The Geographical Journal

WILEY | THE GJ Royal Geographical Society with IBG

ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Domesticating the UK's Hostile Environment: Forced Migrants' Lived Experiences of Making 'Home'

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Received: 15 October 2025 | **Revised:** 25 January 2026 | **Accepted:** 29 January 2026

Keywords: asylum seekers | dispersal | forced migrants | home | precarious housing | refugees

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we analyse the lived experiences of forced migrants in dispersal accommodation in the UK, contributing to understandings of the policies and politics of the hostile environment immigration regime in relation to the domestic sphere. More specifically, our research addresses the relative dearth of work exploring the intimate lived experiences of forced migrants by considering how the asylum regime shapes understandings of home and constrains processes of homemaking. We examine how material and social aspects of dispersal accommodation work to limit forced migrants' sense of home. We show how 'out of place' materialities, such as leaks, damp and infestations of insects, alongside broken and absent material fittings, such as decaying and missing furniture, undermine the making of a safe and comfortable home. We also illustrate how social relations within and around dispersal accommodation, including relationships and encounters with neighbours and flatmates, can undermine one's sense of home and belonging. By illustrating the interconnections of the material and social, we contribute to understandings of forced migrants' experiences of housing that are constituted through an assemblage of people, objects, relations, emotions and broader political policies. Whilst forced migrants respond to precarious housing through diverse coping strategies, this paper shows that within the context of a hostile UK asylum and migration system, the ability to make home is highly constrained.

1 | Introduction

Whilst home is a universally important idea and geographical domain (Blunt 2003; Blunt and Varley 2004; Brickell 2012; Gregson and Lowe 1995), it is considered even more pertinent for those who experience migration, displacement and exile, as these processes often involve 'the loss of material, relational and symbolic homes, and the (re)imagining and (re)making of new homes' (Doná et al. 2023, 42). For forced migrants—such as asylum seekers and refugees—migration leads to the involuntary loss of home, followed by the challenging journey of finding and establishing a new home, which Ahmed et al. (2003) describe as a process of forced 'uprooting and regrounding'. Forced migration, and migration more generally, challenges and reworks traditional notions of the singular and fixed home. Migration exemplifies how the concept of home is continuously made and remade through connections to various spatial scales and dimensions, whether material, social or emotional (Fathi and Ní Laoire 2024). To illustrate the processual nature of home, the concept of homemaking has gained significant traction in recent years in home and migration literature (e.g., Boccagni 2023a, 2023b; Dinmohamed 2023; Eade 2012; Fathi and Ní Laoire 2024; Finlay 2017; Harris et al. 2020; Maida 2024; Van Liempt and Staring 2021; Wilkins 2019). Whilst practices of migrant and refugee homemaking are well documented, it is essential to acknowledge that forced migrants live in contexts that often limit their ability to make a 'home' and feel at 'home'. Crucially, this uncovers a 'politics of home' (Duyvendak 2011) that exposes the

structural forces and everyday practices that work to damage and destroy both the material and imagined aspects of home (Baxter and Brickell 2014). Migration regimes, then, a concept which refers to 'a constellation of regulatory influences, practices and power relations', significantly shape migrant experiences of home and often serve to 'restrict migrants' possibilities of homemaking' (Fathi and Ní Laoire 2024, 10–11).

It has been well documented that forced migrants are often placed in precarious forms of accommodation, such as poor-quality housing and overcrowded and unsuitable reception centres and hotels (Brown et al. 2024a, 2024b; Burbidge et al. 2024; Cassidy 2020; Darling 2022; Hirschler 2021; Phillips 2006). Housing and accommodation are the locus of restrictive asylum polices (Brown et al. 2024a, 2024b), and precarious housing 'has been deliberately produced under the UK government's Hostile Environment approach' (Burbidge et al. 2024, 1). By documenting the lived experiences of forced migrants in dispersal accommodation, this paper makes a key contribution to understandings of the policies and politics of the hostile environment immigration regime in relation to the domestic sphere. More specifically, our research addresses the relative dearth of work exploring the intimate lived experiences of forced migrants by considering how the asylum regime shapes understandings of home and constrains processes of homemaking. We argue that domesticating the hostile environment means recognising the instrumental ways it actively creates housing precarity through the provision of poor-quality housing. We illustrate how 'violent materialities' (Kane 2023), such as damp, infestations of insects and missing and decaying fittings, alongside difficult social relations, impinge on forced migrants' ability to make a safe, stable and comfortable home. A further contribution is to conceptual understandings about housing and home. We demonstrate how the concept of home provides a deeper understanding of housing experiences, particularly the affective and emotional harms of precarious housing. The research we draw on in this paper was undertaken in Newcastle-Gateshead and Glasgow in the UK between 2019 and 2022. Both contexts became important for housing asylum seekers following the introduction of the UK Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 and the dispersal policy that this enacted. The North East has the highest number of asylum seekers in the UK relative to its overall population and Glasgow is the local authority housing the most asylum seekers (Sturge 2025), making these critical sites to explore the domestic experiences of forced migrants.

The paper proceeds with a review of literature that covers critical perspectives on migrant regimes and accommodation for forced migrants, with a particular emphasis on the UK government's policy of dispersal, bringing this into dialogue with work on the materialities and social dynamics of precarious housing. After this, we outline details of our methodological approach before presenting our empirical data.

1.1 | Domesticating the Hostile Environment

The increasingly punitive and exclusionary nature of the UK's asylum regime has been well documented through critical analyses of the 'hostile environment' policy, initially implemented in the immigration acts of 2014 and 2016 (Darling 2022; Gill 2016; Goodfellow 2019; Mayblin 2020). The hostile environment is 'designed to make life as difficult as possible for people without leave to remain in the country' (Burbidge et al. 2024, 6) and is symptomatic of 'a significant increase in bordering practices and alarming procedures of discrimination' (Hall 2021, 38). As a result of this structural context, forced migrants frequently experience 'hyper-precarious lives' (Lewis et al. 2015), marked by exclusion, poverty, limited rights and precarity regarding the provision of housing and accommodation. Muñoz (2018, 371) describes precarious housing as:

> People either living in unsuitable, insecure, unaffordable, or unsafe housing, or not housed at all and living either as street homeless or in hostels, encampments, or temporary accommodation provided by states, charities, and some religious organisations.

Housing and accommodation, then, serve as central elements of restrictive policies targeting forced migrants (Brown et al. 2024a), with precarious housing and accommodation considered to be intentionally created through the UK government's hostile environment policies (Burbidge et al. 2024).

Dispersal has been a central feature of UK state bordering practices since 2000 (Darling 2022). The aim of the policy is to 'spread the burden' (Robinson et al. 2003) of housing asylum seekers and to prevent an over concentration in the southeast of England. Once in the asylum system, dispersal is compulsory and on a 'no choice' basis, removing people's rights to decide where they want to live and what type of housing and accommodation they want to live in (Gill 2016). Dispersal, therefore, follows a 'housing-led approach' (Brown et al. 2024b, 230), with decisions about where to disperse asylum seekers largely determined by the availability of housing and other forms of accommodation. Dispersal policy, like immigration policy more broadly, has changed over the last two decades, shaped by various factors, such as public discourses on immigration, the changing priorities of local and national governments, the housing crisis and increasing neoliberalisation (Bernhardt 2023; Brown et al. 2024a, 2024b; Darling 2022; Guma et al. 2024). Since 2010, the provision of dispersal accommodation has been increasingly shaped by neoliberal logics, with the Home Office contracting private organisations to deliver and manage asylum accommodation, which was previously the responsibility of local authorities (Darling 2022). Darling argues that this outsourcing of asylum accommodation has served to 'entrench the positioning of asylum accommodation and support as no longer a matter of public concern' (116) resulting in a lack of government accountability and a 'diminishing service for asylum seekers' (92).

The locations selected to accommodate dispersed asylum seekers have largely been urban areas—most notably post-industrial cities in the north of England, the Midlands, Scotland and Wales—resulting in a dispersal system that is 'geographically uneven' (Darling 2022, 9; Phillips 2006; Phillimore and Goodson 2006). Cities like Newcastle-Gateshead, Sheffield, Birmingham and Glasgow emerged as key hubs for dispersal. Within such cities, asylum seekers have often been accommodated in relatively poor and disadvantaged neighbourhoods

(Phillimore and Goodson 2006). The most common types of dispersal housing are in the social housing and private rental sectors. In the early years of the dispersal scheme, certain local authorities utilised 'hard-to-let social housing' (Darling 2022, 50), such as high-rise tower blocks listed for demolition. Darling (2022, 51) argues that local authority use of empty and underused social housing was a 'means to both profit from dispersal financially and to quickly meet an immediate demand from the Home Office'. The outsourcing of asylum accommodation to private firms is considered to have contributed to poor-quality housing, with private firms focusing more on cost-efficiency than asylum seeker well-being (Darling 2022; Guma et al. 2024; Hirschler 2021). A key issue regarding private sector firms is the efficiency of housing support and maintenance they provide, as well as the effectiveness of their complaints procedures (Darling 2022). Slow and inadequate responses to complaints about the condition of dispersal housing is a regular feature of asylum seekers' narratives about dispersal and accommodation (Darling 2022). Research has shown that individual dispersal housing is often poor quality and substandard, characterised by material deterioration and unhealthy environments (Brown et al. 2024b; Cassidy 2020; Darling 2022; Hirschler 2021). Most of the literature examining dispersal argues that it has many negative impacts, denying forced migrants agency and, in turn, making them highly vulnerable (Brown et al. 2024a, 2024b; Cassidy 2020; Darling 2022; Finlay et al. 2026; Guma et al. 2024; Hirschler 2021; Phillips 2006; Phillimore and Goodson 2006). As our research shows, not only does this leave asylum seekers living in potentially dangerous and substandard housing, it creates feelings of powerlessness and a sense that housing providers are not concerned about their living conditions. Additionally, whilst in the asylum system, most forced migrants are barred from legal work, and if they are supported under Section 95 of the government's immigration and asylum policy, they receive £49.18 a week, amounting to little more than £7 a day. As a result, many face social isolation and poverty, and may spend prolonged periods of time in these precarious forms of housing and accommodation.

Home is a key geographical concept (Blunt and Dowling 2022), and as we emphasise in this paper, it allows for a deeper understanding of housing experiences, particularly affective and emotional experiences. Much geographical interest in the intersections of home and housing has centred on materialities and the non-human entities that shape people's lived experiences of different forms of accommodation (Bertolani and Boccagni 2021). Harris et al. (2020) explore the ways that (the absence of) objects as mundane as fixtures and fittings such as door locks can produce and reinforce feelings of disenfranchisement and insecurity for people living in social housing schemes in London. Their work underlines

> how stigmas related to the neoliberalisation of housing are reproduced through the material infrastructures of temporary social housing, as rules over the contents and upkeep of such properties reinforce the infantilisation of those not fulfilling expectations of private ownership or rental.
>
> (Harris et al. 2020, 1305)

Similarly, Dimitrakou and Hilbrandt (2024) examine the governance of material belongings and how they can fundamentally shape experiences of displacement in the wake of the evacuation of a housing complex in Dortmund, Germany. In this sense, 'the material things that constitute a home are not a neutral background in which social practices take place; they condition how people practice belonging and structure relations at home and with the world' (ibid., 390). Work has also centred attention on the materialities of inadequate housing infrastructure. Kane's (2023) analysis of domestic materialities shows how violence is embedded in the presence of mould and damp found in rental properties, which she argues, illustrates the violent material politics of austerity and the housing crisis. Lived experiences of home are materialised through objects or the absence of certain objects in the domestic sphere. These material presences/absences are also intimately 'felt' and work has increasingly attended to the multisensory and emotional nature of these processes (Baxter and Brickell 2014; Sou and Webber 2023). Van Lanen (2022, 614), in their study with disadvantaged urban youth in Ireland, powerfully show how, '[h]ome brings together the material and immaterial consequences of austerity which create the affective and personal crises through which austerity is lived and felt'. Importantly, this work sheds light on the affective, less visible and unseen elements of people's lived experiences that can be produced in the context of everyday austerity politics. This body of work usefully brings together the material infrastructures of housing, and the objects that are absent/present in these spaces, with the immaterial affects and emotions that they generate.

The social aspects of dispersal are also complex and should be considered alongside these (im)material elements, characterised by difficult, hostile and disorientating social relations and everyday encounters within dispersal housing and the local area (Darling 2022; Phillimore and Goodson 2006). Given that dispersal locations are generally chosen based on 'economic imperatives' (Darling 2022), this has frequently resulted in the dispersal of people to urban areas with high levels of deprivation (Phillimore and Goodson 2006). Therefore, people are often 'dumped' into challenging and unfamiliar neighbourhoods, with limited or no integration support provided from local or central government (Darling 2017, 2022; Finlay et al. 2026). Poor preparation on the ground in dispersal locations and poor communication about dispersal to long-term residents, has led to community tensions, and as such, difficulties for asylum seekers to integrate into local communities (Darling 2017, 2022). These community tensions, along with the increasing stigmatisation of asylum seekers in popular discourse, have contributed to hostile racist encounters in and around dispersal locations (Darling 2022). As a result of these difficult social dynamics, dispersed asylum seekers can struggle to integrate in dispersal areas and frequently experience social exclusion (Phillimore and Goodson 2006). As our empirical research demonstrates, forced migrants can have both positive and negative experiences as a result of encounters with the people they are housed with and their neighbours living in adjacent properties. However, instances of discrimination, intimidation and threatening behaviour played an instrumental role in the lived experiences of domestic environments for many respondents in our study.

The ways that experiences of home are shaped by wider relations with housemates and neighbours have not only received attention in research on asylum and dispersal (e.g., Burrell 2014;

Cheshire et al. 2021; Paul 2023). Burrell (2014, 152) draws on the notion of 'porosity' to demonstrate 'how the wider economic and social tensions of the street and immediate neighbourhood permeate the so-called private space of the home'. The porous nature of the home has also been usefully deployed to think through the ways political and economic conditions directly impinge on lived experiences of domestic spaces and relations. For Nowicki (2018, 652), 'the home is an intrinsically political site, not only passively affected and shaped by governance practices and socio-political trends, but one that itself actively impacts wider politics'. Seen in this way, the provision and condition of asylum housing does not occur by chance but rather, is central to the execution of specific political agendas and, in turn, 'the perpetration of social, economic and political injustices' (ibid., 652). Indeed, our highlighting of the material, intimate and social aspects of forced migrants' lived experiences of dispersal housing unveils the political choice inherent to the provision of housing that explicitly seeks to avoid engendering any sense of 'home'. Importantly, existing work has also documented how lived experiences of housing are unequal and distinguished by diverse markers of social difference (Brickell 2014). Brown et al. (2024b, 259) have emphasised the 'heterogeneity of the housing experience' based on the fact that forced migrants come from diverse backgrounds and have intersecting identities shaped by factors such as gender, nationality, ethnicity, class backgrounds, sexuality and so on. These have been shown to impact housing experiences, and mean that certain groups are more vulnerable to housing stress (Brown et al. 2024b). This aligns with perspectives on home as intersectional and that migrant 'home-making is rooted in differential positions across axes of power, that is, how some people are able to make home and others are not' (Fathi and Ní Laoire 2024, 8).

The unequal experiences of home have attracted considerable attention in recent research related to the everyday politics of austerity in the UK (Harris et al. 2020; Kane 2023; Paul 2023; Van Lanen 2022). In this paper, we seek to build on this research by foregrounding forced migrants' experiences to further interrogate the political instrumentalisation of housing provision through the UK asylum regime and the so-called hostile environment, a politics not disconnected from austerity as other studies have illustrated (Benwell et al. 2023; Darling 2022; Mayblin 2020). Through the empirical material we present below, we argue that the UK asylum regime functions as a political system that produces and reinforces precarity for forced migrants. Whilst the public and 'visible' migration infrastructures associated with the hostile environment have been examined for the everyday, affective and interpersonal borders they (re)produce (e.g., Goodfellow 2019; Mosselson 2021; Yuval-Davis et al. 2018, 2019), rather less research has been undertaken on the lived experiences of domestic spaces associated with the UK's asylum regime.

2 | Methodology

Data from two qualitative studies inform this paper. The first focused on young refugees' engagements with urban spaces including their experiences of arrival and resettlement into a new place. This project was conducted in Newcastle upon Tyne and Gateshead in the North East of England and took place between 2019 and 2022. We worked with 49 forced migrants including 15 women and 34 men, 17 of whom were refugees and 32 of whom were asylum seekers. We learnt about their lived experiences—including those in relation to housing and accommodation issues—through interviews (including walking interviews), focus groups and creative map making sessions. To supplement this, we interviewed 29 service providers who work with forced migrants in the voluntary sector.

Building on this first study, the second project focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on forced migrant communities. This project was conducted in Newcastle and Gateshead in the North East of England and Glasgow in Scotland and took place between 2020 and 2022. For this project, we conducted 50 interviews with forced migrants including 19 men and 31 women, 34 of whom were asylum seekers and 16 of whom were refugees with ages ranging from 19 to 50. Both studies were significantly affected by the pandemic meaning that, in practical terms, many interviews were undertaken remotely and when respondents were situated in their domestic environments. The social and material conditions that shaped their experience of home were, in a literal sense, all around them as we conducted these conversations and therefore figure prominently in the material we present below. All the interviews from both studies were transcribed fully, coded and then analysed in further depth to identify key issues.

All authors have a strong political and activist interest in asylum issues which supports and emboldens our academic work. We were inspired to conduct this research informed by anti-racist scholar activism (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2021). Fundamentally, anti-racist scholarship is concerned with addressing racist inequalities. In research, various approaches relating to anti-racist scholarship can be applied, such as centring marginalised voices in the research process, co-production, researcher reflexivity and applying measures that can have positive material impacts on people who experience racial inequality. Although we are three white cis men with secure citizenship status employed at UK universities, we frequently reflected on the diverse positions of power and privilege we held in relation to our participants. Our activist interests and previous roles as volunteer practitioners (Blazek and Askins 2020, 464) provided us with important insights into asylum issues and enabled a sense of trust and familiarity to be developed but the power imbalances remain. One mechanism we tried to use to counter these imbalances in a small way was to participate in 'reparative theft' (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2021, 88) which is where anti-racist scholar activists use the material resources of the university—such as printing facilities—alongside their status as academics, to challenge racism. We did this by encouraging voluntary sector groups to charge us for the use of rooms, through ordering stationery for asylum groups and through booking meeting rooms when requested for use by local organisations.

Given the potential vulnerability of the research participants, careful consideration was given to the ethics of the research, and both projects achieved full ethical approval from Newcastle University. To avoid possible misunderstanding and coercion, we provided information sheets and consent forms in various languages, reinforcing the voluntary nature of participation and the right not to take part. When required or requested, we used

interpreters, which helped to avoid misunderstanding and facilitated participants' ability to express themselves fully. All the names used in this paper are pseudonyms in order to protect the anonymity of the participants.

2.1 | The Decaying, Intrusive and Absent Materialities of Forced Migrants' Housing

In this first empirical section, we examine the materiality and physical condition of the housing occupied by forced migrants. Materiality and physical conditions incorporate both fixtures that are fixed to the property, such as walls, windows, plumbing and boilers, and fittings, such as furniture, cookers, fridges, ornaments and technological equipment. It can also incorporate undesirable materialities that ingress the housing space, such as mould, damp, water and odours (Kane 2023; Shurety 2024). Moreover, there are the more-than-human materialities of domestic spaces, such as infestations of bugs and rodents that our respondents referenced (Schuurman 2024). It has been well documented that materiality—the material conditions of a house, as well as the material items within it—is central to processes of homemaking (Harris et al. 2020; Pechurina 2023). We illustrate how 'violent materialities' (Kane 2023) in dispersal housing—such as intrusive, decaying and absent materialities—damage and restrict the making of a safe, stable and comfortable home. We also explore the gendered dynamics of forced migrants' lived experiences, illustrating how these material conditions are especially harmful and challenging for women living with their children.

Concerns about accommodation were expressed by most of the respondents in our studies. Poor-quality accommodation with decaying, damaged and intrusive material conditions were frequently reported. These created uncomfortable and unsafe spaces, undermining a sense of home. A particular issue was the unwanted and intrusive 'non-human "things" that make claim to…space' (Kane 2023, 5), such as leaks, mould and odours. As Kane (2023, 5) points out, precarious and austere housing is more than 'the absence or loss of matter', rather, it is also manifest through the invasive 'material presence of "things"'. Bayan, an asylum-seeking woman from South Asia, talked about the condition of her dispersal house, particularly a leak in her bedroom:

> The house conditions were unbearable. If you call them, they will not sort your issue immediately. For six months one of our bedroom roofs was leaking and nobody came to fix it. It was not leaking in some corner of the roof, it was a straight line starting from one end and goes to the other end.

Several respondents talked about the mould and damp present in their housing. Mould has been described as 'an "emergent" domestic hazard' (Shurety 2024, 4) and a manifestation of 'troublesome water' (Mee et al. 2014). As well as having serious health impacts, 'mould encroaches on the domestic space and increasingly alienates people from their homes and routinely undermines their attempts to make a home' (Kane 2023, 8). Canan, an asylum-seeking woman from Western Asia, talked about the presence of damp and mould in her property, as well as the difficulties in accessing housing support:

> Another thing I'm having a problem with is in my house one of the walls is all damp and rotten. I've called the housing people a few times telling them, 'Please come and fix it. This is not good for our health', but they've not fixed it. They're just saying, 'Because of Covid'.

Some respondents talked about the presence of insects and rodents. Schuurman (2024) uses the term 'multispecies homescapes' to describe 'the co-production of domestic space by humans and animals and the multispecies spatiality of homeness' (655–56). Whist homes can be seen to be co-produced and made through human and animals cohabitating, there are also encounters with animals that are not welcome in the home, damaging the homeliness and safety of one's accommodation (Schuurman 2024). Fanila, a female asylum seeker from Western Asia, discussed the presence of insects in her house:

> In my accommodation we had lots of insects and fleas. Nine months we've been living in that. The doctor saw it and she wrote a letter, a report to the accommodation officer that they either move me immediately or they need to sort the problem out because the fleas and the insects were really, really bad. My children are always unwell…

These examples of leaks, mould, damp and insects are all 'outside matter' (Kane 2023, 5) that most would consider to not belong in the home. They are harmful and violent materialities that have ingressed into the home space, negatively impacting physical and mental health. Their encroaching presence and out of placeness significantly undermine feelings of home through the presence of unwanted matter.

Decaying and broken fixtures and fittings are a common feature of precarious housing (Harris et al. 2020; Muñoz 2018), and many of the respondents reported such issues in their dispersal housing. This also overlaps with the absence of certain fixtures and appliances, such as furniture and technological equipment. Aska, an asylum-seeking woman from Western Asia, who lived with her baby and husband, discussed these issues:

> It's Home Office accommodation that they have given me, but I have lots of problems in it. It has two bedrooms, a living room and a kitchen, but the house… everything is broken in the house, and I don't feel safe in this house. When I had my child, I had to sleep on the bare floor. I had nothing to stay on until recently, when my friend gave me a piece of carpet that I can lay down and sleep on. But as you can see, the house is pretty empty, and everything mostly is broken and has cracks and stuff. I just don't feel safe. I've raised it up a few times, but it seems like it's not going anywhere.

As this extract shows, Aska, who had a baby during the first lockdown, lived in a flat containing only the most basic furniture, much of which needed repair. The bed was in such a bad condition that she and her baby often had to sleep on the floor. These material conditions made Aska, and her family, feel unsafe and insecure, significantly undermining their sense of home. What these accounts show is that poor-quality housing puts significant pressure on asylum seeker and refugee parents. For parents and care-givers, making a home typically means creating a safe, secure and healthy space for their children—a task made significantly more challenging in dispersal housing, where broken and missing fixtures and poor-quality physical conditions create child safety hazards and disrupt the home-making process. This was particularly an issue for asylum seeker and refugee women, given that they generally have caregiving responsibilities. Most of the women who participated in the research lived with their children. Many were single parents with limited material and financial resources. Research has shown that pregnancy and childcare make asylum seeking and refugee women highly vulnerable to the punitive impacts of asylum and migration systems (Fassetta et al. 2016; Finlay et al. 2021), and for our respondents the decaying, broken and absent materiality of dispersal and refugee housing were especially harmful for women with children.

Many respondents reported living in houses where there was a lack of internal space, resulting in overcrowding and discomfort. Whilst this was a concern for both men and women, asylum-seeking and refugee women with children were particularly vocal about the difficulties of living in houses with insufficient space for their families. Some discussed the challenges of living in mid-rise and high-rise flats, especially with children and disabled family members:

> I live in a block of flats that are four levels and we're on the last level. It's really difficult for us because my husband is disabled. He's not being able to walk. So, the pressure is on me getting essentials for home and looking after my kids, myself because my husband has not been able to go up the stairs and down the stairs very easily.

For many respondents, a constant frustration with living in housing with decaying, intrusive and absent materialities, was the slow and inadequate responses from housing providers to concerns about conditions and requests for repairs and improvements. Darling (2022) notes that the outsourcing of asylum housing has contributed to inefficient housing support and maintenance systems. Not only does this leave forced migrants living in poor-quality housing, but it also engenders feelings of not having any control over the property where they live, which erodes feelings of home and security (Hoolachan et al. 2017). The COVID-19 lockdown saw even longer periods of waiting for housing maintenance and support, illustrating how the pandemic exacerbated already difficult housing situations (Finlay et al. 2021). Bayan discussed her experiences of waiting for housing support:

> If you are living in accommodation, if you have any issues, nobody will come. Usually, believe me, they will come not before one month. The pandemic gives them an excuse like you can come in six months, three months. There is so many flaws in the system. They are not able to help.

Whilst some respondents mentioned the 'coping strategies' they employed to make their accommodation more bearable (e.g., sourcing free furniture and drawing on the support of third sector organisations), and to some extent more homely, the vast majority focused on the various difficulties of living in precarious and poor-quality housing. Rather than emphasising narratives of resistance and micro-strategies of homemaking, the difficulties of living in poor material conditions were the overriding topics of conversation.

2.2 | Forced Migrants' Experiences of 'Unneighbourly' Relations

This section presents the testimonies of respondents that foreground the significance of social relations both within and around the home. We remain cognisant of the ways these social relations intersect with and are shaped by the material housing infrastructures outlined above (Paul 2023). Whilst some of our respondents talked of their positive interactions with neighbours, they more regularly cited the anti-social behaviour that characterised their neighbourhoods and the feelings of intimidation and anxiety that this generated. Reza, a refugee woman from Western Asia, talked about the difficulties of living in a flat within a high-rise building in Glasgow and how this shaped her interactions with those living nearby:

***Reza*:** I don't feel safe in this flat at all because we live in high storage flats and there's a lot of alcoholic people and people that are using drugs. There's been a lot of occasions where people have thrown themselves out of the window and on one occasion, I saw it with my own eyes when the person above threw themselves and committed suicide and I'd seen it. I'm really depressed and have mental issues and living in a place like that is putting more pressure on me because I'm seeing things like that. I'm really scared for my life.

***Interviewer*:** Does she feel that she has much support when she isn't feeling good or she's just got certain issues...? [Interpreter translates]

***Reza*:** There's no support and help for someone like me, especially that I don't speak English, it's really difficult sometimes, my life is in danger, for example, there's people that have been knocking my door, trying to break my door down and not being able to call, for example, the police or calling the concierge for them, I can't tell them that I need help because of the language barrier.

The interactions that forced migrants have with neighbours have received surprisingly little attention in existing research, yet, we argue, they can be key in influencing their feelings of security and well-being. Reza's experiences of 'unneighbourliness' (Cheshire et al. 2021) through the witnessing of drug use and a suicide outside the flat compounded the deterioration of her mental health, already affected by the pressures of living in

a flat that was too small to comfortably accommodate her family. The feelings of intimidation and anxiety generated by some neighbours trying to 'break my door down' were heightened by her inability to communicate with the police or building managers when these instances of anti-social behaviour occurred. In our research, these testimonies linked to harassment experienced in the broader neighbourhood outside of the home were markedly gendered, with women much more likely to report feeling threatened and in danger. Zera, another refugee woman from Western Asia, talked in similar ways about the harassment she experienced from neighbours in the area of Glasgow where she lived:

> I don't feel safe in my accommodation because my flat is obviously small but the area I live in there's a lot of alcoholic people in there and a lot of people that are on drugs. They harass me all the time. Every night they knock on the door, bang on the door asking for money, asking for different types of things...Sometimes they knock the door for 2p. They keep asking for different things. I don't feel safe in my own house...The people in our area are really difficult to live with. Randomly they put rubbish in front of our door so we don't go out. I've been racially harassed a lot. I feel like I'm not welcome. They keep giving me racial abuse.

As Brown et al. (2024a, 124) have emphasised, the discrimination and harassment that forced migrants experience in their neighbourhoods cannot be disconnected from broader anti-immigration discourses of 'othering' and policies that serve to dehumanise, disenfranchise and disempower them. In the example above, the intimidating and anti-social behaviour extends to racial abuse that is an influential factor in constraining Zera's ability to feel at home. Whilst the two respondents above reflect on their current housing situations, others talked in more hopeful ways about moving on from 'noisy' and 'dangerous' areas to neighbourhoods where they felt more 'at home' revealing transitory and fluid nature of the housing experiences of forced migrants (Baxter and Brickell 2014).

Our respondents also talked about the challenges of living in shared accommodation as part of their experience of negotiating the asylum system. People who are asylum seekers often have to co-habit with others in accommodation they are assigned and are given little opportunity to determine these arrangements, although this can vary depending on housing availability. However, the pressures on social housing and the broader 'housing crisis' in most parts of the UK mean that these options are typically severely curtailed. The broader political context also plays an influential role here with government ministers openly stating that room sharing in asylum accommodation is needed to avoid 'migrants' enjoying living conditions superior to those of the 'British public' (Forrest 2023). This political pressure has only increased in the years following our research given the increasingly toxic debates surrounding asylum accommodation and debates about its effects on UK government public spending and housing supply more broadly. Caleb, an asylum seeker from South Asia, talked about his efforts to change accommodation in Glasgow because of mental health concerns stemming from loneliness:

***Caleb*:** I've got a housemate but he talks a different language. It's like really hard to, you know, communicate with him because of the different language, even a different culture. So, it's like I feel like most of my time I just stay inside my room, don't go out...I feel so low and because of my depression and anxiety. I even requested to all the people, my housing officer, and welfare and migrant help, and it was like everyone, ah, 'Okay, do these letters and give doctor's letters'. Everyone took it but I feel like no one hears me.

Interviewer: Yes. So did you feel like no one listens to your concerns?

***Caleb*:** Yes, but...like I don't drink. Like my roommate sometimes, he drinks and he's like out of control. I feel like not safe. I'm so scared. You know...because I feel when he is talking his language and he's like...it's like shouting. I've got a bed. I've got the room right, but I can't sleep peacefully.

Several respondents, like Caleb, talked about the challenges of being housed with people with whom they could not communicate and its effect on their mental health, in particular amplifying feelings of loneliness (Finlay et al. 2021). Others referred to difficulties associated with inter- and intra-ethnic tensions within shared accommodation and the conflicts that could arise as a consequence of cultural differences. The perceived lack of agency our respondents had to direct or change decisions made about their accommodation was particularly unsettling. More troubling still, some respondents disclosed instances of physical violence inflicted by housemates and their subsequent protracted struggles to change accommodation, often drawing on the assistance of third sector asylum organisations to support their cases (see Benwell et al. 2023; Darling 2022).

The precariousness of housing arrangements for forced migrants often pushes them to find improvised solutions, sometimes with the help of third sector organisations as in the example above. In other cases, they leant on rather more positive networks of neighbourly solidarity to find emergency housing as they negotiated their routes through the asylum system. Asim, a man who had refugee status and was from Northeast Africa, talked about the challenging circumstances he faced when he was granted refugee status (or leave to remain):

> When I get leave to remain, I didn't find anyone to help me with something like that or moving house after I did my leave to remain. You know, when you get leave to remain, you have to leave your house. So, I left my house and because of lockdown no charity open. So, I moved to my friend's house to live with him...Yeah, after that, I was looking for a shared house to rent. It was difficult for me to find one.

As others have indicated, the 28 day move-on period after an asylum decision is made puts extreme stress on people granted refugee status and has resulted in numerous cases of homelessness

(Brown et al. 2024a; Darling 2022; Hughes 2025). The insecurities and precariousness generated by this tight turnaround enforced by the UK's asylum regime severely constrains forced migrants' ability to cultivate any sense of home. Those with links to third sector organisations and friendship networks are able to improvise under these extreme circumstances, demonstrating forms of what others have referred to as acts of 'micro-resistance' in the face of violent migration regimes (Desmas, forthcoming). Others, however, are not so fortunate to be embedded within social networks that can provide such solidarity and respite. When another respondent, Zdan, a man from North Africa, had his case refused by the Home Office he spoke about his housing situation in Glasgow over the ensuing two years:

> I was applying to do a fresh claim and they take me too long, and for nearly more than two years, I was like, I don't have any accommodation. Just I moved to my friend. Like day by day, like go to my friend's, stay with him for few days, and then moving to someone else's and stay at the mosque as well, sometimes, just on the street.

Forced migrants are not passive or devoid of agency and find ways to cope with the very challenging circumstances they face. However, the political structures of the asylum regime heavily constrain their capacity to engage in homemaking, as do their intersectional social identities, and their varied levels of embeddedness within social, religious and third sector networks of care and support.

3 | Conclusion

This paper brings into dialogue critical perspectives on migration and asylum regimes with work exploring the materialities and broader social geographies of precarious housing, to highlight the factors influential in forced migrants' lived experiences of asylum accommodation. We have shown how 'out of place' materialities, such as leaks, damp and infestations of insects, alongside broken and absent material fittings, such as decaying and missing furniture, undermine the making of a safe and comfortable home. We have also illustrated how social relations within and around dispersal and refugee accommodation, including relationships and encounters with neighbours and flatmates, can undermine one's sense of home and belonging. By illustrating the interconnections of the material and social, we have contributed to understandings of forced migrants' experiences of housing that are constituted through an assemblage of people, objects, relations, emotions and broader political policies (Burrell 2014). Whilst forced migrants respond to precarious housing through diverse coping strategies, this paper shows that within the context of a hostile UK asylum and migration system, the ability to make home is highly constrained. The paper makes three broader contributions to thinking on the intersections of home, precarious housing and geographies of forced migrations.

First, through examining the housing experiences of forced migrants, this paper highlights the intimate impacts of the UK government's hostile environment policy on housing and home. Given that housing precarity is a pervasive experience for forced migrants, the UK asylum system can be considered as a political structure that constitutes a distinctive part of the UK housing crisis. This crisis, driven by the shortage of affordable and suitable housing, affects many people in diverse ways (Madden and Marcuse 2016). However, asylum housing is distinguished by its links with an overtly punitive political system that leads to people living in precarious housing conditions that impinge on forced migrants' sense of belonging and ability to make home, as illustrated in this paper. Domesticating the hostile environment, then, means recognising the instrumental ways it actively creates housing precarity through the provision of poor-quality housing, unstable living arrangements and restricting autonomous decision making in relation to accommodation and housing maintenance.

Second, building on research documenting the precarious housing conditions of those in the asylum system (Brown et al. 2024b), this paper highlights how forced migrants' lived experiences of accommodation are not solely about material and social deprivations but also the emotional dismantling of home. Material and social deprivation create feelings of insecurity, vulnerability and discomfort, which in turn, undermine feelings of home. This illustrates how the affective and emotional harm of living in precarious housing can have profound impacts on the well-being and mental health of forced migrants. Therefore, there is a need for a broader understanding of precarious housing that combines these emotional and affective dimensions of home with the physical and structural materialities of asylum accommodation. Crucially, policies addressing the precarious housing of forced migrants need to consider the quality of housing provision alongside its impacts on lived experiences, as well as emotional and existential well-being.

Third, the paper contributes to understandings of the heterogeneity of forced migrants' lived experiences of housing and home (Brown et al. 2024b), based on their diverse backgrounds and intersecting identities. We have shed light on how housing precarity is gendered, impacting women and male forced migrants in particular ways. The paper pays particular attention to how decaying materialities and unneighbourly relations were especially harmful for women with children. These conditions create feelings and experiences of insecurity and vulnerability, which significantly disrupt any effort to feel at home. As a parent, making home typically means creating a safe and healthy space for one's family and children, a task that is often impossible in poor-quality dispersal housing. Additionally, forced migrant men experience housing stress in particular ways, including feelings of insecurity and loneliness, as well as being more vulnerable to homelessness. In line with Brown et al.'s (2024b) argument, research examining asylum housing should resist the tendency to homogenise populations and instead better recognise how intersecting identities and diverse backgrounds shape lived experiences.

Acknowledgements

We extend our thanks to all the people who generously gave us their time to participate in this research. We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful critique and guidance. The project—the everyday experiences of young refugees and asylum seekers in

public spaces—was financially supported by the HERA Joint Research Programme (www.heranet.info) which is co-funded by AHRC, BMBF via DLR-PT, F.R.S.—FNRS, NWO and the European Commission through Horizon 2020. The project—Responding to the needs of refugees and asylum seekers in the context of COVID-19: resilience, adaptation and new forms of care—was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant number: ES/V015141/1).

Funding

This work was supported by Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA.1.027), Economic and Social Research Council (ES/V015141/1).

Data Availability Statement

The data that has been used is confidential.

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