THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

‘The Hospitality of Asylum’

Investigating the potential impacts on hotel workers of operating asylum hotels in the UK

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Abstract

Of the many challenges faced by the UK hospitality industry over recent years, among the most divisive has been the rise in ‘asylum hotels’, and the polarising, abrasive debate surrounding their use.

Quietly hidden and overlooked within this social justice debate is a group of people about whom there is little or no research in terms of the impact the rise of ‘asylum hotels’ has had on them – the hotel teams themselves. Subject to short notice changes to working conditions, a vastly reduced hotel team, and daily exposure to the stories and experiences of the asylum seekers living in the hotel, they find themselves in a work environment that is worlds apart from the one they knew before. Outside of work the relentless focus on asylum hotels in the media, conflicting opinions within communities, work peers, family and friends, mean that this new world is all-encompassing. Gaining rare and privileged access into a UK asylum hotel to undertake a qualitative research study has yielded rich insights into the experiences of the hotel team there. Underpinned by standpoint epistemology in order to amplify the marginalised voices of the hotel team, themes relating to their changing experiences of hospitality, the daily challenges faced, the ways in which their roles have become better and worse and the impacts on them professionally and personally throughout their time there were all discussed.

What emerged from the research were findings which gave voice to theories of the underlying contradictions of hospitality and hostility; of the role of hotels within the carceral border system; of vicarious trauma and emotional connectedness; of team spirit and personal growth. In addressing this gap in the literature I hope that the findings will be of use in a variety of ways, from helping to inform future asylum system policy-making to learning lessons about how we take care of those working in the hospitality industry in the UK and beyond.

Acknowledgements

I hope that this research in some way reflects my affinity and respect for all those working in hospitality roles across the UK. It is an industry which is frequently underestimated in terms of the skills, determination and dedication required to be successful, and I want to acknowledge the talent and commitment of the people who are at the heart of the industry.

I cannot adequately express the gratitude I have for the hoteliers who made this research possible by allowing me to work with them and their teams on this project. To the hotel manager and team, thank you from the bottom of my heart for your openness, honesty and genuine welcome – I hope that you feel this is a true reflection of your story. Although you cannot be named, you have my utmost respect for the professional, compassionate work that you do. And to Carren, a force of nature within the world of hospitality with whom I'm proud to share my life at work.

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Finally, to my husband, children and family, who have supported me in so many ways along this journey. I absolutely could not have done this without you. Kids, I hope I've inspired you to remain curious, to never stop learning, and to challenge injustice and make a difference where you can.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Social justice and UK hospitality

The hospitality industry both in the UK and farther afield has long been the subject of interrogation relating to social justice issues, across a range of topics such as pay, working conditions, immigration and employment rights. In 'The UK's Hospitality Workforce Strategy: Fixing the Crisis' (UK Hospitality 2022 p5) an acute "cocktail of factors" impacting hospitality workers are highlighted, including population demographics, the impacts of Brexit and Covid, negative perceptions of the industry and more. Unionisation across the industry is rare, despite it being a significant employer of those more vulnerable to social injustices relating to work, including women, young people and migrants (Zientara et al 2024). The need to tackle the underlying issues which can prevent fair and decent pay and conditions across global hospitality businesses is clear, and essential if the industry is to be vibrant, resilient and fair (Giousmpasoglou 2024), however over recent years the rise of a new phenomenon – the use of hotels to accommodate asylum seekers – has added a new layer of challenges to this endeavour. Those working in hotels under government contract for asylum seekers are marginalised, often invisible, when it comes to social justice debates relating to immigration. This research aims to bring to light some of their experiences and address this gap in the literature.

1.2 'Asylum hotels': setting the scene

According to the UK Home Office, as of 1st January 2025 there were 222 hotels being used as contracted accommodation for asylum seekers, housing around 38,000 people in total and representing 35% of all people in UK asylum accommodation (NAO 2025 p15). This figure has decreased since June 2023, when almost 400 hotels were being used to house over 50,000 asylum seekers at a cost of around £8 million per day (Pidd 2023) however the number remains significantly higher than the 9,500 people living in such hotels in October 2020 (Gower 2023). Consecutive UK governments have

been under increasing pressure from political opponents, public bodies, charities and the national media to reduce this figure. In October 2023 then Conservative Minister for Immigration Robert Jenrick MP made a speech about illegal migration to the House of Commons, claiming that “one of the most damaging manifestations of this problem has been the use of hotels to meet our statutory obligations to house those who arrive illegally.” He announced that ending the use of hotels in this way was a government priority, adding: “These hotels should be assets for their local communities: serving businesses and tourists; hosting the life events that we treasure like weddings and birthdays - not housing illegal migrants at unsustainable cost to the taxpayer” (Home Office 2023 p1).

The costs highlighted by Jenrick are substantial and few could argue that they have not had a major effect on the asylum support budget which doubled to £3.6 billion from 2021/2022 to 2022/2023, with £2.28 billion of this budget being spent on hotel accommodation (Gower 2023 p4). Hotels now account for around 76% of the annual cost of housing asylum seekers - £1.3 billion out of an estimated £1.7 billion in 2024-25 (National Audit Office 2025 p6). Much of the controversy around using hotels for this purpose relates to the cost of such contracts to the taxpayer, and the profits made both by the suppliers contracted to source hotel accommodation and the hotel companies themselves. An investigation by the BBC in 2023 found that some booking agencies and hotel companies used by the Home Office had reported a tripling of pre-tax profits due to the rise in the use of hotels to house asylum seekers (Sandford & May 2023). In June 2025, figures released by the UK government showed that £2.2bn of overseas development assistance (ODA) would be spent on housing asylum seekers during this financial year; despite the purpose of ODA being to provide humanitarian and development assistance overseas, rules allow some of this budget to be spent on supporting asylum seekers on UK territory (Landale 2025).

According to the National Audit Office, between 2012 to 2019 the UK Home Office issued and managed six regional contracts known as COMPASS

through which suppliers identified and managed asylum accommodation on their behalf. COMPASS was replaced in 2019 with seven regional contracts – ‘Asylum Accommodation and Support Contracts’ (AASCs) - given to Clearsprings Ready Homes, Serco and Mears Group. These AASCs were originally estimated to cost £4.5 billion over 10 years, however in 2024-25 the cost was £1.7 billion, and the current 10-year estimate has ballooned to around £15.3 billion (National Audit Office 2025 p4). Some hotel companies have responded to media and public pressure and very publicly distanced themselves from taking on government contracts for asylum seekers, such as the Hilton group, who in 2020 released a statement saying “We believe that hotels should be places of hospitality, and the detainment of migrants, including minors, is not activity that we support or in any way want associated with our hotels” (Hilton 2020). Others have given one or more hotels within their portfolio to the contracting companies, whilst some have signed over their entire group to contracts, renewing them each year despite the purported efforts of the government to end the use of hotels in this way.

In their 2024 manifesto, the new UK Labour government promised to "end asylum hotels, saving the taxpayer billions of pounds" (Landale 2025 p1), but the costs of the failure to provide sufficient space within the asylum system reach far beyond the financial. Violations of basic rights for the people living in the hotels have been exposed, such as a lack of access to healthcare, poor meal provision, limited access to education, and more serious safeguarding issues around unaccompanied minors. Challenges have been made in UK courts, focusing on a variety of issues including the (il)legality of placing unaccompanied children in hotels (Revill 2023) and local authorities seeking High Court injunctions planning challenges from local authorities seeking High Court injunctions to prevent asylum accommodation providers using hotels (Gower 2023). Community tensions have been forefront in the media, with asylum seekers frequently represented as ‘parasites’ taking advantage of the UK’s hospitality (Gibson 2003).

1.3 Marginalised voices

Whilst there has been media coverage surrounding the closure of hotels to the public, and the resulting loss of jobs (Calderbank 2022; Loffreda 2022; Owen 2023), the staff left working in the hotels have largely been expected to continue working ‘as normal’ despite the huge difference in the demographic of their residents and changes to their work flow and environment. Working in a reduced workforce, with long-term residents who frequently present a variety of complex needs including poor mental health, language and cultural barriers, experience of trauma and more, the hotel teams find themselves working as a key component of the wider immigration system which they are neither trained nor fully prepared for. The impacts of this change have received very little attention and there is little to no research on the effects of operating a hotel used for asylum accommodation on the hotel workers themselves.

This research aims to address this gap in our knowledge around the phenomenon of asylum hotels, and to bring to the fore the experiences and views of those operating the hotels day to day. People – guests and teams – are the living, beating heart of the hospitality industry. For those of us who have made it our life’s work (and I include myself here), the focus on warmth, on welcome, on putting people at ease and bringing people together, has been the everyday measurement of our success. The words ‘welcome’, and ‘reception’ greet us in different languages in hotels (and hospitals, once known as ‘hospices’ or places of public hospitality) around the world, and those working within are ‘acceptors’, the ones who receive and make welcome (Derrida 2000 p7). What then are the implications for hospitality workers when the accommodation of strangers takes on a new meaning, when our guests speak not of their day at work, nor of family celebrations, but of fleeing war, persecution and poverty? The accommodating of asylum seekers in hotels poses many problems, but for the hotel workers this changing nature of accommodation poses questions about hospitality in an “acute, literal, and direct way” (Gibson 2003 p371). Burridge (2023 p1054) argues that hotels, motels and apartments used for detention form part of a

‘carceral continuum’ hidden within the urban fabric of society, part of a “border assemblage within the wider asylum and detention landscape.” This project will make visible the experiences of those welcoming, caring, cleaning and cooking for the residents of asylum hotels, and of those who find themselves in the position of leading their team in this endeavour, often with many years of hotel experience but no experience of dealing with the acute and unique vulnerabilities of their new guests. The aim is to investigate and articulate these changes, and to explore the impact of these changes on their daily professional (and often personal) lives.

The question at the heart of this research is how becoming an ‘asylum hotel’ impacts the teams working in these hotels in the UK. How does the shift from ‘hotel guests’ to ‘asylum seekers’ affect the way that hotel workers view their role; what remains the same, what’s different, what are the challenges and opportunities such a change presents? How do societal views and media narratives around asylum hotels impact the teams working in these hotels? What have they learned from the experience?

My career as a trainer in the hospitality industry for over 25 years has led to my interest in this area of research. Over recent years I have continued working in and around the environment of hotels operating under government contracts, including working directly with the various teams running asylum hotels, and the stories they have shared of the experience have often moved me deeply. Despite the national media largely focusing on the negative stories relating to workers in asylum hotels, the teams I encounter are often deeply invested in wanting to make the lives of the hotel residents easier and find it impossible not to become emotionally connected given the long-term nature of their stays. One woman working in the breakfast team at a hotel told me that her job had gone from welcoming the business guests each morning during the week, and the families each weekend, to helping the young Afghan children staying in her hotel get ready for school and off on the school bus each morning. For her, this change had given her a new sense of pride and purpose in her work; for some of her colleagues, the exposure to the daily stories of separation and loss, the potential for vicarious trauma and

the full immersion into the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in our society had proved too much and they had moved back to ‘traditional’ hospitality in other hotels.

1.4 Introducing the research

The primary research for this paper was carried out in a UK hotel, part of a group of hotels (renamed ‘Green Hotels’ to protect anonymity) some of which have been operating as asylum hotels for a number of years. A group of employees from the hotel ranging from senior management to team level took part in a focus group day during which questions relating to their workplace experiences were explored. The focus group was undertaken guided by the principles of participatory action research, including co-producing a set of agreements to guide the participation; real-time sharing of knowledge produced (using flipcharts and other visuals); allowing participants different ways to express themselves; and using looped critical reflection for continuous analysis (Cahill, 2007). Following the initial focus day, a set of initial findings was shared with the group to allow them the opportunity to review, elaborate, expand upon or remove anything they felt necessary. What came from the findings was a set of rich, novel insights into the daily lives of the hotel team, which I hope will inform future decision-making around the use of hotels for asylum accommodation.

Following a review of literature relevant to social justice debates around hospitality, the use of asylum hotels in the UK, and potential impacts for hotel workers, I will outline the methodological approach undertaken for the research from design to analysis. It has been essential throughout to consider the ethical sensitivities relating to the research subject and these will be outlined and discussed. The findings from the research are then laid bare and interrogated before some final conclusions are drawn, and suggestions made for potential future research.

2. Literature review

2.1 Hostile hospitality?

The hospitality industry workforce is diverse and hugely varied in terms of roles and skillsets, but in common is a shared understanding that the principles of hospitality will be at the core of their work. Reflecting on the meaning of ‘hospitality’ is the starting point for considering how the work experience changes when a hotel is procured for asylum seekers. The notion of hospitality is one with deep historical roots, across diverse cultures and across millennia – perhaps the earliest recorded example dates from 4000BC, where in ancient Mesopotamia the ‘Code of Hammurabi’ set out laws outlining the importance of offering hospitality to visitors (HCN 2023). The obligation to welcome strangers into one’s home is echoed across multiple faiths, and the principles of offering food, warmth and shelter to those who need it are deeply embedded into cultures which otherwise differ greatly. Hospitality is however about far more than shelter and sustenance; it plays an important role in local political economies, in building social cohesion, and in reproducing and reinforcing social hierarchies and power relationships (Heal 1990). The duty to offer hospitality and act as a generous host to both strangers and neighbours was in contemporary pre-industrial societies viewed as a moral imperative, rooted in the prevailing view of the nature of society and thus viewed with social condemnation if not adhered to (Lashley and Morrison 2011).

In his 1795 work ‘Perpetual Peace’ Immanuel Kant is famously quoted as saying "hospitality means the right of a stranger not to be treated as an enemy when he arrives in the land of another. One may refuse to receive him when this can be done without causing his destruction; but, so long as he peacefully occupies his place, one may not treat him with hostility” (Kant et al 2006 p82). Pavic (2018) argues that Kant’s redefining of hospitality and the politicisation of the term through linking it to a legal human right sees hospitality ceasing to be an act of philanthropy and becoming instead a political act. Derrida (2000) writes on the conditionality of hospitality - or

rather the impossibility of this being unconditional. If one owes hospitality to the other, a stranger, one must determine the other as a stranger, and this very act introduces conditionalities attached to state, nation, citizenship and family. The Latin word for hospitality, 'hospitalität', is itself "parasitized by its opposite, "hostility"" (Derrida 2000 p3); we welcome in strangers (hospitality) or treat strangers or undesirable guests as enemies (hostility). The welcoming of strangers may be into one's personal home, or at a national level in terms of the nation state, and the presence of hostility within any act of hospitality is referred to by Derrida as 'hostipitality'.

The commercialisation of mass travel has seen a move away from the view that the offering of hospitality to strangers as guests is a moral obligation (Lashley 2015). Hotels are framed as hospitable places and yet are used to hold those fleeing across borders, and the ease and regularity with which this happens allows hotel spaces to shift from hospitable to hostile (Fregonese and Ramadan 2015). This situation poses questions of generosity; asylum seekers are not paying guests, but "guests of the nation, solely dependent upon the kindness of strangers" (Gibson 2003 p373). The term 'asylum' evokes notions of sanctuary and refuge, of benevolent institutions offering shelter, and the distinction between 'hotel' and 'asylum' forces questions of political and ethical hospitality, law and justice - can a hotel truly be a space of asylum, and do asylum hotels bring into crisis the myth of British hospitality? (Gibson, 2003).

2.2 UK asylum hotels

Theories of carceral geography can help us to understand the role that hotels play within the 'carceral continuum', although often lacking is a critical investigation into how hotels are used as carceral and bordering spaces (Burridge 2023). Esposito and Tazzioli (2023) argue that the repurposing of hotels into hybrid places of confinement and protection is a core facet of humanitarian control logistics. The increasing number of people seeking asylum in the UK has variously been attributed by consecutive governments to the Covid-19 pandemic, administrative backlogs and increased illegal

Channel crossings (Gower 2023). Across Europe, irregular migration flows, people smuggling and trafficking often result in dangerous sea voyages (Katwala, Rutter and Ballinger 2023) and governments repurpose hotels in response, plugging gaps in the system resulting from austerity policies (Jerrems et al 2023). Despite being initially repurposed to bridge a gap between arrival and moving into housing, the use of UK hotels has been "normalised to the extent that hotels are now intimately interwoven with the structures that accommodate, control and condition the lives of those seeking refuge" (Darling and Burridge 2025 p4). Asylum seekers can be moved on from wherever they are residing, without their consent, and forced to stay wherever they are sent. Hirschler (2021) describes this as a combination of involuntary mobility and compulsory immobility, and points to this as an example of how this uniquely vulnerable group of people are subject to "the pervasive structural violence of neoliberal market imperatives that have prioritised corporate convenience and profitability" (Hirschler 2021 p155).

People arriving in the UK without permission are placed in short-term holding facilities and then moved to hostel-style 'initial accommodation' whilst claims are considered. If support is granted, they become eligible for 'dispersal accommodation' (flats or shared houses) until a final decision is made. The limited availability of initial and dispersal accommodation has led to 'contingency accommodation' such as hotels becoming widely used (Gower 2023). Katwala, Rutter and Ballinger (2023) estimate that over 100,000 people are stuck in limbo in this system, sometimes for years; unable to work whilst awaiting claim decisions and relying on a £40 monthly allowance (Collinson 2023). Hotels are not routinely inspected, although the contract providers self-report each month and inspect a small number of hotels quarterly (Lenehan 2024). People living in asylum hotels are often in overcrowded conditions (or in shared accommodation with strangers), and have little to no choice over daily meals, with only around £7 per week towards personal spending on necessities such as clothes, travel and toiletries (Phillimore et al 2025).

Despite government claims that ending the use of asylum hotels is a priority, alternative proposals are unlikely to come to fruition quickly and questions continue to be raised about their suitability (Katwala, Rutter and Ballinger 2023). A report by the National Audit Office in June 2023 claimed that the government aimed to reduce the hotel use by mid-2024 (NAO 2023); more recently, the UK government has pledged to end the use completely by 2029 (Francis and Fenwick 2025).

2.3 Relations of power

The hotel industry, evolving as it has over time to include hotels in urban and rural spaces, motels and airport hotels to accommodate transitory travellers, aparthotels for families and many more, have long played a role in what McNeill (2008 p390) describes as “temporarily ‘fixing’ mobile bodies”. The rise of hotels for asylum accommodation however highlights the contradictions surrounding hotels and the traditional ‘hospitality’ they offer. The concept of hospitality relies on the offering of an invitation from one to another, indicating an inherent inseparability between hospitality and power (Kakoliris 2015). Under the 1951 Declaration of Human rights Britain is obligated to accommodate asylum seekers, making hospitality in this context conditional. In a hotel setting, this results in a reversal of traditional power relations; power lies not with paying guests but entirely with the host (Gibson 2003). Conceptualising hospitality to be reliant on generosity when linking the concept with political debates about borders and asylum can reinforce unequal power relationships (Craggs 2012) and allow asylum seekers to be framed as ‘takers’ (Harding 2000). The role of hotels in the asylum system is political and logistical - involving incarceration for the production of profit - and cultural and symbolic, highlighting tensions between the responsibilities of states to provide ‘hospitality’ to asylum seekers and the traditional cultural discourses of hotels as spaces of luxury and leisure (Darling and Burridge 2025 p2). Border hotels can thus operate as sites of carcerality, contestation and resistance, and offer insights into the nature of contemporary bordering practices (Jerrems et al 2023). Darling and Burridge (2025) argue that

despite the cultural assumptions of leisure and luxury around hotels, a historic analysis of colonial hotels provides another view into a world where recognitions of violence were denied, being sites of simultaneous comfort and concealment. Drawing on contemporary global examples of places around the world where commercial hospitality and border containment exist side-by-side, they draw parallels between colonial hotels and contemporary asylum hotels, claiming that “the current use of hotels masks violent practices of containment and conditionality behind a veneer of apparent hospitality” (Darling and Burridge 2025 p9). These practices relate to the reproduction of colonial systems which contain, sort, value and expel bodies, practices which have existed for millennia and yet in the context of hotels are today made less visible by the social constructs we apply to perceived spaces of leisure and luxury.

Bernhardt (2023) offers a different power analysis, claiming that whilst conceptions of hospitality are used to frame migrants as ‘others’ abusing national hospitality, states failing to fulfil their duty of accommodating asylum seekers can themselves be framed as hostile. Indeed, there are those who claim that the use of asylum hotels has instigated the rise of a new system of ‘reception’ entirely. Vianelli (2022) argues that humanitarian considerations of asylum seekers have been overshadowed by the ‘logistification’ of the system, with reception becoming a form of warehousing which is creating an industry which valorises the presence of asylum seekers in terms of profit. Once “benign and innocuous civil sites” such as hotels are situated within a geopolitical power framework, the line between civil and penal is blurred as governments use them as places instrumental in the production of refugee trauma and death (Pugliese 2009 p1). This results in social justice debates relating to immigration becoming muddied with arguments about the type of accommodation used rather than the lived experience of those seeking asylum, and the root causes of what drives people to flee their homes and cross borders.

2.4 Framing asylum hotels

The use of quarantine hotels throughout the Covid-19 pandemic attracted much media interest, but the use of hotels for administrative incarceration has a longer history (Burridge 2023). In 1976 two Goan families arrived in the UK after being expelled from their home country Malawi, were placed in a hotel and subsequently branded welfare parasites in the media (Gibson 2003). A more recent example of the use of this 'parasitology' concept is from the Yorkshire National Front, who warned of asylum seekers 'swarming' the country and taking from 'real' British people (Gibson 2003). Derogatory language is often used about the hotels, including descriptions of asylum hotels as being "often closer to prisons with pebbledash." (The Economist 2023 p1).

The Immigration and Asylum Act (1999) introduced new immigration restrictions, regularly employing emotive rhetoric around 'abuses of hospitality' (Bernhardt 2023). Policy and language have increasingly become about deterrence, notably during the creation of the 'hostile environment' introduced by the Immigration Acts of 2014/2016 and with the anti-immigration rhetoric of the 2016 Brexit campaign (Collinson 2023). The Home Office receives public and media criticism relating to policy, costs, accommodation quality, service provision, local planning and impacts on local communities (Gower 2023). Quotes such as this from Robert Jenrick MP inflame the debate: "Taxpayers cannot be expected to foot the eye-watering bill for the use of hotels to accommodate individuals making illegal, dangerous and wholly unnecessary small boat crossings" (Home Office 2023). Thus, despite asylum seekers having the right to hospitality, they are not always hospitably welcomed but constructed as 'alien' strangers (Gibson 2003).

Collinson (2023) links the experiences of asylum seekers to those of the poor; being rendered invisible whilst remaining useful to populist political rhetoric as inflammatory campaign fodder. In the United States, campaigners seeking to damage the brand image of the Hilton Hotel group by exposing

their involvement in what they referred to as ‘violent bordering practices’ led to the hotel chain ceasing all links with such contracts (Darling and Burridge 2025 p5). In UK society today, asylum seekers have become a key target of hostility politics, which aims to make the lives of those seeking asylum here as difficult as possible, and vilifying them in media and societal discourse; an example of which is the Conservative ‘Stop the Boats’ slogan which has become part of everyday political parlance (Phillimore et al 2025).

2.5 Possible implications for workers

Whilst research into the effects of dealing with the immigration system in the UK as an asylum seeker is plentiful, it is scarce when considering the viewpoint of the hotel workers. What are the implications for the hotel teams whose roles are suddenly changed from comprising the daily guest hospitality tasks they are accustomed to, to forming part of this carceral system; from a culture of open doors to one of secure borders? One key change is the length of stay of residents, as asylum processing rules mean that asylum seekers living in hotels cannot be granted refugee status; a ‘Catch-22’ commonly resulting in extended stays (Moran and McMahon 2023). Many of the changes the workers will experience stem from the change of guests themselves and their daily interaction with the workforce. Asylum hotels are occupied by people fleeing war, poverty, persecution and personal danger, and workers are regularly and repeatedly exposed to these stories. The industry welcomes workers from all over the world, and many are themselves immigrants, sometimes refugees. This has potential impacts for those workers; Ebren et al (2021) argue that for service providers who may themselves be refugees, support intervention is important. There is also a view that in an asylum work context, being from the same culture, religion and background as ‘clients’ can actually be beneficial to the work experience (Guhan and Liebling-Kalifani 2011).

A study into the experiences of those working with asylum seekers found that this work increased the likelihood of depression, anxiety, insomnia, secondary traumatic stress (STS) and vicarious traumatic stress (VTS)

(Ebren et al 2021). The latter two conditions, resulting from working with traumatised individuals, are characterised by intrusive thoughts, avoidance, pessimistic worldviews and hopelessness (Aparacio, Michalopoulos and Unick 2013). A 2009 report from People in Aid and Interhealth found that refugee workers often do not receive support to ameliorate the effects of STS and VTS, resulting in decreased competency, negative self-perceptions, poor service and workforce turnover (Ebren et al 2021). Common feelings include frustration, anger, annoyance, sadness, depression, anxiety, stress, helplessness and demoralisation, plus an inability to talk to others due to a lack of understanding from those not working within the 'system' (Guhan and Liebling-Kalifani 2011). For those working in asylum hotels, there are potential psychological impacts from high-profile media stories, and perhaps especially difficult are those concerning the 5,400 children accommodated in hotels since July 2021. Some hotels have been used exclusively for children, effectively rendering them unregistered children's homes, and shockingly 154 of these children are now unaccounted for (Revill 2023). In 2021, the Guardian reported that over 50 people had died in asylum seeker accommodation procured for the Home Office, including three babies. Whilst some of the deaths were due to health conditions such as strokes and cancer, four were reported as suicides and 31 had unconfirmed causes of death (Taylor, 2021). There are other health-related problems which hotel workers are exposed to daily with no prior experience or training to deal with, such as long-term substance and alcohol abuse. Those with prior experiences of trauma are more likely to use alcohol and drugs to self-medicate and are less likely to seek help for mental or physical health conditions (Lashwood 2025). Despite being places of hospitality which offer alcohol as part of the leisure experience, hotel workers are trained only to deal with those who have drunk too much 'on occasion' rather than recognising and responding to long term addiction and any associated mental health conditions.

Although many asylum hotels operate as safely as possible and with empathy and kindness to residents, there are some which do not, and these

are often forefront in the media. There have been stories of mistreatment, poor cleanliness, inappropriate security measures and safeguarding, of low-quality accommodation and catering. Whilst some staff will inevitably be complicit in such practices, many find themselves in the difficult position of having to leave their job and decide how to raise concerns about what they have experienced. In one Serco-operated hotel, an asylum-seeker living in the hotel with his family took the decision to go on hunger strike to protest against the conditions he and his family were being subjected to and the failure of any statutory oversight to their living arrangements. After being admitted to hospital, a hotel employee turned whistle-blower to confirm these allegations. The allegations included theft, assault and abuse by Serco staff, as well as a lack of safeguarding checks which led to two convicted sex offenders working at the hotel for a number of months before their DBS checks were completed (Moran and McMahon, 2023). In a recent study, almost 32% of asylum seekers residing in hotels were reported to have a mental health issue in need of being addressed, with common conditions including anxiety, PTSD, sleep disruption and depression. Self-harm and suicidal ideation were also reported, and living in the hotel environment was found to have caused or exacerbated such conditions (Phillimore, J. et al. 2025 p7). In a 2025 study into the impact of the increased asylum-seeker population on the mental health crisis in the UK, Lashwood et al highlight a complex set of potential issues faced by asylum seekers. These included trauma-related presentations, communication barriers and potentially negative experiences with those in authority, making identifying and alleviating mental health issues more difficult. High recorded rates of traumatic experiences have been found during studies with asylum seekers, with these experiences disproportionately likely to lead to post traumatic stress disorder as well as other complex issues which often go unnoticed due to a lack of awareness of ‘cultural idioms of distress’; the different and often non-verbal ways in which people display signs of worsening mental health (Lashwood et al 2025 p5).

Exposure to trauma experiences can affect thoughts related to safety, relationships, spirituality and worldview; a depletion of physical and emotional resources referred to as compassion fatigue (Fernandes, Buus and Rhodes 2022). Positive effects include observing survivors overcoming adversity, conceptualised as vicarious resilience (Hernandez, Gangsei and Engstrom 2007) and the possibility for posttraumatic growth (Guhan and Liebling-Kalifani 2011). This is the development of wisdom, acceptance, and appreciation of the paradoxes of life, resulting from witnessing survivor endurance, courage, resourcefulness and change (Fernandes, Buus and Rhodes 2022).

As previously articulated, UK hotel workers (and many around the world) are largely ununionised and experience many social justice inequalities relating to gendered work, low pay, precarious contracts and irregular shift patterns. For these reasons, turnover of staff is often high. Despite this, with the right leadership and investment, many hotels offer a vibrant, engaging and energised environment in which to work, with career prospects based almost entirely on performance and dedication rather than academic qualifications. McNeill (2008) highlights the choices made by hotel workers based on cultural capital, such as which roles to take based on tips, pay, kudos, reputation and working conditions; and explores how hotels encapsulate extremes of wealth (guests) and exploited, and often invisible, labour.

The procurement of hotels for asylum leads to the loss of some jobs and there are ongoing issues around the pay and conditions of hotel work. Average gross earnings in hospitality are the lowest amongst the main UK industries (Warhurst, Lloyd and Dutton 2008), and the prevalence of zero-hour contracts allows companies to reduce staffing with few redundancies, exacerbating the industry reputation for low-status, precarious and low-paid work (Papadopoulos et al 2021). Many workers in asylum hotels have seen colleagues lose their jobs and experienced changes to their working conditions, and I can find no literature investigating the impact of these factors. There have been reports relating to a lack of training and support (albeit relating to security staff rather than hotel workers) and allegations of

harassment and abuse of residents within Serco-run hotels have included staff describing being given no training (Kelly 2023). Despite having no qualifications in health and social care practices, hotel staff are the first point of contact for any queries from the hotel residents. One study found that when asked to whom they would turn for advice on healthcare, 70% of service users living in asylum hotels said that they would first approach hotel staff (Phillimore, J. et al. 2025 p9). UK hotels are encouraged to sign up to the Hotelier's Charter (https://hotelierscharter.org.uk) which includes offering employee wellness assistance programmes and committing to training, development, coaching and mentoring, however this training does not extend to that recommended for work with asylum seekers in other contexts, relating to emotional intelligence, resilience and coping with work and personal challenges (Fernandes, Buus and Rhodes 2022). There is no mandatory training within the healthcare sector which provides awareness of the cultural sensitivities of supporting asylum seekers, and there have been calls for such training to be considered if only to highlight differing cultural explanations of distress and promote a more compassionate approach to asylum seeker care (Lashwood 2025). However, no such proposals have been made for those with the most frequent and personal contact with those living in asylum hotels; the hotel workers themselves.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Ontology and epistemology

This research project was approached from the ontological position that there are multiple, shifting truths which depend on the context within which they are constructed. Underpinned by a constructivist paradigm, the view is taken that the world is not one fixed reality but rather realities are local, specific and constructed. This view holds that social context is important, as reality is experientially based and dependent on the holder (Guba and Lincoln 1994). Underpinned by feminist standpoint epistemology, the research approach was designed in a way which reflects that all knowledge is situated and that different social locations offer unique standpoints to understand the world (Hammersley 2000). Those working in hotels under government contract for asylum seekers are marginalised, often invisible, when it comes to social justice debates relating to immigration, and my decision to use standpoint epistemology was taken in order to help amplify their voices and ensure that their stories are heard. The majority of hotel workers are women, often in the traditionally 'back of house' areas such as cleaning and housekeeping (Warhurst, Lloyd and Dutton 2008) and adopting a feminist standpoint can help correct the often invisible and distorted female experience (Hammersley 2000).

Rather than presenting a hypothesis to be tested, the use of abductive reasoning allowed the fieldwork to be carried out on the initial premise of a loose set of assumptions, explored with participants and critically analysed back and forwards between theory and data. Understanding that "there is no such thing as objective knowledge, there are simply 'knowledges' from different perspectives that are likely to be in conflict" (Hammersley 2000 p40), a constructivist paradigm guides the methodology towards qualitative methods which are open, non-directive, flexible and less structured. At the heart of the research is the belief that it must be of use, relate to issues which are not yet fully understood, and be produced in dialogue with participants (Bevington and Dixon 2005). Preparation of the research project involved

remaining mindful of the potential pitfalls of such work, including those relating to time, costs, and failure to share work or offer something back to those involved (Tarlau 2014). For this reason, it was critically important to ensure that the first set of findings were shared with those who participated, allowing them the opportunity to give their feedback on the initial assumptions and themes.

3.2 Research design

Whilst the loudest voices relating to immigration are often those amplified by various political and media outlets, it is important to recognise that history is made by normal people who have important knowledge about their own worlds (Della Porta 2014). In their everyday work hotel teams produce tacit knowledge, and the research design was prepared in a way which allowed all involved to share this knowledge in ways which were comfortable to them (Tarlau 2014). The senior team at Green Hotels were used as an intermediary and were asked to nominate six team members from the hotel selected for the research. This semi-structured approach to sampling ensured that people working across different areas of the hotel were involved, including the General Manager, Head Chef, Operations Manager, Head Housekeeper and key members of the hotel team. This approach has limitations as there was the potential for those who may be more likely to give favourable feedback to be selected whilst rendering other voices silent; this was however the most appropriate way to gain access to participants and allowed the organisation to retain involvement in the research design. Any concerns about this selection were quickly dispelled upon working with the group, who were frank, honest and engaged throughout. The participants' length of service at the hotel ranged from 9 months to 30 years, and the wealth of experience across the team enabled rich discussions relating to the hotel in question as well as the industry overall. The leadership team at Green Hotels have throughout the project expressed a keen desire for the research to be valid and informative to their own best practices, which has enabled a rare and privileged insight into the often-invisible experience of hotel teams working in asylum hotels.

The research was carried out using a focus group session held on location at the hotel. This enabled full attendance from the team without them having to travel, and the familiar environment helped to ensure that they felt at ease and willing to contribute. Focus groups are well suited to feminist standpoint epistemology as they allow flexibility and encourage interactive behaviour. In particular, such methods can help to stimulate discussion and uncover the meanings, norms and collective framing underlying participants' answers (Della Porta 2014). Themes identified from the literature review were used to inform the flow and content of the day, which lasted around 2.5 hours.

In order to settle the group and ensure that they felt comfortable to share their experiences, the session began with a broad discussion on the meanings and personal interpretations of 'hospitality' in traditional hotel roles. This was done in groups using flipcharts to share their feedback. They were then asked to go back to this work and highlight what's changed in their current roles – new skills and behaviours, ones which they felt no longer apply, any which remain the same. This allowed us to discuss themes relating to security, wellbeing and working environment, and coproduce new questions to consider throughout the session, such as those relating to cultural and language barriers, volatility and conflict. The team were then asked to give feedback individually using sticky notes on aspects of the job they felt were more and less challenging than in previous hotel roles. Despite this being individual feedback, common themes emerged which are discussed in the next chapter, relating to areas such as recruitment and retention and performance feedback. Following this was a series of semi-structured questions with group discussion and feedback using visual stimuli such as flipcharts and images. When planning the structure of the questions used throughout the session, being informed by a constructivist paradigm meant recognising that these are not neutral but central to the data co-produced with participants. Throughout the session new areas of conversation were co-created with participants, recognising that interviews (including group interviews) are structured conversations which can identify motives, beliefs, attitudes, identities and emotions (Della Porta 2014). When

discussing media narratives, images of news headlines were shared to prompt discussion on how media representations affect the team both in and out of work. The semi-structured questions and discussion points encouraged the team to think of both the negative and positive experiences and consequences they feel have resulted from their time working in a hotel under government contract, including how they feel their work is viewed by industry peers, friends and family, the local community and the wider media. The session close included a debrief with a short 'off the record' period, and the sessions were voice-recorded with additional written notes taken.

3.3 Encouraging rich discussion

During the research preparation it was imperative to consider and mitigate any potential challenges associated with the research methods selected. The key areas of concern were how to engage and encourage discussion with a group for whom I was a 'newcomer' into the hotel; handling any conflict arising from different viewpoints and sensitive discussions; and encouraging a respectful environment throughout where everyone felt welcome, included and able to contribute honestly and fully. My decades of experience in workshop facilitation including covering sensitive issues such as disability, equality and diversity, as well as facilitating high-level senior team workshops and events, allowed me to navigate the session using professional, empathetic question technique and active listening. This, along with the open and honest nature of the group, their willingness to voice their experiences, and the leadership of the General Manager throughout the session enabled these potential challenges to be avoided. As a hospitality industry professional myself, I was able to engage and relate on a level with the team, using hospitality terminology and references as well as personal stories and experiences to show a shared passion for the work. Hotel work is notoriously fast paced and demanding and thrives on humour and camaraderie; it was therefore important that throughout the session, despite the serious nature of the discussions, there was space for laughter and light-hearted reflection. Importantly, the team appeared to relax and enjoy the experience, and this was confirmed by the manager after the session who said that they had all

felt that the opportunity to share their stories was a valuable experience to them personally.

3.4 Ethics and positionality

In feminist research projects, the “relationship between power, epistemology and methodology is transparent and made explicit” (Conti and O’Neil 2007 p67). This includes a rigorous examination of the role the researcher plays in knowledge production, and an analysis of power. In designing any research, Hammersley (2000) suggests asking how we can ensure data is trustworthy and valid, how we incorporate critical reflexivity, and how in the absence of value neutrality and objectivity, we can ensure that claims resulting from the data are plausible enough to influence social change. By building in both reflexivity and triangulation this enables the production of data from which one can confidently extrapolate (Balsiger and Lambelet 2014). Every effort was made throughout to validate the findings from the focus group, including the use of triangulation to analyse findings against multiple sources, methods and theories, and the application of ‘face validity’, where results were shared with the respondents and refined in light of their response (Lather 1986). This involved creating an initial summary of findings to be shared with the participants, allowing them time to provide feedback and then discussing this with the management team.

Being aware of what influences us as researchers and of how we influence our own research can aid objectivity (Hammersley 2000). My connection to Green Hotels was levered as a strength, whilst remaining open and reflexive about how this may influence interactions with the team. I was, for example mindful that participants would respond to the identity I presented (student, researcher, trainer, hospitality co-worker?) and made careful decisions about this approach. The team were given a full, honest appraisal of the aims and objectives of the research, and my personal introduction highlighted the commonalities of my own career history in hotels, as well as my personal dedication to sharing their stories (and through theirs, those of other hotel workers in their position), and positioning them within the social justice

context of hospitality/immigration discourse. I was prepared for the possibility of findings disrupting current thinking within Green Hotels and remain aware that the test will be the extent to which they incorporate findings into their own future strategy (Bevington and Dixon 2005).

A final consideration in embarking on this research was the importance of identifying and minimising any potential impacts on myself as the researcher as well as the participants involved. Full ethical approval was gained from the University of Edinburgh prior to commencement, and a careful planning of workload, timelines, consideration of vicarious trauma or other negative effects, were all undertaken. Of great importance here was a focus on rigour. Research which effectively contributes to the social justice agenda positively affects esteem and pride (Cher Weixia Chen and Gorski 2015) and at the end of the session the team and I felt that we had co-created an important contribution to this debate.

3.5 Analysis

The focus group included collaborative co-production of themes and analysis of these throughout the session and was voice-recorded throughout. The final analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis, well-suited to qualitative research due to its theoretical freedom and flexibility in providing rich, detailed and complex accounts of data (Braun and Clarke 2006). Recognising the importance of familiarisation with the data, this was listened to in full multiple times, transcribed, read and re-read multiple times, each time making notes on key themes. Effective analysis includes distinguishing between description, narration and interpretation (Della Porta 2014), and reflexivity around the 'art of description' given that description is a subjective construction of meaning (Plows 2008). The use of semantic and latent coding relating to words and phrases which were repeated or emphasised, linked to themes from the literature review, or anything new and unexpected in terms of my understanding of the theory enabled the transcription to be summarised into key themes with relevant quotes, which

was returned to the group for their approval and feedback. The findings and discussion were then prepared, structured around these themes.

3.6 Potential limitations

At the time of writing (July 2025) the number of hotels used in the UK to accommodate asylum seekers had dropped from 273 (March 2024) to 202 (England and Fenwick 2025). These hotels vary hugely in size, facilities, leadership and overall approach to service; as well as being located in diverse geographical locations across the UK. The main limitation to this research is that it is a reflection of just one of these hotels. The hotel in question performs extremely well in terms of all audits carried out both internally and externally, and for this reason the experiences shared by the team are likely very different to some other UK asylum hotels, where standards and practices are not as robust. The research is also situated within a single particular geographical context which will have implications for the results in terms of the workforce and community views.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Changing notions of hospitality

The focus group opened with a broad discussion on the meaning of hospitality and what the team felt this involved in a traditional hotel context. Initially, they were asked to share thoughts on words and phrases which they felt described the true meaning of hospitality. Working in two groups and using visual prompters, the feedback largely reflected the traditional view of hotel work in the UK, highlighting connections with colleagues and guests, delivery of exceptional experiences which 'go the extra mile', making memories for those staying in the hotel and being measured by traditional methods of guest satisfaction such as verbal feedback, online reviews and company audits. Expected behaviours and skills were also shared, such as professionalism, effective communication, respect, manners and high personal standards. This interrogation of the meaning of 'traditional' hospitality was followed by a discussion around how this had evolved since the hotel use was changed to accommodate asylum seekers. Many aspects remain the same or similar, such as the ability to create connections; "we still have to create a connection with the guests, we kind of have to when they live here" (participant C); the delivery of professional service, the demonstration of expert communication skills and knowledge, and the desire to go the extra mile and to work as a harmonious team. These discussions go to the very heart of what hospitality represents to different people in changing and diverse contexts. The notion of hospitality as being the conduct of host to guest has been the subject of academic thinking since long before debates around immigration raged across Europe and beyond and is generally considered to be about the welcoming of strangers and the right of others to not be treated with hostility (Kant et al 2006). The commitment to offering hospitality in this sense to those arriving at the hotel was made evident by many of the sentiments shared by the team. However, there was a unanimous feeling within the group that their roles and the 'hospitality' they deliver had changed in many ways. Notable omissions from the descriptions

of ‘traditional’ hospitality to the current experience of the team included, for example, the strength in team numbers and the resulting camaraderie which all felt was present in previous hotel roles. There was a sense of independence and isolation from the industry although the team themselves have clearly become very close throughout the experience: “we’re a family here”; “at the moment we kind of look after ourselves which we have to (participant A)”. Although this appears to have resulted in some positive outcomes such an enhanced focus on the experience and wellbeing of the smaller team, including provision of catering; “one thing we have done, since we’ve gone to this contract, is we’ve tried to make it better for staff” (participant B); the changed shape of the workforce has narrowed the view of hospitality as a large team endeavour. The restrictions on visitors to the hotel and the many necessary security procedures implemented mean that few if any colleagues from within the hotel group visit the site, which has naturally had consequences on the feeling of inclusion within the wider company. Despite a dedication to standards still being in place: “we still have standards at the end of the day, we’re still professional in the way we approach it” (participant A); the planned refurbishments due to take place before reopening to the general public mean that the usual ad hoc investments in product and services are on hold, and the team displayed an acute awareness of the tired nature of some areas of the hotel; “we’d love to be proud of what we’re walking in to”; (participant A) “the other hotels get the new stuff” (participant A). The team’s changed experience of hospitality could be seen as an example of its contradictory nature; the differences between which Derrida describes as the politics of hospitality, marked by obstructions, borders and caution, and the ethics of hospitality, which demands the acceptance of strangers despite the potential risks this may involve (Pavić 2018).

When asked to consider what’s different about their understanding of hospitality since the hotel change of use, the responses were interesting and varied. There has been a marked shift away from clearly-defined job roles to a general assumption that everyone should be willing to work in all areas of

the hotel: “we’re not stuck to just one role as in a more operational hotel; now we’re pot washers, we’re cleaners, we do whatever needs doing basically” (participant C). The lack of variety in day-to-day activities was also a key difference, with the routine becoming repetitive; “there’s no variation – breakfast is breakfast, lunch is lunch, dinner is dinner” (participant A). What became evident throughout the conversations was the heightened importance of mealtimes and the increased propensity for conflict this added to the daily operational routine. The team frequently articulated an empathetic understanding around how mealtimes need to be managed carefully, both from a security perspective but also in terms of integration and a sense of community more generally within the hotel. The journeys and experiences of the service users before arriving at the hotel, for example, significantly influence behaviour around mealtimes, and this can lead to team members feeling intimidated whilst trying to control food portions. “First couple of days, maybe a week, I mean they haven’t seen food for a while, and they will just grab, grab, grab, and they will leave it to waste, but you can’t really get angry with them, you’ve just got to manage it” (participant B); “food is very important – because sometimes that’s all they’ve got. If something’s not right, then that’s the focus point” (participant A). The team showed an acute understanding that the volatility around mealtimes does not relate to the meals themselves but to the experiences and mental wellbeing of the residents, and someone jumping the queue or being refused an extra serving can be the catalyst for conflict. These pinch points are a world away from traditional hotel restaurant concerns and have clearly been a focal point of learning for the hotel team. There were also many positive comments around the catering function and mealtimes have in many cases become an opportunity for the team to get back to the heart of the hospitality they have delivered in previous roles, and to gain a sense of satisfaction and pride from the reactions of the residents. “(Chef) does a fantastic job with food, tries to make everybody happy” (participant D); “we dress all the tables and it looks stunning”; “the residents all take pictures to send home” (participant A, referring to Eid). The repetition of experiences relating to food highlights the

way in which hospitality related activities such as eating and drinking provide opportunities for social evaluation, social and status displays, and the development of social bonds (Lashley and Morrison 2011).

4.2 Barriers to communication

The diversity of nationalities represented within the hotel community (not unfamiliar in a traditional hotel setting, but much more pronounced here) is reflected linguistically and culturally and this can manifest itself daily through challenges around what would usually be considered innocuous and mundane guest interactions in hotels. Language differences were raised as a significant barrier to communication: “It’s not as easy as just putting a sign up saying ‘do not use’, we have to translate it into six or seven different languages, and we’ve still not covered everyone” (participant C). The challenge of having ‘normal’ ad hoc interactions was discussed due to having to use phones for translation. This lack of language commonality leads to an increased propensity for conflict; “When you say no you’ve got to think about it – why are you saying no, and if you’re saying no, have you got the language to explain why you’re saying no?” (participant B). Many of the challenges facing the team in the day-to-day work environment relate to communication, including finding it harder to anticipate conflict due to the different languages being spoken around them. The female members of staff are also subject to differing cultural norms relating to communication, especially with regards to their ability to assert authority within the workplace when required: “they’re not frightened of telling you, ‘I’m not listening to a woman’, they’re not frightened of telling you that” (participant D). Here is another example of how procedures have evolved in order to avoid conflict, with certain hotel tasks now more likely to be undertaken by male staff, or a male staff member alongside females.

4.3 The carceral continuum?

Conversation points throughout the session linked back to the additions of security and wellbeing to the team’s definition of hospitality, appearing to vindicate views that hotels have become part of the carceral continuum and

hybrid places of protection and confinement (Burridge 2023; Esposito and Tazzioli 2023); or sites of carcerality, contestation and resistance (Jerrems et al 2023). Procedures and daily practices have evolved over time to become clearer and very much focused on the safety of both staff and residents, and it was interesting to hear how much of this development has been undertaken by the team in gradual steps based on day-to-day experience rather than dictated by the contracting operator. There were repeated insinuations about the importance of specific, measurable and consistent standards, in order to keep everyone on the same page and avoid any allegations of favouritism between staff and residents; “it protects the team, because what we’ve found is if one gives one doesn’t, it’s conflict” (participant A). There was reference to the way in which perceived unfairness can fester due to the inactivity of residents and even become a sense of hatred towards a member of the team. The word ‘vigilant’ was repeated through our discussions, and a strong sense of the potential volatility of the environment alluded to: “There’s a pressure on us to keep it right” (participant D); “there’s a lid there, you can feel it” (participant A); “we have to be more vigilant in terms of the different dangers there could be” (participant C). Although specific violence towards team members wasn’t raised, examples were given of aggressive behaviour on the part of the residents. One member of the team highlighted the way in which certain facilities such as the pool table and bike mending kits for the residents were mistreated, and offered an explanation as to why such acts occurred: “What that is is the anxiety from where they’ve come, to here, and they start wrecking this and wrecking that, because they’re not right here, they’re not happy” (participant D). Another shared their personal concern about how such incidents made them feel: “It can get a bit scary, we’ve had a few incidents here which have been a bit scary” (participant A).

Examples of standards implemented by the team to ease this tension and enhance security include becoming stricter with mealtimes and food available ‘out of hours’, and following an unfounded allegation from a resident about unfair treatment, a decision taken that any member of staff entering a

bedroom must have one of the security guards with them, with both members of staff recording the visit in their own shift logbooks. The normalisation of procedures such as these could be seen to underline how hotels accommodating asylum seekers have become subsumed into the system of humanitarian control logistics aforementioned in this paper (Darling and Burridge 2025), and of the inherent hostility within hospitality which involves “folding the foreign other into the internal law of the host” (Derrida 2000 p7).

Some measures have been taken with the aim of not only relieving tension and increasing security, but of focusing on addressing the root causes of conflict. In the bedrooms, for example, kettles have slowly been phased out to encourage residents to leave their rooms and mix in communal areas. This has had a marked impact since the number of residents was increased and people are now allocated to shared bedrooms, often with people from different countries with different languages, norms and cultural expectations. The team have slowly implemented different facilities and services for the residents in order to build a sense of community and calm, such as an area for the residents to become involved in gardening, bike mending facilities and the communal pool table area. “It gets them out, otherwise they just stay in their rooms all day” (participant A). Some of the residents are viewed as ‘influencers’, and the team showed an astute understanding of how this small minority can upset the equilibrium within the hotel community, often in a covert way: “You’ve got what we call influencers, maybe two or three influencers in the building, that will influence all the younger kids, do nothing, stand behind their heads, and push them on” (participant B). What is interesting here is that the team appeared almost unaware of the level of knowledge and understanding of social work which these conversations evidenced. In their changing roles, they have become more attuned to the smallest of changes in behaviour and how to mitigate and alleviate the tensions arising from operating a hotel occupied by asylum seekers. “When they come here, we expect them to be over the moon, but they’re not they’re bored, absolutely bored to death, so they’re in a room every day, sleeping most of the day, or if they’re in with somebody they don’t know, from another

country, that can cause conflict, so then you have to act on and pick up on that, try and solve it" (participant D). Central to their daily operation has become a focus on diffusing touchpoints and managing volatility, and as a team they appear to have found creative and successful ways of doing this.

4.4 Physical and emotional wellbeing

Significant discussions throughout the session highlighted how the team had developed a strong sense of responsibility for the physical and emotional wellbeing and safety of the residents and highlighted the personal emotional weight this created. Of course, in a traditional hotel setting, the team are trained to respond to emergencies, medical situations and unexpected events. However the long-term stays of the asylum seekers in the hotel appear to enhance this sense of duty and care, and the fragile and often unstable physical and mental health of many residents exacerbates this and exposes the team to situations a world away from their previous roles; "we're more like carers, as in we're here 24/7"; "you've just got to help them where you can" (participant C). The team regularly used language relating to emotional attachment and linked it back to other previous roles as hospitality professionals. The willingness to care for and provide exceptional service to the service users within the hotel was often highlighted, however this was also tempered with comments and language relating to the difficulties this presented on a personal and professional level. The literature concluding that those working with asylum seekers in other parts of the immigration system are at an increased personal risk of negative health and mental health impacts (Ebren et al 2021; Guhan and Liebling-Kalifani 2011) should here give some cause for concern for those overseeing workers in asylum hotels. Many of the triggering factors are present in the hotel environment such as exposure to trauma and people in severe mental health crisis. Despite the team displaying high levels of professional and personal resilience, there is evidence of difficulty in recruiting and retaining new staff, as well as an emotional toll on the existing workforce resulting in feelings of frustration and sadness. A natural empathy towards the residents was present throughout the conversations and examples were given of how this impacted the team

emotionally: “I mean in the beginning you see young men turning up with a black bag, and that’s all they had. Sometimes they don’t even have a change of clothes, underwear, it is quite upsetting to see”; “we do find ourselves getting emotionally involved” (participant B). An awareness of the vulnerability of the residents was highly evident throughout the session, especially relating to potential trauma experienced before arrival in the UK and the resulting mental health implications; “you have to think about where they’ve come from, what their life was like where they came from, their mental health, what they’ve left behind such as family, and now, they’re here, so they can’t be there to help them” (participant D). Several examples were given relating to how a seemingly insignificant event or change could tip over into conflict, due to the complex emotional state of those involved. A variety of difficult situations were raised including some relating to self-harming, and the tragic loss of one resident. Despite the team largely being experienced hoteliers and having navigated many difficult guest situations throughout their careers, the difference in impact appears heightened due to the longer-term relationships built up within the hotel community. “We lost someone – that’s been difficult for the team to take. We have that in the back of our mind when we’re dealing with them, we have to be kindly and supportive, because we don’t know what they’re going through” (participant A); “they can be, a bit, mentally unstable, you need to be aware how to talk to them, bring them round if they’re having a bad day” (participant D). These daily realities within the hotel environment mean that the team are unavoidably exposed to the life stories and experiences of the residents, which are frequently upsetting and sometimes traumatic in nature. One member of the team for example had greeted a resident in a public area of the hotel to find he was visibly upset. He showed the staff member a video he had been sent of a family member being executed back in his home country. The sympathetic response of the staff member gives no indication of the vicarious trauma this could potentially have resulted in on their part, however one must surely ask questions about the longer-term impacts of being exposed to incidents such as this.

4.5 Changes for the better

There are some areas of hotel operations which have become easier since being taken over under government contract. These range from the more obvious examples of creating team rotas (significantly less complicated due to consistent in-house numbers, allocated mealtimes, fewer hotel services and far fewer team members) to the relaxation of certain standards due to the change in clientele. Although professional standards are maintained in many areas, there is less of a focus on the finer detail one would expect when catering to a hotel's usual business mix. Overall the environment is more laid-back within the team, with less time pressures when dealing with tasks and requests; in a traditional hotel setting guest requests must be prioritised, however with the longer-term residents in place it is easier to negotiate more time to resolve issues: "if there's no hot water in the room, we can say you've got to wait 6 hours – you wouldn't be able to do that" (participant C). In a world of immediate online feedback from guests across all manner of hospitality businesses, the lack of this particular pressure was unanimously welcomed, although the downside of not receiving regular positive feedback was also highlighted. There has instead been a workplace culture shift from seeking the instant gratification of guest feedback to longer-term relationship building and a sense of pride in helping to ease the lived experience of the asylum seekers living in the hotel: "It is nice when you do get asylum and they come to you and give you a big hug and they're going on to the next place, and I quite like that because I know they're moving on and they're doing alright"; "remember they've been properly hurt, molested, sat on, abused, and they've come here, they're in shock, whatever, and they come through the doors and their trust levels are very low to begin with, it takes a little time, plus all the issues they have in their heads, and bit by bit, they turn a little bit" (participant A). Comments throughout the session frequently highlighted personal learning and growth within the team, from learning more about the immigration system, to developing more patience, becoming more non-judgemental, and taking pride in their enhanced ability to understand people and treat them fairly. This learning as a result of

witnessing the endurance of suffering of others could be viewed as an example of the posttraumatic growth previously discussed (Guhan and Liebling-Kalifani 2011; Fernandes, Buus and Rhodes 2022). Despite the literature referring to hotels as a system of warehousing asylum seekers in a way which deprioritises any humanitarian concerns (Vianelli 2022; Pugliese 2009) the workers here have in many ways found themselves naturally seeking ways in which to improve the lives of those in their care. This of course speaks only to the experience within one hotel but nonetheless should give us cause to pause before generalising about the large number of such hotels in the UK and beyond.

For the senior hotel team, the reduced unpredictability of business levels, steadier level of expenditure and lack of last-minute fluctuations in guest numbers have all led to less complex financial budgeting and reporting. Strict targets remain however in relation to areas such as food gross profit and require the usual stringent efforts to ensure that this remains within the parameters dictated by the hotel group. Another area which was repeatedly mentioned as a positive impact of the change of use was the smaller, more family-like team environment, and the closeness of the team was evident throughout the discussions. Despite the many challenges faced day to day, the work-life balance was generally considered to be better than working in a full-service traditional hotel environment - no late-night weddings and events, a more consistent routine and shift pattern – and all felt that they will find the transition back to traditional hotel work difficult in the future once the hotel reverts back to being open to the general public.

4.6 Change which has challenged

When asked to share their feedback on what has become more difficult for them, several areas were highlighted in addition to the issues relating to communication, security, safety and wellbeing hitherto discussed. Recruitment and retention, already a challenge for hospitality businesses across the UK, has become markedly harder. Examples were given of job applicants arriving for interview, navigating the security at the entrance to the

car park and then turning around and leaving immediately; or of simply not turning up for scheduled interviews, despite job advertisements making clear the nature of the hotel contract. Within the housekeeping team, new employees start work and then leave within weeks due to the unique environment. Within the team, the repetitive nature of the daily routine isn't for everyone and can hinder the motivation and work ethic of those on duty. One employee joined the hotel team having had experience in a different asylum hotel, but when faced with protests outside the hotel found it triggered traumatic memories from their previous work and couldn't continue in their new role. This personal story of one employee speaks to a common challenge experienced by those working in asylum hotels. Fuelled by seemingly never-ending media narratives relating to immigration and asylum, workers are exposed to views on the ethical and practical nature of their jobs both at work and in their personal time, some expressed in subtle ways and others more forcefully. During the focus group the team were asked to consider how they felt their work was perceived by different groups – among industry peers, friends and family, within the local community and by the broader national media. These conversations allowed the team to share examples of how their work in the asylum hotel had impacted them not just in their professional working environment but more broadly in their personal and private lives too.

4.7 Perceptions of work in asylum hotels

In relation to perceptions of working in an asylum hotel amongst hospitality industry peers, the overriding feeling was one of being looked down upon and seen as lesser professionals within the industry. Despite the high level of skill and professional behaviours required to operate their hotel successfully, there is little understanding among industry peers about what the role entails, and the challenges involved: "They think it's easy. They think we've got it easy" (participant C). Many of the team reported experiencing degrading comments relating to this: "They say 'has your career gone down the toilet? Can't you find a proper job?'"; "The perception is, if you're working in an asylum hotel, it's because you can't find a job in a proper hotel" (participant

A); “The amount of times where I’ve told people I’m a chef, they say, well you’re not really a chef, you’re only doing it in an asylum centre” (participant B). More strongly-worded political views have resulted in the shrinking of their professional and personal networks, with the team reporting cutting ties with peers who have expressed certain views about their work: “40 years in the industry, and there’s some people I don’t speak to any more, because I say where I’m working and they say ‘shame on you’ – it’s literally that bad” (participant A). Visits from other hoteliers are restricted, leaving the team with a sense of isolation within the industry which all felt had been exacerbated by the removal of company branding from the hotel exterior. Due in part to confidentiality and security restrictions relating to the hotel contract, successes are rarely celebrated outside of the hotel team, and many achievements go unacknowledged: “There’s not the recognition there, and that’s hard” (participant A). The sense of pride that the team have in their work remains strong, however the lack of ability to share this with the wider hotel community has created an inward-looking culture underpinned by group self-preservation.

Perceptions of the role within friends and family members of the team appear to be varied and present emotional challenges in many ways. For some, the job is a cause for worry and concern among family; for others, the reactions have been harsh and have led to a loss of relationships and long-standing friendships, with most of the team saying that they have experienced such loss. Often this has taken them by surprise, with some stating how people have ‘come out of the woodwork’ and shared negative views about the political aspect of asylum hotels. Despite this, there was a common theme of defensiveness which was highlighted repeatedly throughout the session. This appeared to reflect a desire to demonstrate to others that operating the hotel remains a profession to be proud of, as well as clear empathy towards the residents and a sense of contributing positively to their lives. This sentiment was displayed repeatedly with comments such as: “I always say to them, “if your life was in their position, what would you do? If you had to escape a country that was at war, what would you do?”” (participant D); “Friends and

family – they don't agree with it, I find you have to defend your position" (participant A); and "We've lost friends, so-called friends, to it - I don't care. I'm not gonna lie about what I do" (participant B).

This theme continued into discussions about the local community. Despite the experience throughout the Covid lockdowns being a relatively positive and supportive one in terms of connection and interaction with the local community, since then views have changed and are now generally considered by the team to be predominantly negative. Common themes included experiencing racist and aggressive comments and for some of the team wearing a uniform or badge outside of work has become impossible. For others, confrontations outside of work are seen as an opportunity to prompt discussion about the positive aspects of what they do: "I get people coming up to me saying "are you running that hotel – shame on you". You get that. I say, "you don't know – it's a shame for you, but you don't know"" (participant A). Despite support from some local groups there is a sense of disconnection from the local community, and the team are regularly exposed to comments relating to the effect the hotel use has had on house prices, safety concerns, and a sense of fear and unease about the residents of the hotel: "We get a lot of racism, they can be aggressive, we're affecting the area" (participant A). In common with asylum hotels across the UK, the exterior entrance to the hotel has been repeatedly occupied by people filming the team arriving at work - often live-streaming - challenging them to speak to residents and expressing racist tropes commonly cited in immigration debates: "…saying 'they rape girls, they rape girls, why would you do this, why would you bring paedophiles into this country?" (participant A). This kind of regular interaction between the hotel team and local community illustrates a lived example of where the hostility politics aimed at vilifying those seeking asylum can lead (Phillimore et al 2025).

The team were united in their view that the negative aspects of asylum generally dominate the media and that the rise of right-wing media outlets is both influencing views and shaping debate. There was a general consensus that social media especially is a realm best avoided, with many examples of

how such media has led to conflict which they have had to deal with. Despite this general avoidance of commentary relating to immigration the team gave multiple examples of how media rhetoric impacted them personally and professionally day to day, even at a managerial level. Reactions from contractors and suppliers such as “people coming in to fix equipment say I can’t believe you work in a place like this, they’re taking all our resources, that’s why the country’s broken” (participant A) relate to the aforementioned concept of parasitology and the way in which asylum seekers are framed as takers within society (Harding 2000; Gibson 2003). Staff working at the hotel repeatedly hear comments in their personal and private life which echo extreme views given voice in the national media, and this for some leads frustratingly to an inability to be open about the positive aspects of the work they undertake daily.

4.8 Reflecting with hindsight

The session concluded with a challenge to the team: if they could turn back the clock and prepare for the change of hotel use given what they now know, what would they do differently? Several strong themes emerged here beginning with a keen emphasis on the experience and wellbeing of staff. Their advice begins with the recommendation for an honest discussion to be facilitated with the existing hotel workforce before any contract starts, relating to whether they would they like to stay at the hotel or find alternative employment: “Tell them this is what we’re going to do, those that want to stay with us on this journey, we don’t want you to leave, those who want to leave, no hard feelings, on your way” (participant B). Clarity of communication here is considered crucial to avoid the spread of rumours and rise of misinformation which can be rife if messages are not clear. Once in the role, the focus should be on team welfare including food, rewards and recognition, and building on the positive aspects of the new role such as the enhanced sense of family within the team. Clear job specifications from the start should carefully outline what’s expected and how the employee’s role will change from their current one, for example with the expectation that there will be more ‘mucking in’ in all areas rather than operating in separate, siloed

departments. The team expressed their view that should they have had the ability to learn from other hotels in the same position this would have expediated the implementation of effective procedures and practices designed to ensure that the hotel operates successfully from the perspective of residents and staff. The focus on procedural standards was a constant throughout our group discussions, and it was clear that the team all felt that clarity and consistency were key to maintaining security and stability at the hotel. Structures and processes should be planned out carefully, detailing strict procedures covering people arriving through to leaving, with all members of the team adhering to these and fully trained on the importance of compliance.

A variety of training subjects were highlighted as being crucial to a team taking on a new government contract, including conflict resolution (extending far beyond the complaint handling training offered in traditional settings); how to handle the more sensitive aspects of the role relating to cultural and linguistic barriers; and the volatility of the environment including potential health and wellbeing crises. Genuine, useful support should be available for those who are exposed to traumatic stories, material and situations, and this support should be available immediately when required. Perhaps more challenging to address, given the confidentiality surrounding asylum hotel contracts, was an expressed desire from the team to find ways in which their work could be better recognised, rewarded, and not seen as a poor relation within the hospitality industry. For hotels which are part of a wider group, this could involve awareness-raising within the group of the challenges and realities of asylum hotel operations and ensuring that the team receive regular positive feedback and support internally. This should be of particular concern to group operators, who may otherwise find it difficult to reengage hotel teams once the contract has ended. For confident, professional hotel operators, it is natural to thrive on positive guest feedback and to experience this being shared with a wider audience across the industry. When operating an asylum hotel this instant gratification is minimised and it is impossible, indeed forbidden, to share examples of positive experiences and successes.

4.9 Discussion

Discussing perceptions of hospitality and what these represent in both traditional hotel contexts and within asylum hotels allowed an interrogation of how hospitality is offered and experienced within the hotel. Do, as Gibson (2023) asks, the contradictions of asylum and hotels bring into crisis the myth of hospitality in the UK? I would argue that based on the hotel in question, that is certainly not the case. Laying to one side questions relating to the appropriateness of hotels being used in this way, and wider issues surrounding the social justice elements of the immigration debate, the way in which the team here have approached their changing role remains centred around the traditional hospitality skills honed during their (in many cases long) careers. Basic principles of professionalism, effective communication, warmth and generosity still guide their daily operations, despite their lived experience of delivering this hospitality changing in many ways too. A smaller team has led to a heightened sense of family and teamwork, although it would appear that this has been at the expense of connections and bonds with the wider hotel industry. A more structured routine and more consistent working hours have been positively received, with a willingness to 'muck in' and work in all areas of the operation offered in return.

Theories of carceral geography help explain the addition of new terms and definitions of the daily hotel work. A move from willing, paying guests to those crossing borders in search of a new, better life – "guests of the nation" (Gibson 2003 p373) has shifted power dynamics and laid bare a need for a new raft of security measures far beyond those required in traditional hotel environments. Can one draw connections between hospitality and hostility, are there conclusions to be drawn here relating to the 'hostipitality' of which Derrida writes? Certainly, there is a new sense of volatility within the hotel environment and a simmering of tensions for which the team have had to develop strategies and procedures to manage and overcome. Stricter mealtimes have resulted from an acutely developed understanding within the team of the social tensions and diverse cultural associations with this most basic of hospitality offerings. At times, the team displayed knowledge and

learning more akin to that of social workers than hotel specialists, learning which has happened organically and almost entirely through their own experience and dedication to doing the job well.

Our traditional understanding of hotels centre around leisure, luxury and the creation of memories, and yet for many of us these perceptions have been eroded over recent years due to the unrelenting focus on asylum hotels in UK political discourse and the resulting (almost entirely hostile) media coverage. The impact of this on the hotel team has been marked and is evident across interactions with wide-ranging social groups. Friends and family have been lost along the way, due to what the team describe as at best misunderstandings and at worst racist views of the work that they do. Industry peers are disparaging and dismissive of their changed roles, largely through ignorance of what is involved, which is itself fuelled by the levels of secrecy and security under which the teams must operate if they are to keep themselves and the residents safe. Frequent challenges, often involving aggressive verbal and non-verbal behaviour, to the team both in and out of work have driven them into a protectionist state where they rely on themselves, their small team and look to each other for support and validation of the work they do.

Despite these challenges, the sense of pride and determination to continue to be the best they can be within the asylum hotel context remains undeniable. A strong sense of fairness and justice has been fostered as a result of learning with and from the asylum seekers in their care – and in their 'care' they are – and this has encouraged some of the team to reflect on their work through a newly-discovered social justice lens. Power relations have shifted from that of the paying guest dictating the team behaviour and dynamics, to a more security-focused (carceral?) environment where the team are required to assert more authority, and although the team in situ are now accustomed to this change, recruiting and retaining new workers is challenging. Despite referring to the way in which the offering of hospitality is now discretely managed, for example through limited mealtimes and room provisions, the team still refer to the residents in terms of systems and procedures being

designed for their benefit and comfort, which would appear to contradict view that asylum seekers are consistently viewed or framed as ‘takers’ in this context (Craggs 2012; Harding 2000). However, the team were clear that this is how they feel the residents are viewed from the outside looking in, and this has led to them feeling defensive and often adopting the role of social justice champions when discussing their work with others, or avoiding such confrontation altogether.

The communication barriers, trauma presentations and cultural variances in displays of mental health struggles which Lashwood et al (2025) describe were all described in various ways by different team members, and in keeping with the literature (Phillimore et al 2025) it is clear that the team are viewed as the first point of contact for a range of issues experienced by the residents. Some of these issues are those more consistently prevalent in social work than hotel work and have clearly had an impact emotionally on many of the team, who have over many months, sometimes years, gotten to know the asylum seekers and their stories and experiences. There was evidence of vicarious resilience here (Hernandez, Gangsei and Engstrom 2007) in the way in which the team reflect on and discuss the way some residents have overcome adversity. Learning from all of this has clearly taken place and in many areas; from catering to differing religious and cultural needs, to the workings of the UK immigration system, to understanding human behaviour and interactions in a way far beyond that which is learnt in traditional hotels.

Despite the many differences to their working (and sometimes personal) lives which have resulted from becoming an asylum hotel, underpinning all daily operations is a current of the traditional hospitality which the team have carried with them from previous roles. Writing before the emergence of asylum hotels into the global immigration system, Derrida (2000 p16) claimed: “The stranger can pass through but cannot stay.” The 32,000 asylum seekers currently living in UK hotels have been ‘passing through’ for years, and the UK government has now pledged to end the use of hotels in this way by 2029 (Francis and Fenwick 2025). If the teams working in such

hotels are to be encouraged to remain in the industry and return to life as ‘normal’, hotel leaders will need to consider how best to welcome them back and facilitate this return, whilst recognising and rewarding their learning and experience from delivering the hospitality of asylum.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Drawing conclusions

This research has taken many turns and the candid experiences shared by participants were both inspiring and humbling, as well as at times emotional to hear. The question at the heart of the research was to find out how becoming an ‘asylum hotel’ impacts the teams working in such hotels in the UK. The findings here show that there have been many changes to the daily working lives of the team, as well as wider impacts within their professional communities and personal lives. They have found themselves transitioning from traditional hospitality professionals to a team which whilst remaining part of the UK hotel industry is now also a part of the global immigration system, and this has led to a variety of changes to the nature of their work. Some of these changes have been, and remain, challenging both personally and operationally, some have been received positively - all have led to learning in ways which could not always have been anticipated.

5.2 Being of use

The global rise of asylum hotels over recent years reflects wider national and international failings in offering safe, effective ways for those fleeing poverty, persecution, catastrophe and conflict to seek asylum on safer shores. Until the root causes of these are addressed, and the international community adopts a more unified approach to identifying and welcoming those most in need, the need for contingent accommodation will remain. Policy relating to this should not only consider the practical and financial costs of hotels forming part of this system, but the human costs in terms of the lived experiences of the asylum seekers themselves and the impacts on the hotel workers, both in the short and long term.

The aim of this research was not to discuss the wider question of whether hotels are an appropriate form of accommodation for those seeking asylum in the UK, a question which has been forefront in political and media debate now for some years. I do however hope that by applying a social justice lens

to the experience of those working in such hotels, their experiences can be more widely heard and understood. In the seven months following the 2024 budget, 84,000 jobs have been lost across the UK hospitality (UK Hospitality 2025), and as an industry we can ill-afford to lose the experienced and valuable professionals who are currently working in hotels under government contract. Recognising their experiences, dispelling some of the myths relating to their work, and casting light on the challenges, skills and growth which has come from their time working in asylum hotels, will help encourage them to return to the industry as and when the contracts end. In the meantime, companies operating hotels under government contract should pause and reflect on the teams in their care, and question how they can ensure that they are supported and recognised for the work they are doing.

5.3 Future scope

This research allowed an insight into the experiences of the team in one hotel, and as such cannot be considered fully representative of the experiences of all workers in asylum hotels across the UK. A key challenge here to extending this scope arises from the difficulty in accessing asylum hotels. Access here was made possible in large part due to the openness and indeed desire of the hotel group in question to find out more about the experiences of their own teams, as well as my existing connections to the industry. The hotel performs well in all audits both internal and external, and so many of the issues highlighted within the literature review relating to poor conditions, mistreatment of staff and residents and issues relating to whistleblowing were not present. In many ways however, this means that it is possible to speculate that in such hotels, the challenges shared by this team must be both present and potentially exacerbated both for the team and for the residents.

The experiences in hotels housing a different demographic of residents would also undoubtedly yield differences in findings. I have had experience of visiting hotels for example where all residents are Afghan nationals who have had their asylum claims granted and are awaiting permanent housing. The

residents were mostly families, with the children leaving the hotel each morning for school. Despite there most likely being many similarities in experiences for the hotel team, there will surely be differences too and to investigate this further would be of great interest. Similarly, investigating the experiences of those working in hotels in different parts of the country would highlight possible variations relating to community contexts and diversity of workforce. The participants in this research were all of UK/Irish descent and having spoken to team members working across the UK who are themselves former immigrants or asylum seekers, it is clear that there are potential challenges and experiences which have been felt differently as a result of this, and which would be of potential great interest for future research.

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