this crisis by the Illegal Migration Act 2023, which effectively barred most people seeking sanctuary from having their asylum claims considered. While we welcome the current government's decision to re-admit these people into the asylum system, the current high rate of decision-making means that many people are receiving refugee status, and facing eviction from Home Office accommodation, at the same time.

Second, over the last four decades, successive governments have created a chronic housing crisis through the decimation of social housing and deregulation of the Private Rented Sector. Recent refugees hoping to rebuild their lives here encounter a society where housing has been turned from a human right into a commodity.

Within this national context, there are specific reasons why so many refugees are facing homelessness in **Greater Manchester**, particularly the city of Manchester:

1 There is a large concentration of asylum accommodation in the city-region.

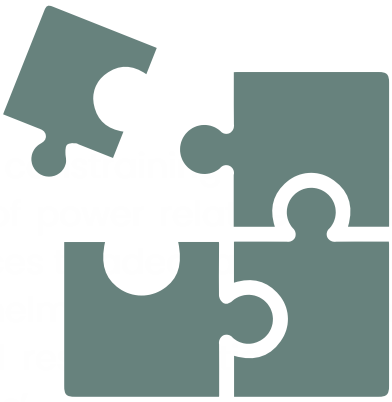
2 There is a particular concentration of asylum hotels. Some will receive a decision while in the hotel. Others, after being kept in the hotel for time period ranging from a couple of months to more than a year, are 'dispersed' on a no-choice basis elsewhere in the North West. Many of these, once they receive their status, return to the place where they had been putting down roots.

3 Others who have been in asylum accommodation elsewhere in the UK may decide to move to Greater Manchester after they get their status to be near family and friends, or for employment opportunities, or to feel safer in a multicultural diverse city, or because they have not found housing elsewhere.

Taken together, these factors have led homelessness services, especially in Manchester, to be overwhelmed, restricting councils' ability to meet their legal responsibilities. Those facing homelessness after moving from a different local authority will not be owed a legal duty by the council until they have been resident for a certain period of time. However, there are likely many others who are owed a duty by the council, but simply cannot be accommodated.

Constrained agency and corroded trust

This crisis is far bigger than any one body involved, constraining agency and limiting options. Local authorities are in a position of power relative to those facing homelessness – but they also lack the resources to adequately address the crisis. As homelessness services are overwhelmed and it becomes increasingly hard for councils to meet formal legal responsibilities, different parties are left to improvise informal, ad hoc 'solutions'.



- Council officers may try to stem demand by setting the threshold of what counts as 'high priority' ever higher.
- Such decisions may be challenged on a case-by-case basis – but success usually depends on the threat of legal action. With very limited capacity at GMLC and Shelter, most people will not be able to threaten legal action.
- Therefore, voluntary sector workers may encourage people to find a private rented property, as the most realistic option, even if there are vulnerabilities that should render them priority need.
- Meanwhile, refugees facing homelessness have the most limited options of anyone involved. This does not mean that they are incapable of exercising agency, voicing demands or building solidarity. But the limitedness of their options can push people into desperation. They might therefore sleep outside the Town Hall in the hope this will push the council into housing them. Others might be pushed into other unsafe practices, such as incurring debt to raise a deposit or accepting unsuitable or overcrowded accommodation.

In this context, it is easy for **trust** to be corroded and **blame** to be apportioned.

What needs to happen

At GMIAU, we stand in solidarity with all GM residents facing homelessness. While we do not run frontline services for this specific group, we respect the work of all those standing alongside and supporting refugees experiencing homelessness. As a crisis that is bigger than any of us here in Greater Manchester, we recognise that there are no easy answers or quick fixes. However, certain things can be done to improve the current situation – some of which are already under way. We welcome the recommendations in The Boaz Trust's recent report based on learnings from their Refugee Homelessness Prevention Project.

Locally, we call for the following:

1 People need to be informed about their rights, as well as a realistic appraisal of their options in a context where councils are struggling to meet their legal responsibilities. Information and support needs to be provided in straightforward language, with translations available. Available resources include this guide produced by The Boaz Trust and this from the Greater Manchester Law Centre.

2 Local authorities across the city-region should coordinate to ensure a strong consistent offer to anyone presenting as homeless in their borough, including support with tenancy deposits and a first month's rent;

3 Trust needs to be strengthened between people facing homelessness and local services. Recognising the racialised power imbalance and the desperation of those facing homelessness, this should involve:

a. Transparency around procedures of presenting as homelessness and commitment to ensuring that everyone presenting as homeless receives an assessment;

b. Homelessness assessments being trauma-informed, with vulnerabilities appreciated and listened to, even if the shortage of accommodation means that this does not result in the person being housed;

c. Safe spaces for open dialogue where the experiences, motivations and demands of refugees are genuinely listened to, and creative solutions can be co-produced between services and people affected;

d. Accountability for violence in the evictions of the homeless camp in Manchester city centre, and a commitment from Manchester City Council to refrain from further violent evictions.

4 Local authorities and politicians need to be speaking out about what is happening in our communities, upholding commitments to welcome, sanctuary and safe, secure homes for all GM residents.

None of this can be **satisfactorily resolved** at a **regional** level without central **government action.**

Therefore:

1 Local authorities need to be better supported to deal with the crisis, through better funding and information sharing from the Home Office about numbers receiving refugee status. In particular, the 56-day move-on period for recent refugees needs to be reinstated for all refugees in line with the Homelessness Reduction Act 2018;

2 The Government needs to stop their hostile anti-refugee, anti-migrant rhetoric, which sows dangerous division and leads to people facing homelessness being scapegoated for the very issue they are suffering from;

3 In the long-term, the issue needs to be addressed through wider reform of the asylum accommodation system. At present people spend months or years warehoused in privately-managed, hostile asylum accommodation before being evicted into homelessness after being granted refugee status. We support proposals for a decentralised asylum accommodation system centred on human beings. A system that is person-centred and place-based would offer opportunities for people to be better embedded in communities while awaiting an asylum decision, and for local government to be involved throughout the process – allowing a seamless move from the asylum system into mainstream accommodation;

4 This reform of asylum accommodation needs to be part of a bigger picture of national renewal with an increase in social housing for all groups in need of accommodation, whatever their background.

Ultimately, we need a housing system that works for all of us – where housing is prioritised as a social good rather than a source of private revenue.