

PROJECT

How Communities can better support people living in asylum hotel accommodation.

SITUATION & CONTEXT

Across the Diocese of Westminster, churches and faith-based groups increasingly found themselves supporting asylum seekers housed in hotels under the UK asylum system. While volunteers are eager to help, many face restrictions in accessing the hotels and are overwhelmed by the magnitude and complexity of need. The aim of this project was to explore, from multiple perspectives, how communities—particularly faith-based groups—could provide more effective and systemic support to asylum seekers in hotel accommodation.

PRACTITIONERS INVOLVED

The project was led by a systems thinking apprentice, supported by Caritas Westminster staff. The apprentice facilitated a “deeper listening” process using **Critical Systems Heuristics (CSH)**. Participants included seven volunteers directly supporting asylum seekers, two asylum seekers themselves, and three Caritas staff members advocating for systemic change. Caritas team members provided facilitation support, captured insights, and ensured inclusive language throughout.

SYSTEM OF INTEREST

The system of interest was defined as: **community and volunteer responses to support people living in asylum accommodation**—not the broader asylum system itself. Conversations occasionally spilled into that wider context but were guided back to focus on community-based action and influence.

APPROACH TAKEN

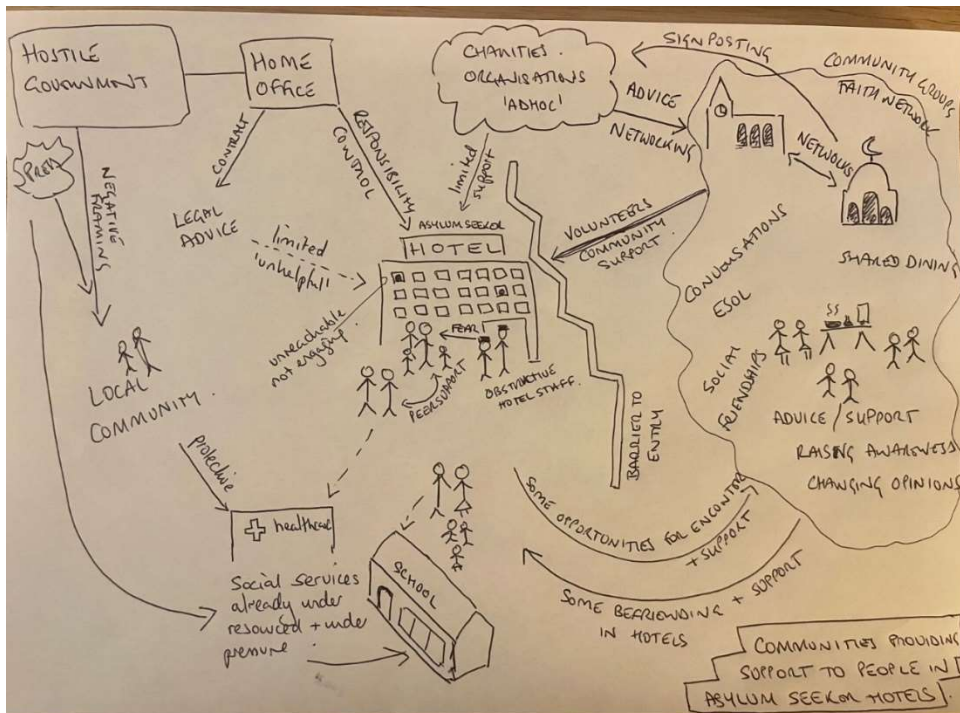
The project began with a large in-person gathering of stakeholders and faith leaders, including Bishop Paul McAleenan, the Roman Catholic Migration lead for England and Wales, to surface shared experiences and frustrations. A follow-up online session was then held with a smaller, more diverse group for a structured systems inquiry using the 12 CSH boundary questions, explored in both “as is” and “ought to be” modes. The [Miro platform](#) was used to document responses in real time.

MODELS & INSIGHTS DEVELOPED

The CSH process yielded several critical insights:

- Community groups are not only helping asylum seekers but also indirectly supporting the Home Office, hotel staff, and broader social cohesion.
- Volunteers are driven by humanitarian concerns but also by a desire to counteract dehumanising political narratives.
- Asylum seekers benefit greatly from friendship, language help, advocacy, and emotional support—but this assistance is inconsistent across regions and hotels.
- Mis-information fills the communications gaps, meaning that asylum seekers are often disappointed at their final outcomes and would benefit from early and accurate information to help manage their expectations.
- Key barriers include restricted hotel access, inadequate mental health resources, lack of up-to-date legal knowledge, and limited agency among residents.
- Success stories often revolve around empowerment: residents accessing education, celebrating cultural traditions, organising their own support, especially when it comes to female personal care products, and forming supportive relationships.

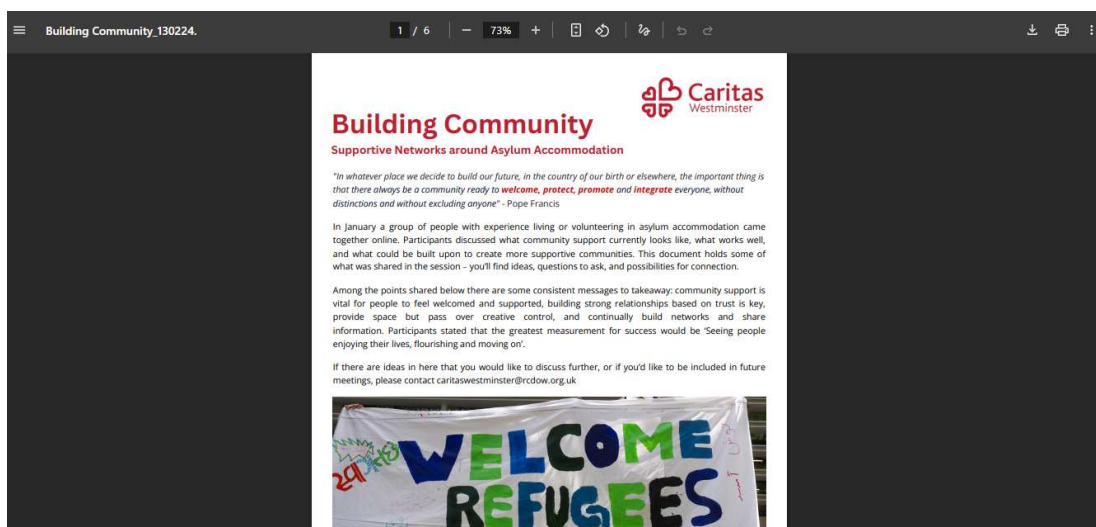
Rich picture of the system of interest; communities providing support to people in asylum seeker hotels



KEY INTERVENTIONS

The process generated both practical interventions and broader recommendations:

- **Developing a booklet** to share practical guidance for community support, distributed through faith venues and online platforms ([available here](#)) and image below
- **Highlighting underused support systems**, such as LEAH, ESOL classes, peer interpreters, and faith-led memorial services.
- **Advocating for access improvements**, particularly more flexible hotel entry policies and better collaboration with statutory services like Migrant Help.
- **Strengthening volunteer infrastructure** with trauma-informed training, better mental health support, and facilitated networks for sharing knowledge and resources.
- **Promoting agency among residents** by encouraging them to volunteer, organise community activities, and be part of decision-making processes around donations and services.



REFLECTIONS, AFTERTHOUGHTS & FURTHER WORK

The use of **CSH proved invaluable**—accessible to participants and rich in surfacing systemic blind spots and hidden assumptions. Supplementing each of the 12 core questions with expanded prompts helped deepen responses. However, the session ran over time (lasting two hours), and future iterations would benefit from a tighter agenda or a follow-up session. While initial engagement was strong, the delay in delivering outputs slightly weakened momentum; future projects would prioritise faster follow-up.

A key challenge was keeping focus on the system of community support rather than drifting into critiques of the asylum system itself. Nonetheless, these overlaps sometimes revealed interdependencies worth noting—for instance, the Home Office's gatekeeping of hotel access directly limits community support effectiveness.

Participants found the session rewarding and were enthusiastic about continued involvement. The apprentice learned the importance of **language sensitivity**, pacing, and offering multiple avenues of engagement (1:1 vs. group). Terms like “deeper listening” may be rebranded in future sessions as “perspective thinking” to make participation feel more inviting.

FURTHER WORK could include:

- Developing a **‘buddy system’** for asylum seekers, matching them with trained volunteers.
- Establishing **shared community directories** of legal aid, translation services, mental health support, and educational opportunities, with clear housing advice and information.
- Coordinating **interfaith initiatives** to offer inclusive pastoral support, safe discussion spaces, and opportunities for creative and civic expression.
- Developing an intentional **community support wrap-around model with the Home Office**; with a quality mark overseen by a charity like Housing Justice or UK Welcomes Refugees.
- Continuing to use systems methods like CSH to **inform advocacy** to the Home Office and local government—moving from isolated community acts to strategic systems influence.