

Does your church want to support asylum seekers who are placed in local hotels?



Tips and Suggestions

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If you are considering supporting any asylum seekers in hotels in your parish or borough, we have compiled these tips from Rev Jo Burke, a Curate in Luton, and some of the volunteers from St Pauls Grove Park, Chiswick, who have been involved with this ministry in Hounslow.

If you'd like more support, or to find out if there is a local group you can connect with, please do get in touch with Pattie Gercke at Compassionate Communities

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Initial Visiting

- 1. Going in: it is OK to visit a hotel.** Obviously you sanitise your hands and wear a mask. Then you walk in, as you would to any hotel. There will probably be a receptionist: ask to see the manager in charge of the migrants. This person may be different in different hotels. Some will be hotel managers, some may be employed by the agency placing the asylum seekers (e.g. Clearspring). Some may be from an organisation called 'Migrant Help'- a charity the government contract support to.
- 2. Build relationship:** Identifying who the key 'gatekeeper' is and building relationship is vital. The managers of the asylum seekers at the hotel are your most valuable contacts. If they trust you and find you respond to requests, they will come to you quickly and share concerns as well as telling you something of what is going on. You will need their co-operation to be able to meet the needs of the residents, so it is worth making friends with them (They are often lovely people, anyway, so this is rewarding.)
- 3. Be open about who you are:** Introduce yourself as from the local church (it can help if the first contact is made by a member of the clergy, simply because the collar is a clear badge of good faith.) Say that you believe that there are asylum seekers living in the hotel and ask if they need clothes, shoes, activities or anything else that you can help with. Give them your mobile number/email address so that they can text or mail you easily.
- 4. Record keeping:** Expect that they will want a record of your presence. Once you establish a relationship with the senior managers of the agency, they may ask you to send them an email when you go in, so that they have their records up to date.
- 5. Consistency:** The agency may ask for visits to an individual/family always to be made by the same person, because of Covid. They may want to be given notice of each visit. If you can set up a buddy system, so each volunteer sees the same person each time.
- 6. What you can provide initially:** You are likely to be asked for clothes and shoes as the priority. Ask for specifics (at least how many each of large, medium or small: this isn't always easy because the managers do not always speak good English). However if you know you are looking for men's medium size coats, say, you can ask donors for exactly that and you don't get left with a lot of unwanted surplus.
- 7. Providing food:** The quality of food provided is very patchy. They should get three meals a day but this is often of variable quality. If you are taking in food, fruit cheese and yoghurt is good.

Lots of baked goods may feel like a treat but what they really need and crave is decent nutrition.

The hotels generally won't want anyone taking food onto the premises so this could be in the form of a very targeted food bank run from a nearby church hall, if there is one. People staying in the hotels don't have fridges or any way of cooking food, so standard food bank packages aren't suitable.

8. **Quarantining:** Expect the agency to be strict about quarantining anything you take in: but if not, quarantine it in your own premises first.
9. **Parking:** Some hotels have 'Parking Eye' type parking systems: look carefully for any signs and register your car as directed, or you may get a £100 parking charge.
10. **Communication:** It is not always easy to get messages through to the residents about events you are planning or benefits you are offering, If you have contacts who can translate flyers for you into some of the top languages, it is well worth getting translations done, copied and taken in to be handed out. Useful languages include: Arabic, Farsi, Kurdish, Russian and Tigrinya. (You may find other denomination or faith contacts invaluable here: e.g. the Russian Orthodox Church, the mosques or the Ba'hai.)
11. **Get to know your demographic:** Each hotel has a different make up of Asylum seekers. Some house more men, others women, others families. Find out what the demographic is in your specific hotel if you are collecting things from others to donate (e.g. toys, books, clothes etc.)
12. **Give dignity, not tat:** They may be desperate, but they are likely also to be image conscious, and dignity matters.

The greatest need will be for small and medium sizes. The most acceptable clothes will be t shirts, shorts, hoodies, fleeces, warm jackets (down or similar), track-suit bottoms, jeans, trainers and new underwear and socks. Bags, especially rucksacks go down well. Hand knits, stained clothes and used underwear will not be very welcome. The best test is to ask yourself if you (or a friend in his twenties) would like to wear it.

13. **Be strict with your donors!** There is a wonderful amount of goodwill out there, but some just want to clear out their houses. Be very clear about what you are looking for and be ready to refuse some offerings, or you will be used as a tip. Don't pay any attention to those who say, 'well if they're desperate they'll take it.' They won't, and in any event, why demean people by giving them rubbish?
14. **The hotel residents are very bored:** if you can possibly find books in their languages they will be thrilled. Some however read English well, so be ready to offer some books, especially thrillers. As the weather improves, adult footballs, cricket and tennis things will be welcome if they have space outside. Also try cards, chess and backgammon. There is little point taking in games which rely on English.
15. **Storage: don' be offended if things aren't needed, and don't be afraid to bin stuff!** The hotels do not have space to store any surplus goods that are taken in, so you are likely to be asked to remove unwanted clothes, shoes, books etc... Don't be offended if things are returned. Just smile and keep on: most of what you offer will be accepted, and even if you don't see the direct result yourself, it will make a difference.
16. **Toiletries:** The Home Office contract provides that the residents be supplied with toiletries. This includes nappies and nappy cream for babies. However, when (lockdown permitting) the

residents come to visit your premises, they will be very pleased with donations of better quality shaving things, soap, shower gel etc. (ration the things though: deprivation sometimes creates feeding frenzies.)

Consider registering to receive goods from [The Hygiene Bank](#).

17. **Be ready to listen.** No counselling is provided for the residents.
18. **Challenge prejudice and change hearts:** Be ready to field push back from some people as you ask for donations. This is an opportunity to change opinions. Without breaching confidentiality share some of your first-hand knowledge that the asylum seekers are not criminals, are full of gratitude for anything that is done for them, or whatever you feel appropriate. This, plus the simple example of you helping, can be very influential.
19. Be careful about what and where you share; maintain confidentiality of residents and their stories. Always be aware of the risk of right-wing interest and **never share the locations of the hotels.**

20. MOST IMPORTANT OF ALL: Don't try to do this on your own. Ask local churches of all denominations to help with donations. Engage local mosques too: they will be able to supply prayer mats and Korans and direct folk to the appropriate mosque (many asylum seekers are Shia). They can advise on halal food too, where the hotel is supplying inappropriate food. There is no standard understanding of halal: it varies from culture to culture within Islam. There are others doing this: Care4Calais have a great network of volunteers; REAP in West London; other volunteer groups. Get involved. Join networks. Share the load.

This is wearying work, and burn out is common. We need to care for each other. The more you can network and draw others in, the more you will do this.

Developing the Work

21. **Developing more of a clothes bank in time:** In time you might build up a bank of the most asked for clothes etc... If you can't use your church hall for usual purposes, this might be a good use for it. Ideally, get hold of some strong clothes rails and hangers. Then hotel residents can come in and chose for themselves with dignity. It also makes good clothes look better: no-one much wants clothes that have been left in a pile on a table that others have rummaged through.
22. **Advocacy: Find out what they are entitled to** and make sure they are getting it. What people are given varies very much from hotel to hotel. Some offer meals from the hotel kitchen, other greasy leftover takeaways and not much else. Food is often too spicy for children.

Once registered, asylum seekers in full board accommodation should be eligible for just over £8 per week for clothing and travel needs; some get it in cash, others don't. For more information on what support asylum seekers are eligible for, there is more information [here](#) and in more detail at the end of this document.

If you are concerned, you can talk to the hotel manager. If you don't get anywhere, escalate through your networks. Go to the contractor if you have contact. See the next point for how to do this.

- 23. Network outwards and upwards:** Ask for regular Zoom meetings with Clearspring (or whichever agency is responsible), the local authority, the Red Cross, Migrant Help and Care4Calais and anyone else who is engaged with the issue: these are invaluable. This saves duplicating effort, gives you the background to some of the decisions taken and will supply sage advice. If you have concerns about things that have alarmed you, you can raise them at these meetings. Sometimes you will have misunderstood; sometimes there will be a real problem than can be put right.
- 24. Advocacy- Offering more support:** There may be applications volunteers can help with, for more support than the asylum seekers would never be able to do by themselves. For example, some councils may be able to make Emergency Assistance Grants to particular people. People don't know they can apply, they would never complete the form themselves and would not be able to print/fill out and submit the form even if they could understand it. So there is perhaps an advocacy role here, but it will depend on whether the local authority is sympathetic and has any funds available. And whether the church can handle the paperwork!
- 25. Acts 435:** This is a great organisation to link to and worth considering become an Advocate. Acts 435 Advocate organisations can post request for small amounts up to £150 for those they meet (eg. asylum seekers), which is then crowdfunded on their website; funds transferred to the Advocate organisation to pass on. It's relatively easy to register your church as an Acts 435 advocate, and then you can post up for specific items if you need them. Requests are normally met in full within 2 weeks through the generosity of the public. www.acts435.org
- 26. Digital Poverty:** WiFi is sometimes supplied only erratically; it is a lifeline for them which is not always there. Consider printing off maps of the local area and also useful contact details.
- 27. Phones and connection:** If you can find a place where people may donate old mobile phones, sim cards etc this is even better. Sometimes corporates get rid of their staff phones when they upgrade: if you have local businesses, why not ask? GiffGaff provide simple pay as you go sims for free; if you get them referred from someone already on the network, you get £5 credit.
- 28. Meeting outside the hotel:** The real breakthrough is when you can get the asylum seekers to come to your hall or premises, say for English lessons. Then it is easier to supply clothes, classes, toiletries, extra food, etc. and to get to know them as people.
- 29. Consider providing English classes.** This is almost the asylum seekers' number one request. Asylum seekers count as vulnerable so anyone dealing with them on a one to one basis must be DBS checked. You may have to collaborate with other agencies to achieve lessons. Make it clear though that you are not a college and cannot supply qualifications.
- 30. Educating children:** Children have a right to school places, even if their parents have 'no recourse to public funds'. If you are able, a huge ministry is in helping the families apply for local school places. This can be an absolute transformative for the families. Even in lockdown, the local authority identify children as 'vulnerable' so they should be able to go into a physical school. Most of them should also be able to access free school meals.
- 31. If children are given school places** they will need uniform and help with transport. Most schools will help with specific items of uniform, so it's worth getting in touch with them. You will also need to help the parents apply for Oyster Zip cards for children to enable them to access free travel.
- 32. Odd Jobs and Volunteering:** Some hotel residents may ask you if they can come to the church to do tasks: they are so bored. Once lockdown permits, have a list of safe, suitable jobs ready!

- 33. Gathering and catering:** When it is possible to gather and drink tea, be prepared for requests for black tea with lots of sugar, from Farsi speakers especially. Gathering over food is a cultural norm and a way of eating amazing food.
- 34. When your church opens for services don't be reticent about inviting asylum seekers.** Print the service times and get them translated. When they are in your service, have as much printed as you can (readings and sermon as well as the liturgy) because there are apps that will translate the written matter so that they can follow. Don't be hurt though if the residents come for a few services and then stop: they may just have been moved on.
- 35. Dispersal and Keeping in touch:** A weak point in the system is when people leave the hotels and move to their dispersal accommodation. There is no follow-through in support. Health visitors and education departments are trying to keep tabs on individual situations but it's very random. If you have built a rapport with individuals and are able to help them establish new support networks in their new location this could be a huge help. Again, this is why it's helpful to be in networks, and to pray!
- 36. More information:** The Red Cross do not have any spare capacity in London to take any more referrals, but have sent this list of [agencies who may be helpful](#). London is at the end of the list.

Finally: Keep open minds and hearts: you will meet some very special people!