**Supporting asylum seekers placed in local hotels**

*The Diocese of London have put together these tips and suggestions for those considering supporting asylum seekers in hotels in your parish or borough. The information has been compiled from Rev Jo Burke, a Curate in Luton, and some of the volunteers from St Paul’s Grove Park, Chiswick, who have been involved with this ministry in Hounslow. It has been edited for the Diocese of Oxford by Hannah Ling, Social Justice Adviser.*

*If you’d like more support, or to find out if there is a local group you can connect with, please do get in touch with* *Hannah Ling**.*

INITIAL VISITING

1. **Going in**: **it is OK to visit a hotel?** You can walk in, as you would to any hotel. There will probably be a receptionist: ask to see the manager in charge of the migrants. This person may be different in different hotels; some will be hotel managers, some may be employed by the agency placing the asylum seekers (e.g. Clearsprings), others may be from an organisation called Migrant Help, a charity the government contract support to.
2. **Build relationship:** Identify who the key ‘gatekeeper’ is and build relationship with them.

The managers of the agency at the hotel are your most valuable contacts. There might also be a hotel manager who ran the hotel before it was used to accommodate asylum seekers. You will likely find they are keen to work with you once they trust you, sharing concerns as well as insights into what is going on. You will need their co-operation to be able to meet the needs of the residents, so it is worth building strong relationships with them.

1. **Be open about who you are:** Introduce yourself as from the local church (it can help if the first contact is made by a member of the clergy, simply because the collar is a clear badge of good faith). Say that you believe asylum seekers are living in the hotel and ask if they need clothes, shoes, activities, or anything else that you can help with. Give them your mobile number and/or email address so that they can contact you easily.
2. **Record keeping:** Expect that the hotel will want a record of your presence. Once you establish a relationship with the senior managers of the agency, they may ask you to send them an email when you go in, so that they have their records up to date.
3. **Safeguarding:** Although adult asylum seekers count as a vulnerable group, volunteers working in this area would not meet the minimum requirement for a DBS check (unless providing health/personal care or dealing with personal finances). Anyone volunteering or working with asylum seeker children would require an Enhanced DBS. All volunteers should get basic safeguarding training to ensure they know how to protect themselves and the hotel residents.
4. **Consistency:** The agency may ask for visits to an individual/family. It would be helpful to set up a buddy system, so each volunteer sees the same person each time creating consistency and building relationships. The agency may want to be given notice of each visit.
5. **What you can provide initially:** You are likely to be asked for clothes and shoes as the priority. Ask for specifics (at least how many each of large, medium, or small): this isn’t always easy because the managers do not always speak good English, but will allow you to ask donors for exactly what is needed and avoid receiving a lot of unwanted surplus. Find out what the Home Office is required to provide (more info under 21. Advocacy) – it is right that the Home Office provide what asylum seekers are entitled to.
6. **Providing food:** the quality of food provided is very patchy. Those in asylum hotels should get three meals a day but this is often of variable quality and may not take individual’s preferences into account. The hotels generally won't always want organisations taking food onto the premises so food provision could be in the form of a very targeted food bank run from a nearby church hall. People staying in the hotels don't have fridges or any way of cooking food, so standard food bank packages aren't suitable. If you are taking in food, fruit, cheese, and yoghurts are well received. Lots of baked goods may feel like a treat but what they really need and crave is nutritious food.
7. **Parking:** some hotels have ‘Parking Eye’ systems; look carefully for any signs and register your car as directed or you may get a £100 parking charge.
8. **Communication:** it is not always easy to get messages through to the residents about events or benefits you are offering, If you have access to people who can translate flyers for you, it is worth doing. The most commonly spoken languages tend to be: Arabic, Farsi, Kurdish, Russian and Tigrinya (but check the languages spoken by the residents in the hotel you’re working with). You may find other faith contacts invaluable here e.g. the Russian Orthodox Church, the mosques, or the Baháʼí.
9. **Get to know your demographic:** Each hotel is different - some house only men, some only women, others families, and others still a mix of people. Find out what the demographic is in your specific hotel to help with knowing what donation collections you need (eg toys, books, clothes etc). Try to find out what people need, rather than just assuming.
10. **Give dignity, not tat:** They may have very few belongings, but they will be conscious of their image (like most of us!). Dignity matters. The best test is to ask yourself if you (or a friend in their twenties) would like to wear it. Handknits, stained clothes, and used underwear are not appropriate. The most acceptable clothes will be t-shirts, hoodies, fleeces, warm jackets (down or similar), track-suit bottoms, jeans, trainers, and new underwear and socks. The greatest need will be for small and medium sized clothes. Bags, especially rucksacks, are well received. It may be possible for you to provide gift cards for things shoes or underwear so that people can buy the right sizes themselves (this also gives agency and choice).
11. **Be strict with donors!** You will receive a wonderful amount of goodwill, but people don’t always consider whether others really want what they’re getting rid of! Be very clear about what you are looking for and be ready to refuse some offerings**,** or you could end up like a tip. Donors may assume that if people are desperate, they will take anything – not only is that demeaning, but people will refuse donations if they’re unsuitable.
12. **The hotel residents are very bored**: There is very little for residents to do, especially when they have little money and are in isolated locations. Offer books in their languages (thrillers seem to be particularly welcome), as well as English; some can read English well or may want to practice their English. When the weather is better, footballs, cricket and tennis equipment will be welcome (both for children and adults) if they have access to outdoor space. Cards, chess, and backgammon may also be good to offer. It is unlikely that games relying on English will be helpful.
13. **Storage: don’t be offended if things aren’t needed.** The hotels do not have space to store surplus goods, so you need to remove unwanted donations. Don’t be offended if items are returned. Even if you don’t see the direct result yourself, it will make a difference.

Don’t be afraid to get rid of things not needed – there may be another group (eg a homeless shelter) accepting donations, some items can be given to charity shops or recycled, and others will need to be put in the bin.

1. **Toiletries:** The Home Office contract must provide the residents with toiletries. This includes nappies and nappy cream for babies. However, when residents come to visit your premises, they will be very pleased with donations of better-quality soap, shower gel, shaving things, period products etc. Distribute these fairly and limit the number of items each person can take - deprivation sometimes means people, understandably, stockpile for fear of future scarcity.

Consider registering to receive goods from the [Hygiene Bank](https://thehygienebank.com).

1. **Be ready to listen:** Counselling is not provided to the residents, so be on hand to listen. Remember to put boundaries in place to protect both you and those you are listening to. You can be a helpful listening ear, but unless you are a trained counsellor you should not provide counselling. Know what safeguarding and modern-day slavery signs to look out for, and who to report these to.
2. **Challenge prejudice and change hearts:** Be ready to field push back from some people as you ask for donations or share about what you are doing - this is an opportunity to change opinions. Common tropes used against asylum seekers are they are undeserving, criminals, living in luxury, and taking vital resources from other vulnerable groups. Without breaching confidentiality, share some of your first-hand knowledge of the asylum seekers you’ve met and be prepared to challenge misconceptions kindly and gently.
3. **Be careful about what and where you share:** maintain confidentiality of residents and their stories. Asylum seekers may not always want their asylum status to be publicly known, or their stories to be linked to them. If you want to share people’s stories, anonymise them or ask permission from the individual. Always be aware of the risk interest from the extreme right-wing and **never share the locations of the hotels.**
4. **Don’t try to do this on your own**: Ask local churches of all denominations to help with donations. Engage local mosques too - they will be able to supply prayer mats and Korans, and direct folk to the appropriate mosque (many asylum seekers are Shia). They can advise on halal food too if the hotel is supplying inappropriate food - there is no standard understanding of halal; it varies from culture to culture within Islam. Partner with community groups.

There are other organisations doing this work – see ‘35. More information’. There are other community groups supporting refugees and asylum seekers too. Get involved. Join networks. Share the load.

This is wearying work and burn out is common. We need to care for each other. The more you can network and draw others in, the more you will do this. Remember to look after yourself as well as those you’re supporting – your needs matter too, and you can only support others well if you take care of yourself. You’ll never be able to do everything, but what you can do will be invaluable.

DEVELOPING THE WORK

1. **A clothes bank**: In time you might build up a bank of the most asked for clothes etc. in a church room or church hall. Ideally, get hold of some strong clothes rails and hangers. Hotel residents can come and chose for themselves, giving them dignity and agency. It also makes good clothes look better than a pile of rummaged-through clothes on a table.
2. **Advocacy: Find out what people are entitled to** and make sure they are getting it. What people are given varies very much from hotel to hotel. Some offer meals from the hotel kitchen, others given greasy takeaways and not much else. Food is often too spicy for children.

Once registered, asylum seekers in full-board accommodation should be eligible for £8.24 per week for clothing and travel needs; some get it in cash, others don’t. For more information on what support asylum seekers are eligible for, there is more information for what they are entitled to as [part of the accommodation](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/living-in-asylum-accommodation) and [general asylum support](https://www.gov.uk/asylum-support), and in more detail at the end of this document.

If residents are not receiving these things, then first speak to the hotel manager about provision (rather than seeking to provide items/support yourself). If you don’t get anywhere, escalate through your networks, and go to the contractor if you have contact (see the next point for how you might develop this relationship).

1. **Network outwards and upwards:** Ask for regular online meetings with the agency responsible for the hotel, the local authority, Red Cross, Migrant Help, Care4Calais, and anyone else who is engaged with the issue. This will prove invaluable and saves duplicating efforts, gives you the background to some of the decisions taken, and will supply wise advice. If you have concerns about things that have alarmed you, raise them at these meetings. Sometimes you will have misunderstood; sometimes there will be a real problem than can be put right.
2. **Advocacy - offering more support:** If asylum seekers need more support, there are other organisations and funds they may be able to access, but you will need volunteers to identify these and help complete forms. Councils often have Emergency Assistance Grants available. People are often reluctant to apply for things, worried they aren’t eligible or are concerned they’d be taking limited money and preventing others from receiving it.
3. **Acts 435:** This is a [great organisation](http://www.acts435.org.uk/) to connect with, and worth considering become an Advocate. As an Advocate organisation, you can post requests to cover needs up to £150 for those you’re working with. Requests are crowdfunded on their website, normally met in full within 2 weeks, and funds transferred to the Advocate organisation to pass on. It’s relatively easy to register your church as an Acts 435 Advocate, then you can post for specific items or needs required by asylum seekers you meet.
4. **Digital Exclusion: Wifi** is sometimes supplied only erratically in hotels. It is a lifeline for residents who will need to navigate the area and local services. Consider printing off maps of the local area, and a list of useful contact details to reduce reliance on the wifi.
5. **Digital Exclusion: Phones:** Many asylum seekers are without phones or SIM cards. If you can give mobile phones and SIM cards (with credit added) this enables people to stay connected with each other, and with their loved ones in their country of origin. You can request refurbished phone donations from charities like [Getting Oxfordshire Online](https://gettingoxfordshireonline.org/). If you’re a charity, you can apply for [free loaded Vodaphone SIM cards](https://www.vodafone.co.uk/charities-connected/application/register/) for 6 months. Giffgaff provides simple pay-as-you-go SIMs for free, and if you get them referred from someone already on the network, £5 credit is automatically given.
6. **Meeting outside the hotel:** It can harder to meet residents outside the hotel, but well worth encouraging as it can be beneficial for wellbeing. You may want to invite people to your hall or premises for English lessons, to supply clothes, classes, toiletries, extra food, etc. or to get to know them over a hot drink. You may also consider organising walking tours or activities/excursions in your local area.
7. **Providing English classes:** This is very likely to be asylum seekers' number one request. If you have volunteer capacity, in-person lessons are invaluable. You may have to collaborate with other agencies to achieve lessons or you may have experienced teachers in your congregation. If you want support on starting English lessons, get in touch. If it’s not possible to run ESOL lessons, you could run an informal English conversation café. Make it clear though that you are not a college and cannot supply qualifications. The Diocese of Oxford runs [online English sessions](https://www.lllinks.org/) which asylum seekers can attend if they have digital access.
8. **Educating children:** Children have a right to school places, even if their parents have No Recourse to Public Funds. If you are able, a huge ministry is in helping the families apply for local school places. This can be transformative for the families.
9. **Doctors and dentists:** Asylum seekers have a right to access NHS doctors and dentists but may need help registering. Sometimes doctors or dentists practices are not aware of asylum seekers’ rights to access NHS health care. If there are a large number of people needing to register, you could organise a registration day in conjunction with local practices. Get in touch if you’d like some info on how you might do this. [See other health entitlements](https://faq.nhsbsa.nhs.uk/knowledgebase/article/KA-04005/en-us).
10. **Odd jobs and volunteering:** Some hotel residents may ask if they can come to the church to do tasks; often they are so bored and want something purposeful to do, or a way to ‘give back’. Have a list of safe, suitable jobs ready! Remember that asylum seekers can volunteer but are not able to work for money until their asylum claim has been approved.
11. **Gathering and catering:** Gathering over food and drink is a shared cultural norm. When gathering to drink tea. Farsi speakers especially request black tea with lots of sugar. Check whether you need a food hygiene certificate for any food made and served in your premises.
12. **Invite asylum seekers to church services and activities:** Print the service times and get them translated. For services, have as much printed as you can (readings and sermon, as well as the liturgy) – even if this is in English, asylum seekers attending will be able to use their translation apps and follow along. Sometimes residents come for a few services and then stop; this may be because they have been moved on to new accommodation.
13. **Dispersal and keeping in touch**: A weak point in the system is when people leave the hotels and move to their dispersal accommodation as there is no follow-through in support. Health visitors and education departments try to keep track of individual situations but it's not always consistent. If you have built a rapport with individuals and are able to help them establish new support networks in their new location this could be a huge help (another reason why it’s helpful to be in networks).
14. **More information:** Organisations working across Thames Valley are currently at capacity, but will be able to offer advice and information even if they can’t offer hands on support or volunteers. They are experts in the field, so lean on their experience when needed. Some of them have volunteer training that you could ask to access for your volunteers.
* Care4Calais have a network of volunteers across the country and currently supports hotels in Oxford, Reading, MK, Banbury, Buckingham, and Slough.
* Asylum Welcome work across Oxfordshire
* Refugee Support Group across Berkshire
* Slough Refugee Support works in Slough and beyond
* [Other support](http://www.asaproject.org/resources/organisations-who-can-help)

**Finally:** Supporting asylum seekers can be emotionally exhausting so remember to take care of yourself and your team. You will likely also find joy in unexpected places and meet incredible people.

What asylum seekers in hotels are entitled to:

While people are in the hotels (called ‘initial accommodation’) they are due to receive £8.24 per week from the Home Office and under a recent legal ruling this can be backdated to when they first submitted their ASF 1 form, which is the claim for Section 95 support. Additional amounts are paid for new-born and young children, and to pregnant women.

Someone from Migrant Help should support people seeking asylum fill out the ASF 1 within days of first arriving in the country. This Section 95 phase can last for years.

Section 95 support provides accommodation, including meals, and a weekly cash amount (generally on a preloaded card) while people's claims are being assessed.

When people are ‘dispersed’ (the official term) from the initial accommodation, they are placed in multi-occupancy houses, flats, or individual houses and continue to receive Section 95 payments of about £40.85 a week (through which, they’ll have to provide their own meals).

But the system is overwhelmed, and people are not receiving the £8.24 immediately – some are waiting eight weeks or more after arriving. This period with no cash, when they have just arrived in the UK and often have very few belongings, is causing a lot of stress.

For issues about money, the advice is to direct the people staying in the hotels to ring the Migrant Help phone number in the first instance. If they're not happy with the advice from Migrant Help, they are given a Home Office number to phone. Unfortunately, when they get through, the HO often tell them to phone Migrant Help!

**Factsheets can all be found here:** [**www.asaproject.org/resources**](http://www.asaproject.org/resources)(info regarding support for refused asylum-seekers, destitution, asylum appeals etc)