

Asylum Seekers and Poverty Truth Project Blackpool

Rethinking Service Provision

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Executive Summary

This report evaluates the experiences of asylum seekers housed in the Metropole Hotel in Blackpool and assesses the impact of the health and wellbeing activities delivered by the Poverty Truth Project, Blackpool. It highlights the challenging national context, the crucial gap-filling role of the third sector, and the relational, community-centred approach that underpins the project's effectiveness. Drawing on focus groups with the project team, former and current residents, the report identifies key strengths, persistent barriers, and areas for improvement.

Nationally, asylum seekers experience limited rights, lengthy decision-making processes, and highly constrained living conditions. Local authorities face significant strain due to limited funding from the central government. As the government increasingly relies on private contractors for accommodation, the third sector has become essential in meeting unmet needs in mental health, integration, support services and advocacy.

Blackpool reflects these national pressures acutely.

The Metropole Hotel has been used as contingency accommodation since 2021 despite criticism over overcrowding, unsuitability and safety concerns. The combination of long asylum processing times, poor housing quality, and a hostile political climate has created conditions that negatively affect residents' mental health, social integration and sense of belonging. Far-right mobilisation around asylum accommodation in Blackpool has further heightened fear, isolation and stigma among those housed at the Metropole Hotel.

In this context, the Poverty Truth Project Blackpool offers grassroots, relational model of support that seeks to restore dignity, connection and community for asylum seekers. Between 2024 and 2025, the team delivered a range of activities, including sports events and creative workshops, as well as beach trips, film nights, and cultural

celebrations. Often, with little to no budget and facilitated by volunteers.

The evaluation finds that these activities played a significant role in reducing isolation, improving mental health, and linking residents to essential local services. Through everyday conversations and relational engagement, the project helped Metropole residents access healthcare, education, mobility support, leisure opportunities and local networks. For many, these interactions strengthened their resettlement readiness and sense of belonging.

However, challenges remain. Communication between the project and residents needs improvement, and activities are not always culturally appropriate. However, the project team is aware of these challenges and uses different mitigation strategies to overcome them.

Furthermore, structural barriers, such as poor accommodation conditions, inadequate funding, and the broader political environment,

also limit what the project can achieve on its own.

The report recommends:

- 1. Strengthening communication strategies**
- 2. Adopting participatory co-design in activity planning and developing culturally inclusive practices.**
- 3. More sustainable funding and resourcing would enable the project to scale its impact while maintaining its relational**

Ultimately, the report concludes that the project's human-centred approach is its key strength, offering vital connection and support to asylum seekers navigating an often dehumanising and fragmented system.

Context

Research shows that only a small minority of people fleeing persecution have any meaningful chance to “choose” their destination; most report that decisions are shaped by urgency, trauma, flight routes, smugglers, or simple happenstance rather than any informed preference for the UK (Crawley, 2010; Refugee Council, 2010).

The North West and North East regions supported the largest numbers of asylum seekers per million residents (2,739 and 2,643, respectively) (Home Office, 2025). As of 2025, Home Office figures show that there are 26 asylum seekers per 10,000 residents. Whilst councils receive funding per occupied bed for an asylum seeker, there are still significant gaps in the provision of social care and wraparound support.

This consequently risks retraumatising an already vulnerable population and increases the likelihood that councils will not meet their goals of integration and independence of

asylum seekers once they are granted refuge, as set out by the central government.

Moreover, many asylum seeker provisions are outsourced to private contractors. From the beginning of their asylum claims, asylum seekers are housed across the country in often unsuitable accommodation and live off small weekly allowances.

Every individual in the household is entitled to £49.18, and additional weekly payments are made for pregnant mothers (£5.25), babies under 1 (£9.50) and children aged 1 to 3 (£5.25) (No Recourse to Public Funds Network, n.d.).

Asylum seekers also have no say in where the Home Office places them and often must move with little to no notice. Their experiences while awaiting a decision on their claims vary because each local authority has a different approach to supporting AS and providing care.

The strain on local authorities has led the third sector to step in to fill gaps in provision.

Charities partner with local authorities and also work independently to support asylum

seekers' wellbeing, education, transition, and integration into the country.

Rising Tensions

Higher levels of asylum-seeking cases since 2021 and public discourse (politicians, social and traditional media) have resulted in more visibility and polarisation on the issue of providing refuge.

In recent months, especially after the Southport murders, online misinformation and political hate speech against asylum seekers have been on the rise. The construction of 'the other' through such inflammatory content on

social media and decades of state-led anti-migrant rhetoric have led to unsafe environments for vulnerable people escaping war, persecution and serious human rights violations. It is largely ignored in this discourse that, as of 2025, many asylum seekers and refugees (66%) fleeing conflict and persecution remained in a country neighbouring their country of origin.

For example, 76% of Syrian refugees were hosted in Türkiye, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. In comparison, the UK takes in only 1% of global refugees and asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2025).

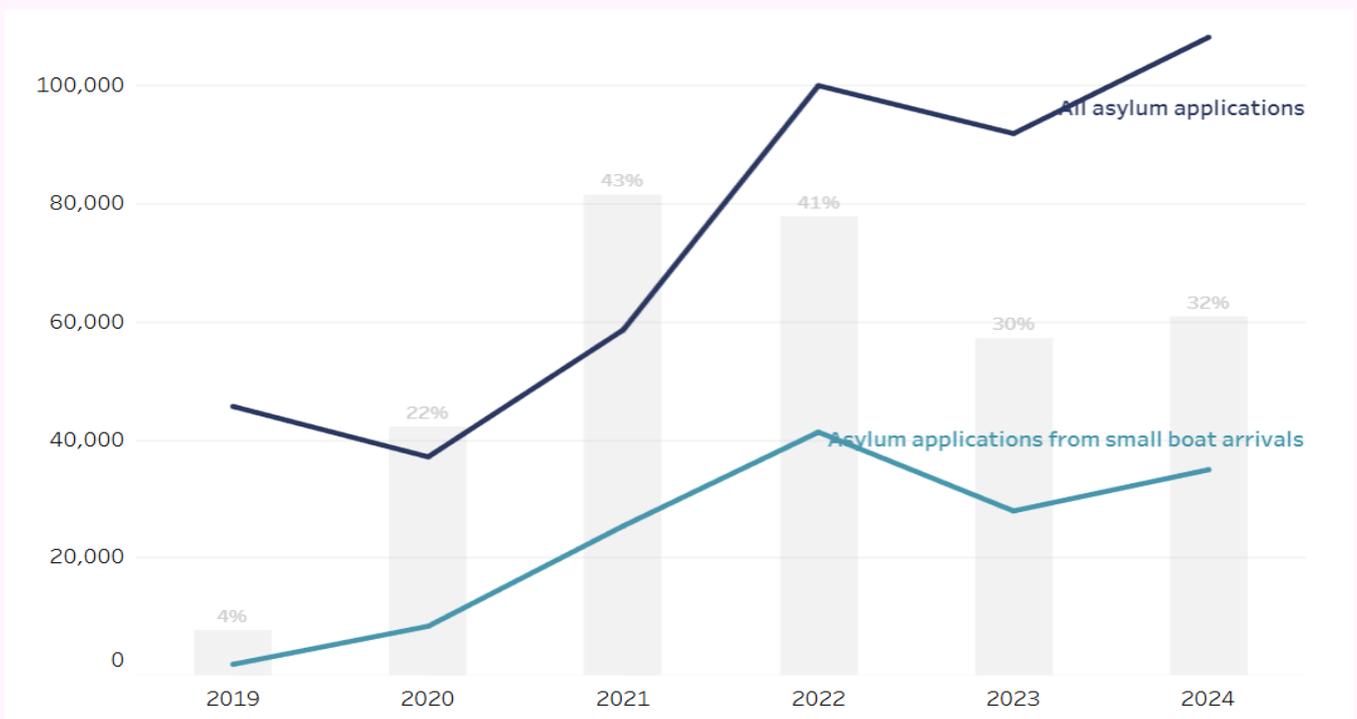


Figure 1: Migration Observatory, University of Oxford, 2026

The current policy environment could be described as hostile to asylum seekers. They have no recourse to public funds (e.g. no housing support or welfare), limited financial support and legally unable to earn an income.

A coalition of more than 100 organisations — including the Refugee Council, Save the Children, Mind, Oxfam, Shelter, Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth — have written to the current Home Secretary, Shabana Mahmood, expressing their concern about recent policies. They fear the consequences of creating larger divisions and amplifying the othering of refugees as scapegoats.

The role of the third sector

Considering the hostile policy environment from the central government, local authorities' financial challenges and their limited control over the Home Office's policies, the third sector has become a major player in this ecosystem. The sector fills significant gaps left by the government, particularly in mental

health, integration, legal assistance, and emergency support.

Policy-setting and asylum claim decisions are all controlled by the Home Office and other central government departments.

Accommodation procurement and management is organised and controlled by private contractors under Home Office contracts (such as Serco, Mears and Clearsprings Ready Homes). Support services, such as legal advice, integration, counselling, language support, and charity support, are delivered by the third sector; government grants fund some, while others are funded by traditional charity funding and donations. With expertise in service delivery, the third sector is well placed to provide advocacy for asylum seekers, oversight, campaigning, and research. However, the third sector is facing its own set of challenges.

Many of the challenges the third sector faces are economic, driven by top-down government decisions. The potential positive impact of the sector's services is hampered by limited

capacity, funding cycles, and political and contractual pressures. Supporting refugees and asylum seekers is now viewed as a contested area, with many in the sector feeling like it needs to be 'under the radar' work. This type of work then becomes more difficult to find funding sources.

Also, councils tend to do the minimum statutorily demanded, so the third sector provides support out of passion and goodwill; many third sector organisations are willing to work for free. Many services, such as English Language lessons, are usually free and volunteer-run. However, due to the current cost-of-living crisis across the UK, the third sector, which depends on donations, is receiving significantly less. Local authorities argue that central government grant funding does not fully cover the real costs of supporting asylum seekers, which in turn affects funding allocated to the sector.

About Poverty Truth Project Blackpool

The narrative about Blackpool is usually negative and viewed through a deficit lens.

Blackpool is characterised by deprivation, economic and social decline, and a lack of community cohesion. However, many organisations within the third sector are tackling these social issues head-on. Poverty Truth Blackpool is doing things differently.

Poverty Truth Project Blackpool

Poverty Truth Project, Blackpool, is a small voluntary organisation, an associate member of a national network of self-governing, self-funding projects in the UK, asking for citizens to be put at the centre of decisions made about them. Through its residents' forum and podcast, The Other Side of Blackpool, the Poverty Truth Project in Blackpool has a proven track record of supporting communities in shaping the places they live, the services they use, and the decisions that affect their lives. The project has two part-time members of

staff, and the resident team comprises migrants from Syria, Lebanon and Iran who support the work with translation services or catering. They serve as volunteers, or, if possible, for payment.

The vision is for people who are disadvantaged, marginalised and living in poverty to have a powerful voice and an equal say.

Inspired by the Poverty Truth Network, the project has been active since 2020. The project hosts fortnightly lunches for residents who are in seasonal work, on benefits, renting, or in poor health or with a disability. A third of the town falls into this category (approx. 50,000 people). In 2025, the project had meaningful, sustained contact with 100 residents and supported 10 residents in leading advocacy campaigns that brought about meaningful change. The project goes beyond engaging communities by actively working to increase communities' power and influence over local decisions and services.

The project enables residents who lack agency to recognise, harness, and use their power to

drive and lead positive change within their community. The project brings residents together to influence change, enabling them to lead advocacy on the issues that matter most to them, and act as powerful advocates with and for residents to drive tangible change in areas of unmet need in the town. A resident of Blackpool identified one such unmet need.

One saw a child waving a 'help!' sign from the window of the Metropole hotel and wanted to do something.

Climate change, wars and gender-specific harm such as female genital mutilation (FGM), forced marriage, sterilisation, abortion, the threat of honour killing and trafficking mean that there will likely be a flow of people desperately seeking refuge in the UK for years to come. Specifically, since 2021, the flow of asylum seekers has taken the shape of a single hotel, the Metropole. In response to the unmet needs of asylum seekers, the project created a fun day out - and delivered it. The initiative won the backing of Blackpool Transport, a local construction company and a migrant advocacy charity. It has ignited the interest of the

council's leisure services team, who now offer gym sessions, ping pong and bowls in the hotel ballroom.

The government declines to fund 'health and wellbeing activities' for asylum seekers, leaving it to already over-stretched local authorities to do this. The Refugee Council condemns the absence of such activities for asylum seekers, stating that it adds injury, they say, to people already dislocated and traumatised. Supported by government funding through Blackpool Council for one year through the community cohesion grant, the project steps in to fill gaps in provision and offers activities, including days out for residents of the Metropole Hotel.

Accommodation

Under Section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, the Home Office is tasked with providing housing and financial support to asylum seekers who are destitute or likely to become so within 14 days. Accommodation is provided through contracted providers, including private contractors, in either shared

flats/houses or hotels, often in sub-standard conditions. It works through a ‘no choice’ basis, meaning they cannot choose where to live. Private contractors provide this accommodation on behalf of the Home Office, and asylum seekers are placed under the care of local authorities.

Whilst the Home Office is responsible for accommodating asylum seekers, local authorities are responsible for education, health and social care, and the wellbeing of those housed in their constituencies.

Outsourcing accommodation to private contractors with profit-making motives can conflict with ensuring the welfare of asylum seekers. In addition, this dual system raises concerns about a lack of transparency and accountability regarding who oversees the health and wellbeing of asylum seekers.

At the time of writing this report, 1,349 individuals in Blackpool fall under the categories of Asylum Contingency, Supported Asylum, and Dispersed Accommodation (NWRSM, 2025). The latter category refers to

those living in longer-term temporary accommodation following the approval of their Section 95 support applications (Home Office, 2024).

The Metropole Hotel

The Metropole Hotel in Blackpool, part of the Britannia Hotels chain, has been used to house dispersed asylum seekers since 2021. It was originally commissioned for only three months but continues to house vulnerable families dispersed by the Home Office to Blackpool (BBC, 2025). The Metropole has been criticised for poor, overcrowded conditions and for being generally unsuitable for long-term housing.

Hotels have been part of the government’s accommodation options for asylum seekers. However, hotels are an expensive solution and have increasingly been the target of racist attacks, including at this hotel. The government has stated that it wants to stop using hotels and instead use repurposed buildings and large sites, such as former military bases, to house asylum seekers. The issues and potential

solutions that are discussed in this report remain relevant regardless of the type of accommodation.

The Metropole Hotel houses asylum seekers from different migration streams; this could create tensions due to the different nationalities, cultures, and religions all under one roof.

The tool 'Learning Village' provides community-based support to new arrivals and offers cultural integration resources (Learning Village, n.d.).

Asylum seekers in Blackpool who have not been placed in longer-term accommodation are housed at the Metropole Hotel. Serco runs it and has received extensive media attention in recent months. It has been an epicentre for far-right activists due to the positive connotations ascribed to the term 'hotel', which evokes images of holidays (Refugee Action, n.d.). However, the reality is far from this mental image.

Service evaluation

In 2025, Blackpool Poverty Truth Project received money from a Migrant charity and the government's Community Cohesion fund, with volunteers delivering events, enabling them to offer health and wellbeing activities to Metropole residents. Poverty Truth Project attends the monthly Blackpool Council-led VCFSE asylum meetings, where different organisations can plan and offer support to the asylum community. There, Emily Hopley and Blackpool Researching Together's Matthew Parker presented on research and ongoing capacity-building activities.

Poverty Truth Project contacted them to discuss this evaluation. From there, Matthew and Emily spoke to Dr Eseonu to conduct the evaluation.

Dr Eseonu, Lecturer in Politics and Policy at Lancaster University, led the evaluation of activities for asylum seekers residing in the Metropole Hotel. Emily Hopley, a local community researcher, co-facilitated the

event, and Matthew Parker, a local community researcher, served as the observation note-taker. Poverty Truth Project, Blackpool, recruited participants through leaflet advertisements and WhatsApp messages in different languages.

The evaluation used elements of Ripple Effect Mapping to conduct 2 focus group discussions with Metropole Hotel residents and the Blackpool Poverty Truth Project team, as well as conversations with 2 former Metropole Hotel residents. The first focus group discussion included 13 participants (11 Metropole Hotel residents and 2 stakeholders/staff of the Poverty Truth Project).

The discussion explored which activities the residents had participated in, what they enjoyed about them, what made them enjoyable, whether they led to engagement with other people and activities, and what other activities they would like to engage in in the future. It was mediated through a translator who was also a hotel resident.

Most of the residents in this group were of Iranian heritage. The second focus group discussion had 12 participants (7 Metropole Hotel residents and 5 Poverty Truth Project stakeholders/staff), with a more balanced representation across Metropole Hotel residents, Poverty Truth Project stakeholders, and mixed heritage.

The discussion covered the variety of activities that the Blackpool Poverty Truth Project offered to residents between January and December 2025. It delved into the impact of attending these activities and the barriers to offering and participating in them.

The sections that follow highlight the key themes from the evaluation:

- **The need for health and wellbeing activities**
- **The types of activities offered**
- **The impact of these activities**
- **Missed opportunities (areas for improvement)**
- **The barriers to effective delivery of activities.**

Why health and wellbeing activities matter

Housing that is safe and meets basic standards is central to anyone's mental health (Refugee Action, 2025). Furthermore, the socio-economic conditions asylum seekers are placed in mean they are likely to have experiences of loneliness and isolation, which carry a higher risk of poor mental health (Mind, 2025).

In this evaluation, we found evidence of residents suffering from poor mental health as a result of the state of the accommodation and isolation. The translator said that "most of" the attendees in the hotel suffer from anxiety and depression due to their past experiences.

Residents acknowledged that taking part in activities helps reduce their anxiety. There was also a desire to meet people outside the hotel, such as members of the wider Blackpool community.

Residents reported a feeling of déjà vu, doing nothing and facing the same hard realities day in, day out, month in, month out. Residents

reflected on their inability to access activities and outside space, stating that "**being inside constantly is really tough**". One of the participants said they were so bored they "**wanted to kill themselves**"; it highlights the state of the mental health of some of the residents at the hotel.

Yet, it appears that there is still a gap in the provision of activities that support mental health. One resident with anxiety expressed that he had asked Serco directly for activities around children and parents, and how to participate in such activities. He was specifically interested in football activities for his son, who is upset that he cannot play at the moment. Another resident mentioned that children in the hotel do not have access to physical space, and when they do venture out to the beachfront, it feels unsafe for them. For example, the protests outside the hotel were interpreted as a safety issue.

Both parents felt that "**nobody helped**".

Thereby exacerbating feelings of isolation and

negatively impacting their and their children's mental health.

Providing activities is therefore an important intervention in supporting residents' mental health. These activities are held to help reduce feelings of isolation, repetition, and boredom.

Activities offered

Poverty Truth Project, Blackpool, between December 2024 and December 2025, organised at least one activity per month and included a variety of events, including Christmas parties, sports events, creative classes, e.g. macrame and flower arrangements, a magic convention, beach trips, nature walks, cookery, picnics (teddy bear themed and Eid) and film nights. Pictures from these activities are included in this report.

These activities were run with little or no budget, typically relying on the team's willingness, which included employees, the board, and volunteers. Some of the activities included Blackpool residents, such as a picnic and sports day organised by a local Roman

Catholic school academy (two schools working together) that brought 60 locals and Metropole residents together. The wide variety of activities offered meant that there was something of interest to Metropole residents.

The embeddedness and connectedness of the Poverty Truth Project in Blackpool's ecosystem facilitated the delivery of these activities. For example, residents received free tickets to the Magic Convention held in Blackpool in February 2025 through one of the team's connections in the entertainment industry. The team also leveraged connections to churches, mosques, community centres, and other local organisations to deliver activities, signpost residents to receive support and support their integration into Blackpool.



Impact

Conversations during these activities between the Poverty Truth Project team and residents were critical to their experiences and improved their mental health. The examples below highlight several ways in which Poverty Truth Project served as a referral conduit, helping residents access support and connect with organisations with mutual interests. These activities affect residents' resettlement readiness, sense of belonging, and mental health.

Resettlement readiness

A former resident, now resettled in a new community, reflects on how these activities helped him settle in.

In their words: **“Those activities made me communicate with locals, you know? And before that, I hesitated to communicate with the locals. Now I can communicate with them. I can say to them; Hello, exchange my views with the locals, with our neighbours, and we share things with**

Improving mental health

Participating in these activities positively impacted residents, which is reflected in the quotes below:

“I enjoyed the teams that came for entertainment and outings...these things made me very happy there”

“The team has lovingly and humanely brought joy and happiness to the hearts of displaced people, both young and old”

“reduced our depression, when you engage in some activity, you forgot about your past”

Belonging

The cookery class enabled a mum to make a home-cooked culture-specific meal for her young children who had been craving a taste of home.

“made us feel like home”

Another said: **“Friendly faces made me feel like there are people here to welcome you to society”**

Interest intermediaries

Volunteers facilitated a resident to volunteer with a local charity that offers crisis support, emergency accommodation, mental health counselling and Severe Weather Emergency Protocol provision.

The team introduced a cricketer from Iran to the Blackpool Cricket Club, and he began to play for the club's 3rd Team before he was resettled elsewhere.

A young Iranian boy, a very talented football player, was introduced to the coaching staff, watched a match at Blackpool Football Club, and is now searching for a local club to join.

Bridge Builders

Instances of bridge building included:

Recognising that a family has a deaf non-verbal child and making a referral to Deafway, a charity that provides Deaf/sign language arts and cultural activities and projects, so they can access the necessary support.

Identifying that a disabled child with no mobility did not have a wheelchair

Providing information to parents about services such as Neuro Ninjas, Better Start and Better Minds

Letting services know of culturally specific needs such as halal food in schools and women-only swimming sessions

Arranging for core services such as Education and Transport to provide residents with the relevant information to ensure they can meet their needs

Improvement priorities

Through the focus group discussions, this evaluation found two key areas that the Poverty Truth Project, Blackpool, and other similar organisations need to consider when providing activities to asylum seekers and refugees.

These are communication channels, cultural awareness, and connection.

The Metropole Hotel, as the sole communication channel between the team and residents, is an area for improvement.

Residents reported not always being aware of the Poverty Truth Project's activities.

Sometimes flyers were posted in the Metropole Hotel's lunch area, just a day before the event, resulting in low turnout for some activities.

Furthermore, some residents who had been there for 6 months were unaware of the Poverty Truth Project and the activities.

While there is a high level of churn among residents at the Metropole Hotel at any given time, and the Poverty Truth Project team schedules engagement events in the days leading up to the activities, further

consideration is needed for how outreach for these activities currently works. One suggestion from the residents was to better utilise the existing space, which currently displays posters and materials for services such as the NHS, so that communications are in one place and they can check that space to see what is happening.

In addition, a purposive effort is made to reach groups that are not always represented at these activities. To support coherence in the offer and communication to asylum seekers and refugees, the local Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE). Asylum Seeker online meetings can serve as a space for organisations to learn more about the needs and interests of asylum seekers and refugees at the Metropole Hotel, and to coordinate support services and activities.

The Metropole houses people from different backgrounds, and residents said sharing accommodation did not bring them closer together.

The residents said they were struggling with the diverse backgrounds and cultures of the hotel's residents. While activities brought residents together, there was not always a sense of connection between the groups. There are therefore future opportunities to focus on connecting groups in the hotel to one another and to local residents through culturally sensitive activities.

Another area related to culture: some activities were not always culturally sensitive, for example, the choice of movies shown on film night or how to celebrate Eid. Yet what was key was that the team demonstrated openness and a willingness to learn and develop their understanding of culturally appropriate activities.

Therefore, the team should involve residents in co-designing activities, provide more options that reflect different cultural norms and interests, ensure activities are accessible to people observing cultural or religious practices (such as ensuring halal food is available), and collaborate with community groups and

organisations already supporting specific cultural communities.

The Poverty Truth Project team employed a former resident of the Metropole Hotel who has settled in Blackpool to support the delivery of these activities, but, in light of feedback from the focus group discussions, the provision of culturally appropriate activities still needs further improvement.

Recommendations

- Improve communication channels and messages between residents and community organisations that provide support. Where resident representatives attend the VCFSE meetings to share residents' support needs and interests, facilitate their ability to influence the outcome of these discussions.
- Adopt a structured approach to designing and delivering activities that are culturally aware, inclusive, and responsive to the diverse backgrounds of asylum seekers and refugees. This should include a co-design element in which Metropole residents assist with planning sessions. This could help ensure the sessions are culturally diverse and improve residents' employability skills once their asylum applications are granted.
- Avoid overreliance on a single person representing residents and reflect on

whose voices are missing from these planning sessions.

Structural considerations

There are structural factors beyond the control of Poverty Truth Project, Blackpool, that affect the lives of asylum-seekers and refugees.

The state of the Metropole hotel is one factor that contributes to the poor mental health of residents. For example, residents complained about mould in the hotel's living quarters.

Samantha Arden, a previous Metropole Hotel employee, demonstrates the reality of the hotel.

When speaking with the 'Blackpool Lead', she states (Beardsworth, 2025): "There's one room [on] the third floor where the roof collapsed while it was occupied [...] The residents are families, older people, and people with disabilities. Babies [are] being raised [in] one overcrowded room."

While there are no incentives for Serco to go beyond providing basic lodging and food, a commitment to preserving human dignity

creates a moral imperative to improve the accommodation and to work with the local VCFSE to support residents.

The pace at which asylum seekers' claims are processed also negatively impacts the mental health of residents. Those housed in the Metropole Hotel are unable to attend any groups, begin studies or access any services for six months. This creates a climate where asylum seekers feel invisible to the system and are cut off from the rest of the town. The Home Office currently has long delays: the average wait time for an asylum application that received an initial decision in 2024 was 413 days, and around two-thirds of all substantive initial decisions made in 2024 took more than a year (The Migration Observatory, 2025). These long waiting periods keep asylum seekers and refugees in a perpetual state of waiting, contributing to poor mental health outcomes.

Resource availability in terms of money and time restricted the team's ability to deliver these activities.

Small amounts and short-term funding limit the types and numbers of activities offered. For example, transporting people to places can be quite expensive. Members of the team felt there was not always enough time to engage with residents as they would have liked.

Recruiting more people to join the team will enable Poverty Truth Project to reach more residents and offer more activities. Sustainable resourcing for the Poverty Truth Project can scale up the positive impact on asylum seekers and refugees.

Finally, the political context of anti-asylum hate in the UK has escalated, characterised by increased far-right protests and harassment targeting accommodation sites such as the Metropole Hotel. HOPE not hate research has shown that far-right activity around asylum accommodation increased by 102% in 2022 from the previous year, with 253 separate incidents. This hostile environment is exacerbated by the flying of British flags and the portrayal of asylum-seekers and refugees in traditional and social media that seek to communicate that 'the other' is not welcome,

leading to a climate of fear and serious mental health impacts on asylum seekers.

Conclusion

The key ingredient of Poverty Truth Project's is their human-centred, relational approach.

From speaking to residents (current and former), it was clear that the team prioritised connection, empathy, and mutual respect in interactions to foster trust and create good outcomes for residents. Their relational capability is evidenced by their ability to form, maintain, and strengthen relationships with residents and the local ecosystems, including with VCFSE and businesses.

These relationships facilitated a positive impact on residents. Their relational approach meant they concentrated on creating environments where residents feel respected, heard, and supported. These safe environments aided the team in fostering belonging, acting as interest intermediaries and bridge builders, and improving mental health outcomes and resettlement readiness.

Despite the identified structural constraints and the need to improve communication channels and offer more culturally sensitive activities, Poverty Truth Project exemplifies the importance of being relational through everyday activities that provide relief from the harsh realities of waiting.

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