



Insight Report

Accessing Health and Social Care Services:

Asylum Seekers

November 2023

healthwatch
Leicester

Accessing Health and Social Care Services:

Asylum Seekers

Our access to health care project is to listen and explore how people have been accessing their health care and what that experience has been like for them. We have identified groups and we will seek to listen and outline what the specific issues are for those communities.

Our focus for this project was to engage with asylum seekers who have been accommodated in hotels in Leicester.¹

In this report, we share the lived experiences of asylum seekers living in Leicester. We wanted to find out any challenges people face, the barriers that they have to accessing services and how they perceive and interact with the health and social care systems.

In August and September 2023, we visited three hotels in Leicester and spoke to 65 people. We also visited the Leicester City of Sanctuary in October 2023 and spoke to 25 people.²

Who is an asylum seeker?

Amnesty International says, “An asylum seeker is a person who has left their country and is seeking protection from persecution and serious human rights violations in another country, but who hasn’t yet been legally recognised as a refugee and is waiting to receive a decision on their asylum claim. Seeking asylum is a human right. This means everyone should be allowed to enter another country to seek asylum”.³

¹ We have also visited hotels and spoken to asylum seekers in Leicestershire. The findings are in a separate county report.

² We spoke to Asylum seekers and refugees who live in Leicester either at the hotels or their own accommodation

³ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/refugees-asylum-seekers-and-migrants/>

Background

Central government has a statutory duty to accommodate people who are seeking asylum. The Home Office has placed several people seeking asylum in hotels across Leicester, whilst their asylum application is assessed.

In Leicester, there are three hotels managed by SERCO⁴ housing 721 asylum seekers.

Hotel	Number of Asylum Seekers	Residents
Hotel 1	275	Men
Hotel 2	290	Families
Hotel 3	156	Families, men and women

Aim of the visit

We received feedback that asylum seekers placed locally were experiencing problems in accessing health and social care and with their mental health.

There have been reports of a decline in the mental health of the asylum seekers and we therefore wanted to understand the mental health needs and challenges of residents.

The aim of the visits was to listen to people's experiences of accessing primary care services, mental health support and their awareness and access to health services. The aim of the visits was not intended to provide an in-depth analysis of the situation, but rather to gain insight from people into the pressing issues and common themes.

The visit teams consisted of staff from Healthwatch, the Neighbourhood Mental Health Leads from Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust (LPT) and the Leicester City Council Public Health team.

⁴ <https://www.serco.com/uk/sector-expertise/immigration/asylum-accommodation-support-services>

Limitations

Our remit is to capture patient and public voices. One limitation was the language barrier. We did not have access to translators and relied on the people at the hotels to translate information as well as using the technology available. Having other residents translate for people could mean that some responses could be open to misrepresentation.

We also provided posters with information in other languages, however, we could not provide this in all of the languages spoken.

Staff

As well as engaging with the hotel residents, we wanted to speak with the housing officers working at the hotels to get a better insight into each facility and the challenges faced by their residents. The staff are tasked with resolving housing issues, support in arranging medical appointments and transport to them, provision of well-being activities (such as books, board games, etc.), and any other concerns such as interpersonal disputes between residents.

Key findings

Language barriers

Across all of the hotels residents spoke languages including:

Pashto	Hindi
Kurdish	Persian (Farsi)
Arabic	Sudanese
Tigrinya	Kumari
Amharic	Panjabi, Punjabi
French	Albanian
Urdu	Kartvelian
Tamil	Turkish

Language is the main barrier people have because they are not able to share their personal feelings or concerns openly. We found that many of the residents were unable to communicate in English. English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) lessons are provided in some of the hotels but not all.

For all health needs, there needs to be clear and accessible information given to people on arrival at the hotels and local information available within the hotels. This also needs to be shared with hotel staff so they can provide support to people.

Mental health

Mental health was a recurring theme amongst all residents.

Prolonged stays in hotels are having an adverse effect on people's physical and mental health. None of the residents that we spoke to knew when their application would be processed.

Pathways to mental health support need exploring. People need to have access to one-to-one counselling and group therapies. There needs to be support for different groups of people with diverse, varied or specific mental health needs and there needs to be access to local support services.

We noted that there was a lack of meaningful activities available to residents. Residents wanted gym access, activity classes, fitness classes and social activities to support their mental health.

Access to dentists

Access to dental care is extremely difficult for asylum seekers. Staff told us that the emergency dental line is used for everyone as most people are declined when trying to register with a dentist directly.

People shared that they are primarily using emergency lines and hoping they can access an appointment somewhere.

Across all our visits, it was evident that people found it difficult to access a dentist. We ensured that we gave appropriate signposting advice and provided the staff with up-to-date information.

Hotel visits

Hotel 1

Wednesday 6 August 2023

10 am – 11 am

Residents spoke to: 20 men

Key Themes: Dental appointments, mental health and access to services.

Access to dentists

All of the men indicated that they struggled to obtain a dental appointment.

Those who manage to book an appointment are then told that we are not taking on NHS patients.

The residents apply for a HC2 certificate but this does not mean they will get full treatment. Those who have registered at a practice are told there is a 6-12 month waiting list.

People said:



“I cannot get a dentist appointment. Every time I try they say they do not take NHS patient”.

“They make for me new teeth. But they are not right. I cannot get an appointment to get new dentures”.

“I just need a dentist”.



Accessing GP appointments

The staff told us that 99% of the residents are registered at the Leicester City Assist GP Practice.

People said:



“Very, very problem because no appointment given”.

“My GP gave me my medical record, but no help”.

“I spoke to my GP about 5 months ago as I want to see a dermatologist. But no referral given”.



People said that urgent care services are very good. The residents have used the NHS 111 service and have been directed to the appropriate services whether that is a hub or the hospital. They have had no issues with the 999 service and ambulances have been very good.

Two residents have long-term conditions. They have regular visits from healthcare professionals to help them manage their conditions.

Several people expressed that they wanted a referral to a specialist service i.e. dermatologist and x-rays but the GP is not making the referral.

One person, wants to get a sonogram as he has a fatty liver. The GP will not make the referral for the scan. The person cannot understand why he cannot go to the hospital as he is aware he has this condition and wants it monitored.

Optician provision

None of the people we spoke to are having eye checks.

Mental Health

There is no regular contact with mental health services and support organisations. Some of the residents told us that they felt sad.

There is not much access to social activities. The men will use Abbey Park which is near to the hotel. Residents expressed that they would like regular gym access. At the moment access can be given if the GP writes a letter citing healthcare reasons.

Additional findings

One of the residents said that the rooms were bad. In some of the rooms, the windows do not open fully.

ESOL lessons are provided at the hotel.

Provider response

Whilst not a legal requirement, window restrictors are fitted to all windows above the ground floor for residents' safety. The general recommendation is that the restriction should prevent the windows opening beyond 100mm which can for some occupants be frustrating, however will continue to operate to these standards for the safety of all.

When mental health concerns raised, Serco provides information on relevant support services for referrals. However, it is evident that waiting lists for such support is prolonged.

Hotel 2

Thursday 14 September 2023

10 am – 1 pm

Residents spoke to: 25 people

Key Themes: Accessing health and social care services, mental health and access to education.

We used Google Translate to communicate with people as there was a wide range of languages spoken. We spoke to people who had recently arrived in England. The majority of people that we spoke to had been in the country less than two weeks.

Access to services

The residents are struggling to obtain dental appointments for themselves and their children. There were concerns that children needed to be seen by a dentist but people could not get an appointment with a dentist.

People expressed that they would like to see a dentist but there is limited availability.

Personal stories



One Georgian couple said that they had problems with their teeth. They have not been to see a dentist, however, they said that they are registered with a dentist. They said, "We've told the staff here but they give no help."



People told us that they were unable to obtain free prescriptions for some products.

One person said, "The doctor and dentist are okay, I have been two months before to dentist and it has been good." One person mentioned that "the dentist has said they will give cleaning products for teeth but they have not, it is very expensive to buy."

The staff told us that on arrival every person is given the details to register at the Assist GP Practice in the city which is a short walk from the hotel.

People said:



"My son has shortness of breath, staff have said they will make an appointment."

"I have asked for cream for my skin but the doctor says he can't give a prescription and I have to buy it."



Mental Health

Most people we spoke to at the hotel are stressed, worried, anxious and not sure what is going to happen to them in the long term. Most people are waiting to hear from the Home Office.

People with young families expressed that it has been stressful for young people.

One young person stated, "Mentally I am upset, I cannot bring a friend to the hotel to help me because I have to do everything myself for my mother."

People told us that due to their situation, they are getting psychological and mental health problems.

One person stated, "I am stressed, tired and on medication for my bad health."

People told us that they are not allowed any visitors in the hotel.

One person said, "I feel lonely." Another person said, "We saw many problems on the way and there is no one here, we do not have any friends or acquaintances here either."

One person spoke about family who live elsewhere in England. They said, "Family lives in Brighton. I need a translator for my son and they know the language."

One man shared that they have two rooms between four people e.g. one room for mother and daughter and one room for son and dad. The man shared, "It is mentally impacting my emotional health being here. I do not know how to explain to you."

Dietary needs

Food was one of the main issues at this hotel because people said they were missing their own home cooked food, especially children. One woman stated, "My children cannot eat the food for two weeks."

One young person stated that her mother is 60 years old and is not well and because of food choices she cannot control her diabetes. She stated, "I have to care for my mother in a small room." She shared that she has a letter from her GP for her mother's diet but still, "my mother does not get the right food to control her diabetes."

One person told us, "I am diabetic, here they don't cater to my diabetic needs, they give the options but it is not the type of food we used to get at home."

Education

One person spoke about their education, "I would like to go to university, the universities are charging international rates, and some are charging home rates. I can't afford it."

One person spoke about school and language training and said, "I want my son to go to school. My wife and I want to go to language training."

One young person spoke about schooling and said, "I want to go to school but haven't heard anything."

People expressed that they do not know English but want to learn. One person said, "We told them many times but they told us to wait. My mother goes to them every day for the last 10 days and asks for language, but they do not give any guidance, the only good thing here is they give food."

Facilities

There is limited space outside the rooms to use. We noted that there were no communal play areas or toys available for the children. We observed that the children are expected to stay quiet by the hotel staff.

Most of the mothers with young children shared that their children are not at school and do not know how to keep children busy every day. The mothers expressed that it is very difficult to look after children in the hotel. One mother stated, "I take my children to the park but it is not possible every day."

At the hotel, there are limited activities available for the children and adults. We did not see information about activities in the hotel.

Women told us that they would welcome gym memberships, ESOL lessons and a playroom for their children.

Additional findings

Families told us that the staff are helpful but cannot provide everything they need. One mother said, "I need a stroller for my son and some toys for my children. I

asked the staff and they directed me to the Red Cross. I went there and they didn't have a stroller."

People told us that clothes are washed once a week. One woman said, "This is no good for children's clothes. The children are wearing dirty clothes because we have no choice." Another woman said, "The clothes do not come back clean enough. I wash the children's clothes by hand."

Provider response

Any dietary and medical restrictions will be noted by Serco as part of the induction procedure. In the event that a guest has specific dietary needs, such as those related to culture, religion, or health, Serco notifies hotel catering teams so that the demands are met. If their demands are not satisfied locally, Serco will consider their larger contingency portfolio and appropriately relocate them to a location where their needs may be satisfied.

Local procedures are in place to guarantee that, upon arriving at the accommodation, children of statutory school age are forwarded to the appropriate local authority agency for the purpose of processing their application.

Hotel 3

Monday 18 September 2023

10 am – 1 pm

Residents spoke to: 20 people

Key Themes: Access to services and activities.

Hotel facilities

The hotel is very modern, in the City Centre and people can walk to most places.

We were told that the hotel has accessible rooms and facilities. Laundry services are provided. Most people were happy with the accommodation however some people told us that the rooms are too small for families.

There is a small library in the reception with adult and children's books. However, we noted that there is no social space dedicated to children and babies.

One young person said that there is not much to do and, "I am bored."

We observed a good rapport between the staff and residents. One person said, "I am very happy and very nice staff."

Access to services

Everyone was registered with the Assist GP Practice. We observed healthcare professionals coming into the hotel to meet with residents. We noted that there is health information available for residents.

The residents are struggling to register with NHS dentists and are finding it difficult to get dental appointments for themselves and their children. They can only get an emergency appointment, however, this is also very difficult to access.

Parents are concerned that children need to be seen by a dentist but people cannot get an appointment with a dentist. One man shared that he went to an emergency dentist for his toothache and he was advised to take his tooth out which he did not want to do. His English is not good and he did not understand the process.

One woman shared that she had health issues and was admitted to hospital. She said, "The staff and doctors are good. I had good treatment at the hospital."

Dietary needs

Food is regularly provided at the hotel. The hotel has a canteen set up near the main reception. There was no table or chair to sit on where people were served their food. There is no communal space to eat so people have to get their food from reception and take it to their rooms to eat. The hotel manager explained that they have an Indian cook and an English cook and they are providing a balanced diet for everyone. Some people said that they were happy with the food, while others were missing their own home cooked food.

Housing

One man is due to leave the hotel but he is finding it difficult to find a place to live as council housing and private housing are too expensive.

One young boy was explaining about housing issues on behalf of his mother who could not speak English. He was asking us to help them find housing because the rooms were too small for their family to live. They also wanted to move to Derby as they had family there.

Activities

At the hotel, there are no activities for the children or adults and they do not have any activities taking place in the hotel. There is a makeshift noticeboard made from cardboard boxes in reception but there was no information about social or volunteering activities.

There is health information for residents. Leaflets are available in various languages in reception. We spoke with the manager who told us that they are well connected with local organisations. People are signposted where to find information and activities. We were told that people go to Leicester College for ESOL classes and education.

School

Most of the children attend local schools and nurseries very close to the hotel within walking distance. The mothers with young children that we spoke to seemed happy.

Provider response

Nothing to add to the findings.

Leicester City of Sanctuary (Refugees & Asylum Seekers)

Wednesday 11 October 2023

11 am – 1 pm

People spoke to: 25 people with children, single adults

We attended a drop-in session to speak to people who access the centre. People who use the centre can access snacks, drinks, food, clothes, activities and information. The staff are there to help and support people.

Key Themes: Dental appointments, mental health and maternity services.

Access to primary care services

People told us that they are struggling to obtain dental appointments for themselves and their children. They are only able to obtain emergency appointments with dentists.

One of the men explained that he managed to pull his tooth out by himself because the pain was unbearable and he could not access a dentist. He took painkillers to get himself better.

People said:



"I tried to register but the dentist rejected me, they said to go private but I cannot as too expensive."

"My friend called 111, they got him an appointment but he missed it. He went the next day and they said you missed it and offered only a private appointment."



Most of the people we spoke to were registered with a GP Practice. Some people were waiting for their HC1 form before registering with a GP.

People said:



"Nowadays services are really bad, getting a GP appointment is hard."

"When you are at the GP the doctors are nice."

"When I want to make an appointment, stay on the line for a long time, when they answer they say no appointment, call back tomorrow. Horrible for me."



Mental Health

Most people explained that because of their current situation, they are not feeling well, they are worried, cannot sleep at night and are anxious as they do not know what is going to happen.

One man expressed that his children and wife are in Pakistan and he has not seen them for about 3 years. This is making him worried every day.

One woman said, "I am happy living in the UK but I am living in a Travelodge hotel and waiting for a house for 8 months. My husband is working but I am not happy living in a hotel because it is difficult to feed my children, make food and wash clothes."

Nutrition

People told us that health and cultural considerations have not been taken into account for people when they are diabetic. People who are living in the hotels told us that they are not happy with the food provided where they live.

Mother and toddlers

We noted that the people attending the mother and toddler group are receiving lots of support, advice and signposting to appropriate organisations.

People said:



"The mother and toddler group is good because we can meet other people, babies can play and we can practice English."

"The group lead helps us to register our children to school and nursery."



"I like this area because everything is within walking distance."

Maternity Care

People expressed that they had concerns with the maternity care they have received.

Personal stories



“I had a bad experience when I had my baby at the Leicester Royal Infirmary as the professionals did not listen to me. I had a fever, it got worse, they were giving me so much medicine, but the fever would not go, I was worried about my baby. I said I wanted a caesarean, and then they took me for the caesarean. They did not allow my husband to be with me. I was worried because I had a sugar problem. I had a caesarean because my sugar was going higher and higher. After giving birth, I was not called back for a check-up for diabetes. I called the GP Practice but the receptionist was not helpful.”



People said:



“I had no period for two years and the GP referred me to the gynaecology department and I am still waiting for the appointment for 9 months. I have been told that I have to wait another 9 months for an appointment. I am mentally upset.”

“Maternity with my first daughter was not good. The second one was good, more careful. With my first child, I told them the baby would come soon, but they told me to wait, they left me and my husband, I was in the bath and the baby started to come, but they didn't want to check. I spoke no English but with my second was very careful. I think it was at the time staff were changing shifts.”



Recommendations

The recommendations relate to what we have heard during our visits. In discussions with service providers and the local authority, it is clear there is a wider context that many are acutely aware of, particularly the impact national policy can have on local areas.

1. Better and more informed communication of how our health systems and other available services work. Consider regular information sessions from health care service providers to provide up-to-date information on local services. Consider the introduction of mobile community-based services, including those with health information, to regularly visit the hotels or offer access close to the hotels with limited space for additional activities.
2. The local authority to explore to what extent asylum seekers' needs could be supported by involving local voluntary sector organisations. Asylum seekers are to be made aware of local opportunities and encouraged to get involved with the local community.
3. That all residents are provided with an information pack explaining what local support services are available and where they are located. Explore the use of phone apps such as Joy Marketplace to provide relevant local information.
4. Voluntary sector organisations are invited to join collaborative discussions about how they could potentially extend services and activities to support the needs of asylum seekers. Particularly new mothers who may not be aware of local support groups.
5. Translation services at GPs should be provided for every patient who needs them. Ensure that the residents who need translation services for appointments are aware that interpreting services are available.
6. Hotel staff to use language translation services to support residents in contacting health services, particularly if residents are struggling with follow-up

appointments or accessing hospital services.

7. Joint approach from the local authority and the Voluntary and Community Sector to assist in providing support services at the hotels for residents, including ESOL lessons.
8. Involve Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust (LPT) in exploring how culturally appropriate mental health support services can be implemented. Look at options to provide specific mental health support to meet individual's needs.
9. The local authority to explore options for providing ongoing access to leisure centres and gyms for all residents to help people with their physical and mental health.
10. Ensure that the nutritional needs of people with ongoing health conditions (including diabetes) are being catered for and provide people with appropriate information and support for their condition.

Next steps

We will be sharing our findings with the relevant organisations, the local authority and partner agencies.

We will continue to reach out and listen to the views of asylum seekers and support the ongoing multiagency approach to providing service and facilities for asylum seekers in Leicester. Working together to improve the experiences of all people accessing health and care services in our city.

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