



Lost in the system: The voices of refugees and asylum seekers on health and healthcare – Executive summary

This research is the first locally to amplify the voices and experiences of refugees and asylum seekers with regard to their health and access to healthcare. The report highlights the experiences and needs of 32 Hertfordshire residents with asylum seeker or refugee status, and provides corresponding recommendations to local providers aimed at improving the experience and wellbeing of this cohort.



Refugees and asylum seekers had very poor emotional wellbeing and struggled to access the right support. Accommodation providers should work more closely with the voluntary sector to provide wellbeing activities and resources for their residents, and healthcare professionals should have training on the issues refugees and asylum seekers face.



Residents in contingency accommodation were not getting nutritionally sufficient food. They are struggling to live a healthy lifestyle and should be supported with this as they have very limited resources to do so independently. The food needs to provide a balanced diet and accommodation providers should be flexible about different medical and cultural needs.



Parents were worried about their children's health and development. They often did not know where to go for help with their children's health needs. They received very good support from health visitors and provisions should be put in place to enable health visitors to visit each hotel regularly to support the children and families living there.



Refugees and asylum seekers had very poor physical health and struggled to navigate the NHS system. They tended to have positive experiences when they attended GP services, but would benefit from being offered an initial health and wellbeing check upon registration with the GP surgery, and be supported to understand the healthcare system.



Many refugees and asylum seekers struggled with communication and accessing care. Most relied on informal means for interpretation which poses unnecessary risks and is not equitable. Everybody who needs them should have professional translation and interpretation services available to them at every stage of their interaction with the healthcare system.



Refugees and asylum seekers generally had positive experiences of urgent and emergency care but needed support in navigating the system. The referral system was unfamiliar and some respondents faced unexpected differences to what they were used to outside of the UK.



Accessing dental care was difficult for some refugees and asylum seekers. More emphasis needs to be put on supporting this cohort with finding a dentist and booking a check-up.

Recommendations

Health and social care services in Hertfordshire have a duty to provide an equitable and adequate level of care to everyone in their area, including refugees and people seeking asylum. In light of the findings of this report, we recommend the following be considered for implementation:

Recommendations for local health and care services and partners:

Recommendations specifically relating to refugees and asylum seekers:

1. As per national guidance recommendations, offer an initial standard **health and wellbeing check** to asylum seekers upon their registration with a GP surgery – see [this toolkit](#) from Doctors of the World for reference. This opportunity for healthcare providers to do an extensive check of an arriving individual's health and wellbeing needs should be explicitly and properly funded to ensure its occurrence despite pressures on resources.
2. Prioritise the provision of **mental health and wellbeing support** for all residents of hotels. This could include partnering with Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) organisations to provide wellbeing support, social and physical activities.
3. Ensure that mental health services have a close, collaborative and established relationship with colleagues at Herts Mind Network and ensure that **the most vulnerable asylum seekers and refugees** have access to the right support.
4. Provide **training and education** for healthcare professionals (clinical and non-clinical) and support staff on the issues refugees and asylum seekers face, including training on providing trauma-informed care.
5. Ensure key information about **how the healthcare system operates** is explained to newcomers by healthcare professionals, such as what their role is, what a referral to secondary care means, and how to collect their prescription.
6. Use **social prescribers and link workers** to help refugees and asylum seekers to navigate the system and connect them with local VCFSEs, activities and education or specific activities.
7. Ensure **consistency and equity** in the support provided by healthcare professionals across hotels in Hertfordshire. This includes access to GP practice staff, dentists, health visitors, and other key staff.
8. Ensure that providers fulfil their responsibility to **work with local NHS services** so residents can access appropriate healthcare. This includes supporting with GP registration, finding a dental practice, and local pharmacies. They should also encourage and support new arrivals to request a general health and wellbeing check (see recommendation 1).

Recommendations to address health inequalities across the county that will improve services for a wide range of people:

9. Mental health providers to **improve access** to their services, with a particular focus on increasing availability and capacity for those most vulnerable, and with complex needs.
10. Provide consistent and reliable use of **interpretation and translation services** throughout the patient pathway from first contact, as required by the NHS England Accessible Information Standard¹ and Reasonable Adjustments under the Equality Act 2010²
11. Ensure **data recorded on patients** includes interpretation needs and languages spoken, existing healthcare conditions and prescriptions required, and disabilities or digital barriers that may affect access.

¹ NHS England Report Template 1 – long length title

² NHS England » Reasonable adjustments

Recommendations for Hertfordshire County Council:

12. Create and share **information resources** for refugees and asylum seekers on how to navigate the health and care system and how it works – including their rights, where to go for different needs, and the role of different services. The resources should be printable, and provided in a range of languages.
13. Ensure the findings of this report **inform future strategic and developmental work** for this population, including the Needs Assessment currently being undertaken.

Hertfordshire County Council to influence and work with contingency accommodation to:

14. **Partner with VCFSE organisations** to provide support and signpost residents to wellbeing support, local groups, clubs and activities, community transport schemes, volunteering and employment opportunities, and places of worship to enable better integration and connections.
15. **Signpost residents to local family centres** and provide contact details for health visitors.
16. Consider **improving the food** provided in hotels, ensuring that it is **sufficiently nutritious** and meets a minimum standard of quality. It should be expected that residents are able to eat a healthy balanced diet that is within their religious or cultural requirements, without having to supplement it themselves.
17. Consider whether **more flexibility can be afforded to the evidence required for specialist food needs**, rather than only accepting GP letters which can be difficult and costly to obtain. This could include accepting evidence from VCFSE support staff or alternative clinical professionals (such as health visitors) who have contact with the individual or family.

"It's been a real pleasure working in partnership with Healthwatch Hertfordshire over the past year. They've joined us at every drop-in session, listening directly to refugees and asylum seekers about their experiences accessing health and social care. Together, we've uncovered a number of unmet needs that other services were not aware of. Their compassion and commitment to amplifying our clients' voices has been invaluable, and I'm very grateful to have them alongside us in this work."

Karolina Siklodi, Flourish Group Facilitator, Herts Mind Network

"In recent years, the wider partnership in Hertfordshire has worked effectively and collaboratively at speed to respond to increasing numbers of refugees and asylum seekers coming into county. However, there is more work to be done, and it is important that this work is shaped by the people most affected and with the most relevant experience. That is why this Healthwatch project is an important step forward in our local discussion. The research, report and recommendations will be invaluable in helping to steer the next steps for Hertfordshire County Council and our many partners in Districts and Boroughs, health services, and voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise organisations."

Sarah Perman, Director of Public Health, Hertfordshire County Council