

your guide to settling into your home

April 2003

Refugee
Housing
Association





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If RHA is not your landlord and you receive support services only from us you may still find the sections for residents useful as a general guide. But you should refer to your landlord for particular information or advice.

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Introduction

This guide tells you about your home with Refugee Housing Association (RHA). It also tells you about the support services we provide, as well as your rights and your responsibilities. We call it a residents' guide but every attempt has been made to make it relevant to service users as well.

We hope it will be helpful.

It is intended to provide all residents and service users with enough information to conduct their lives in the UK. As our residents and service users have different levels of education, knowledge and experience of the UK we appreciate that some of you may already know much that is in this guide.

This guide is not intended to replace contact with your housing officer. Please ask him or her about anything you do not understand. We use the term 'housing officer' for the person in RHA who works with you. This includes supported housing officers, caseworkers, tenancy support officers, and housing officers.

This guide belongs to RHA. Please keep it safe and return it when you move out of your home or when your support ends.

Talking your language

This guide will be available in different languages soon. Until then, if you need someone to translate or help you understand any part of this guide, please tell your housing officer.

Ky udhezues do te jete se shpejti i disponueshem ne disa lloj gjuhesh. Deri atehere, ne qofte se keni nevojë qe dikush t'ju perktheje apo t'ju ndihmoje per te kuptuar pjese te ndryshme te ketij udhezuesi, ju lutem flisni per kete me punonjesin tuaj te strehimit.

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سنقوم قريباً بتوفير هذا الكتاب/الدليل بمختلف اللغات. إذا كنت تحتاج الان لمن يساعدك في فهم أي جزء من هذا الدليل الرجاء التحدث مع موظف الاسكان المسئول.

بزودی این کتاب راهنما به زبانهای مختلف در دسترس شما قرار خواهد گرفت. تا آن موقع اگر میخواهید کسی آن را برایتان ترجمه کند یا اینکه برای فهمیدن هر کدام از قسمت های آن به کمک نیاز دارید، لطفاً آن را با کارمند اداره خانه (housing officer) در میان بگذارید.

Cette brochure sera bientôt disponible dans des langues divers. En attendant, prière de demander à votre Housing Officer si vous avez besoin de l'aide de quelqu'un pour traduire ou expliquer certaines parties de cette brochure.

بەم زووانە ئەم کەتیبی رێنویێنێ کردنە بە زمانی جوژاوجۆر تەرجومە دەکرێت و دەخرێت بە دەست تان. تا ئەو کاتە ئەگەر پێویستیتان بە ئەو هەبێت کە کەسێک بۆتان تەرجومە بکات یاخود بۆ تێگەیشتن لە هەر کام لە بەشەکانی پێویستیتان بە یارمەتی هەبێت، تکایە لە گەڵ کارمەندی داڕەوی خانوودا (housing officer) باسی بکەن.

Niedługo przewodnik ten dostępny będzie w różnych wersjach językowych. Do tego czasu w celu pomocy w tłumaczeniu lub zrozumieniu konkretnych aspektów zawartych w tym przewodniku, należy zwracać się do urzędnika do spraw mieszkaniowych.

Tilmaamahani wuxu dhawaan ku soo bixidoonaa luqado/afaf kala gedisan. Intaa inta ka horeysa, haddii aad u baahato qof kuu turjuma ama kaa kaalmeeya fahamka qayb ka mid ah tilmaamahani, fadlan u sheeg sargaalka kuu qaabilsan guriyaynta.

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Bu kılavuz yakın bir zamanda başka dillerde de hazırlanacaktır. Ancak o zamana dek, bu kılavuzun herhangi bir bölümünü anlamanız için birisinin yardımına veya çevirisine ihtiyaç duyarsanız, lütfen ev işlerinizden sorumlu görevliye bildiriniz.

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"ESTA GUIA SERA TRADUCIDA A DIFERENTES IDIOMAS MUY PRONTO. SI USTED NECESITA TRADUCIR O ENTENDER ESTA GUIA POR FAVOR HAGASELO SABER A SU 'HOUSING OFFICER' (TRABAJADOR SOCIAL)"

If you have difficulties with English, we will ensure that developing your language skills will be part of the support we offer. We will provide any necessary translations or interpreters to ensure that you understand everything you receive from RHA.

Welcome

Welcome to Refugee Housing Association (RHA).

Our job is to help you gain the information and, where required, the skills you need to live independently in the UK. You will be given a housing officer who will work closely with you on your own support plan. More information about this is on page 3:3.

If you are an asylum seeker supported by National Asylum Support Service (NASS) you will live here and be supported by us until you receive a decision on your asylum claim.

If you are a refugee or have Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) or Exceptional Leave to Remain (ELR) status you will probably require our support for about one year while you acquire the knowledge and skills to live independently.

Whatever the duration of support, we want you to tell us how we can help you. Please read this guide carefully and then ask your housing officer for any further information you need.

Refugee Housing Association

RHA aims to help refugees settle in England by providing good, affordable housing and support that is tailored to your needs. Many of our staff are themselves refugees.

We work in London, the South East, South Yorkshire and the East Midlands. We are managed by a Management Committee, made up of 15 voluntary members, including refugees and one resident member. We want you to be involved in the way RHA is run. There is more information about this on page 1:8.

Our diversity policy

We are committed to treating you fairly, with dignity and respect. We will give you the support you need and will carry out regular activities to ensure this policy is as effective as possible.

We value diversity and try to promote a culture that respects the differences between people. We will deal with you as an individual, while recognising that you may share common experiences with others, based on issues such as gender, race or disability.

We recognise that there is a history of discrimination in Britain in issues such as race, gender, sexuality, age and religion. We are committed to ensuring that we work in a way that treats all our staff, residents and contractors equally.

We will not tolerate racism or discrimination in any form, particularly discrimination against refugees and asylum seekers. We will work to increase awareness of the positive contribution made to our society by refugees and asylum seekers.

The asylum system

This section explains the asylum system and the support that asylum seekers can receive.

When you arrive in the UK you will be called an **asylum seeker** while the Home Office is considering your claim. This is the government department responsible for immigration. This process can take many months.

There are three possible outcomes. The Home Office may decide to:

- 1) Give you **refugee** status or **indefinite leave to remain (ILR)**. This allows you to stay in the UK as long as you like.
- 2) Give you **exceptional leave to remain (ELR)** because it is not safe for you to return to your home country. This normally lasts for 4 years. After this time you can claim ILR if it is still not safe to return home. The Government is planning to replace ELR with the more restrictive **'humanitarian protection'** status. This will be granted for 3 years. After this time if you no longer need protection you will be refused further leave to remain status.
- 3) Refuse your asylum claim. If this happens, you are expected to leave the country. You may be able to appeal against this decision.

Support while you are seeking asylum

If you entered the UK and applied for asylum after April 2000 and you do not have enough money to support yourself, you can get help from the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). NASS provides support with accommodation, food and other essential items. It is part of the Home Office,

but is separate from the department that considers asylum claims. Any information you give to NASS will not affect your asylum claim.

You cannot choose where you are housed by NASS. Asylum seekers are dispersed to many different parts of the UK.

From January 2003 people who do not immediately apply for asylum on arrival in the UK may not be eligible for support from NASS.

If you applied for asylum before September 2000 you may be eligible for support from NASS or from social services in your area. If you are an asylum seeker and have been receiving welfare benefits you will continue to get them until you are given a decision on your asylum claim. If you are refused asylum and wish to appeal you will need to apply to NASS for support.

If you are granted refugee status, ILR or ELR, you will be entitled to welfare benefits and much the same services as other UK residents.

Support if you are under 18

If you are under 18 and not accompanied by an adult, you can claim asylum in the same way as an adult. You will be looked after, housed and supported until you reach the age of 18 by social workers that work for local social services departments. Social workers have a duty to protect you from harm or neglect and can help you to obtain many local services. You may be placed in a children's home, fostered to a family or placed with specialist providers such as RHA.

1 Rights and responsibilities

Your agreement with us

Noise and nuisance

Ending your agreement

Privacy

Consulting and involving you

Racial harassment

Complaints and compensation

Family reunion

Being reunited with family you have left behind in your home country can be a long and difficult process and you should get legal advice.

RHA has experience in providing housing and support services that support a variety of people in each stage of the asylum process.

Travel

If you are an asylum seeker you will automatically lose any rights to claim asylum if you go outside the UK.

If you have refugee status, ILR or ELR or humanitarian protection, **you can travel to other countries if you have the correct documents and visas, but need to seek advice before travelling to your home country.**





Your agreement with us

By now you will have signed an occupancy/support agreement that gives you permission to occupy your home and/or access to support services. It also sets out the rights and responsibilities you have as a resident here. Your housing officer will have explained the agreement to you. The details of the agreement will depend on your immigration status, your age and the level of support that you will receive here.

As your landlord, we will:

- provide you with a safe and clean home
- allow you to enjoy the privacy of your home
- keep your home and the contents we provide in good repair
- provide you with support that is tailored to your needs
- provide you with assistance and/or information as you require.

As a resident with RHA:

- You also have rights and responsibilities.
- If you repeatedly fail to do what is expected of you and we cannot resolve the problem with you, you may lose your home.
- You are expected to make this your only home in the UK. You must not invite anyone else to live here with you or instead of you.
- Your views on what we do are important to us. We will ask you regularly for your opinions. Please tell us if you feel that we are not fulfilling our responsibilities to you. More details on how to complain are on page 1:10.

- You are expected to make this your only home in the UK. You must not invite anyone else to live here with you or instead of you. But if you expect to be reunited with close members of your family please contact your housing officer to discuss this matter further.

If you are an asylum seeker and are supported by NASS or Social Services then you do not pay rent. NASS will pay your rent until you are required to leave the property.

If you NASS or Social Services do not support you, you are responsible for paying your weekly rent. This needs to be paid in advance on the Monday of each week. Your weekly rent is composed of both basic rent and service charges. These cover the costs of your accommodation, furniture and the services we provide to you such as the costs of your gas and electricity. It also includes your council tax, which is a tax for local services such as schools.

From April 2003 the support service we provide to adult residents and clients not supported by NASS or social services is funded by the Supporting People programme and paid for by our local authority.

If you are on Housing Benefit, you are still responsible for paying your rent. You also must pay for services that Housing Benefit does not cover, such as gas and electricity. If you receive any letters regarding your Housing Benefit or if there are any changes in your financial circumstances, you should contact your housing officer as soon as possible.

Your tenancy agreement will tell you how much your rent is. Your rent will change at the beginning of April every year. You will receive a letter a month earlier telling you what your new rent will be. If you are not happy with this then you can appeal.

You will receive a written statement of your rent account every three months. However, your housing officer will tell you immediately if you fail to pay your rent and start to owe us money ("rent arrears"). Once you start to owe us money it can be very difficult to catch up and we strongly recommend that you keep your payments up to date. If you do not pay your rent, you may lose your home.

From April 2003, the support service we provide is funded by Supporting People and paid by your local authority. If your circumstances change please tell your housing officer as this payment may be affected.

Noise and nuisance

As you will be living among a number of other people, please show some consideration in your behaviour. You have the right to expect others to do the same.

Please do not annoy or cause nuisance to other residents or staff members. Please also ensure that any of your visitors behave reasonably, as you are responsible for their behaviour.

You must not play any music, radio or television so loudly so that it can disturb your neighbours. Between 11.00pm and 7.30am please make sure that any sound you make cannot be heard outside your own home or room.

Differences in lifestyle, noise or a disagreement can lead to a dispute with neighbours. If this happens, talk to your neighbours about the problem, but if it continues tell your housing officer. Serious cases of nuisance will be dealt with by working with the local police and taking legal action.



Your housing officer and other staff

We expect you to be polite and courteous to our staff and contractors. We do not expect them to put up with aggressive behaviour or bad language

Ending your tenancy

We will give you notice that your occupancy will end. The period of notice will depend on the type of tenancy you hold and is stated in the agreement you have with us (the notice period will be shorter where we end the occupancy for reasons of violence, nuisance or harassment).

Moving out

At the end of your occupancy you must leave the property. You must remove your personal belongings, return the keys to us and leave the property and contents in clean and good condition.

On the morning after the notice period, we will take possession of the building. We will not be responsible for any belongings that are left in the property after you have left.

Privacy

We respect your right to live in privacy and without unnecessary interference:

- The only information we keep about you is what we need to know in order to provide you with housing and support.
- We will make sure that this information is accurate.
- We may need to give some simple information to providers of services such as gas, electricity and social security.
- Your information will only be made available to other RHA staff if they need it to help you.
- We will not give this information to anyone else without your consent except if we think you are putting yourself or somebody else in danger, or if we believe you may be doing something that is against the law.
- You have the right to see your file.

If you are seeking asylum, we have a duty to tell the National Asylum Support Service (NASS), which is part of the Home Office, that you are living in one of our properties. We must also tell NASS of specific incidents where we are contractually obliged to do so.

If your housing officer needs to bring someone else to any meetings with you, they will ask you first.



Consulting and involving you

We want to involve you in day to day housing management and support. This will help prepare you for your life once you move on.

We provide a number of ways in which you can tell us what you think. These include local meetings, forums and focus groups, our regular residents' newsletter, surveys, questionnaires and internet consultation.

We will ask you for your opinions on how we are doing and will tell you what changes we make as a result of your views. We will also ask your opinion when we review a particular service such as support planning. We will work with you to identify what issues you want to address such as quality of service, value for money or setting our priorities for the future.

We will consult you regularly by for instance letter or newsletter on the following where they apply to you:

- changes in rent, service or support charges
- changes in the terms and conditions of our tenancy agreements
- quality of services provided
- redecoration, planned maintenance and major repairs

We would like to encourage you to get involved in our management and decision-making. There are many ways of doing this such as house meetings, residents meetings and service reviews. Please speak to your housing officer to find out more.

Harassment

No form of harassment is acceptable

Harassment may range from verbal insults, threats or graffiti through to physical violence. We take the view that no form of harassment is acceptable.

We believe that a racist incident is any incident that is perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person. All racist incidents are investigated and taken seriously.

What to do if it happens to you

If you or anyone close to you experiences any act that you think is racially motivated, tell us straight away.

Your housing officer will visit and take full details before contacting any relevant support agencies on your behalf. They will do whatever is needed to support you and will make any necessary arrangements to protect you from further harassment.

Our commitment to you

We promise to:

- investigate all reports of harassment
- take legal action wherever possible against whoever has harassed you
- observe our duty of confidentiality to you
- take action without your consent only if we consider the harassment to threaten other residents, staff or the public
- support and advise on taking independent legal action
- seek to evict residents guilty of harassment or who have let visitors commit acts of harassment
- try to move you if it is not safe to stay in your home
- bring in outside agencies to provide specialist advice and support.



Complaints and compensation

Complaints

We are committed to providing a high quality of service. If you feel we have not fulfilled our responsibilities to you then we want you to tell us. We aim to put things right as quickly and as fairly as possible. All complaints will be treated confidentially and will not affect your asylum claim.

You can complain about any aspect of our service, such as:

- quality of our services, standards or information
- failure or delays in delivering a service
- our policies or decisions
- the way you have been treated.

How to complain

First of all, discuss your problems with your housing officer. He/she will try to resolve this for you as quickly as possible.

If you are still not satisfied then you may make a formal complaint, by telephone, letter or in person. You should be told who is responsible for dealing with your complaint, what is being done about it and how long this should take. We will write to you to acknowledge your complaint and to explain what action is being taken.

You should take time to decide if you are satisfied with the outcome. We assume that you are satisfied if we have not heard from you within two months of dealing with your complaint.

If you are not happy with the way in which your complaint has been handled or its conclusion you can appeal to the Management Committee.

If you are still not satisfied you can complain to the independent housing ombudsman. If you are supported by NASS, you can complain to them.

Compensation

We are committed to providing a high quality of service to all our residents and customers. However, occasionally things do go wrong and compensation may be paid to you.

If any of your property has been lost or damaged because we have been negligent or failed to respond, you may be entitled to compensation. If this happens to you, please contact your housing officer as soon as possible after the loss or damage has occurred.

If you report a repair or maintenance problem which affects your health, safety or security, and we fail on two occasions to make the repair in the target time we have set then you are entitled to compensation.

In other circumstances where we have made mistakes, we may offer you compensation as gesture of good will. This is usually at our discretion. If you think you have cause for a claim, then please contact your housing officer.

2 Your home

Getting settled in your new home

Moving in

Telling people your new address

Taking care of your home

Maintenance and repairs

Health and safety

Security





Getting settled in your new home

We want you to settle in and be happy in your new home. There are a few basic rules we need to tell you.

Moving in

Your home may be self-contained or you may be sharing a kitchen and bathroom. It may be fully furnished when you move in and include kitchen equipment, bedding and cleaning items.

Your housing officer will go through the list of furniture and equipment in your home with you.

Telling people your new address

You may wish to give your new address to family, friends, professional advisers including your solicitor, and anyone else you may want to keep in touch with.

If you do not manage to contact everyone before you move in, check whether you can leave a forwarding address with someone you trust, or with an organisation that will pass on your address details.

Alternatively, you can give a contact address instead of your home address to people you may not want to know your home address.

Taking care of your home

Please keep your home clean and tidy, including any communal areas. If you have a garden, please make sure that nobody leaves rubbish in the garden.

If you live in shared accommodation, all residents are responsible for keeping it in good condition. In some properties we pay a cleaner to clean part of the accommodation, but you should still try to keep it clean from day to day. If there is no cleaner, there will probably be a cleaning rota. It is your responsibility to make sure that you do your share of the work and your right that others do the same.

Please do not carry out any repairs, improvements or alterations yourself. RHA will arrange for all necessary repairs or redecoration be carried out. Just tell your housing officer what you think is needed.

Visitors

Visitors are very welcome, but if a visitor is to stay overnight you must seek advice from your housing officer as you may need permission. Please remember that you will be responsible for the actions and behaviour of your visitors.

If you or your visitors cause any damage to the property or furniture we will ask you to pay the cost of repairs or to replace damaged items.

Televisions and licences

We provide a television set (TV) in most of our properties and pay for a TV licence.

If there is no TV or if you are in a shared property, you may want to buy or hire your own television. You must also have a TV licence. You can buy a licence from any post office and you can pay in installments. The Licensing Authority makes checks on homes without a licence and you could pay a large fine if you are caught. You may also need an internal TV aerial to improve the reception.

No pets, please

Because you are living with or around other people, we think it is fairer to everyone to have a "no pets" rule. Please do not keep any animal, bird or fish in your home.

If you are away from home

You are free to travel anywhere in the UK. However, you must keep to any reporting conditions required by the Home Office. If you are going to spend more than seven days away from your home, you must tell your housing officer in writing where you are going and when you will be back.

Changes in circumstances

If your home becomes unsuitable for your needs (for example, for health reasons or because your family size changes), please talk to your housing officer. You may be able to move somewhere else.



Maintenance and repairs

We will ensure that your home is safe and in reasonable condition before you move in. We will carry out any repairs that are that are needed to the building or its contents. We rely on you to report repairs to us as you notice them.

Reporting repairs

If you need any sort of repair carried out to your home or its contents:

- Please contact your housing officer or any member of staff on duty during office hours.
- You will be told how long the work should take.
- All repairs are given a priority and a target time.
- You must allow our staff to come into the premises at any time in an emergency or when it is necessary to check on your safety and well being.
- You must allow us or our contractors to enter the premises at any reasonable time to inspect or carry out repairs. We will normally give you at least 24 hours notice of a visit unless it is an emergency.

How to report repairs out of office hours

If an urgent or emergency repair is required outside of office hours you should call the emergency out of hours telephone number at the back of this guide **0845 7585425 or English churches number. This is for urgent or emergency repairs only.**

If a problem that is not urgent occurs in the evening or at the weekend, please wait until the office is open to contact us.

Office hours are set out in the insert at the back of this guide.

How long will your repair take?

This will depend on the policy of your landlord. This is explained at the back of this guide. Set out below is a general guide.

Emergency repairs

Work is carried out within 24 hours.

Making your home safe is the priority – it may take longer to complete the repair. Examples:

- your home is insecure
- no cold water
- burst pipes
- no heating or hot water (October to March)
- lavatory is blocked
- gas leak
- total loss of electric power
- removal of obscene / racist graffiti in residential / communal areas.

Urgent repairs

Work is completed within 7 days.

Examples: general plumbing and electrical repairs.

Non-urgent repairs

Work is completed within 3 months

Examples:

- Minor repairs to doors, windows, roof or leaking gutters
- Repairs to internal plasterwork
- Redecoration after other repairs have been carried out.



Health and safety

Fire, ambulance, and police: call 999 free

Gas emergency service: call 0800 111 999 free

RHA's emergency contact numbers are listed at the back of this guide/on page x. Call us for emergency repairs such as no heating in winter.

When to call 999

- **999** is the phone number for the emergency services: fire, ambulance and police. You can call this number free on any telephone.
- Call 999 if there is a fire or flood, serious accident, medical emergency or serious crime. They will take the details and tell you what to do next.
- Call 999 only for emergencies, such as a heart attack, a serious injury or if a person is unconscious, or for a serious crime. If a crime is not an emergency, call your local police station.
- When you need medical help other than in an emergency, see the 'Health' section of this guide.

Fire and fire prevention

Your home may have a fire extinguisher or a fire blanket and will have smoke detectors. If you have been given a fire safety notice, please read this so that you know what to do if a fire breaks out.

If there is a fire in your home do not put yourself in any danger. Do what you can to put the fire out safely using the fire extinguisher or the fire blanket.

If you cannot put the fire out, leave the building immediately, closing the doors and windows behind you. Do not go back into the building until it is safe to do so.

The fire doors in the house are there for your safety so please keep them shut. Also keep the stairs and hallway clear so that you can leave the house quickly if there is a fire.

To help prevent a fire:

- only use the heaters that we have provided
- do not cover the smoke detectors
- do not use charcoal burners anywhere indoors
- keeping watch over boiling pans
- do not smoke in bed.

Using gas safely

Please make sure you know how to use cookers and heaters and how to turn off the main gas supply if you need to.

If you smell gas, check to see if the gas has been left unlit or if a pilot light has gone out. If there is still a problem:

- turn off the gas at the main stopcock
- open doors and windows to get rid of the gas
- telephone the gas emergency service on **0800 111 999**
- put out any cigarettes and do not light a match, cigarette lighter or any other naked flame
- do not switch any electrical appliances including lights, either on or off.

Using electricity safely

Please make sure that you know how to use all electrical equipment and how to turn off the main electricity supply if you need to.

Do not:

- put any electrical appliance in water
- use electrical equipment in the bathroom (except for heaters provided by us)
- use broken plugs or blackened plugs .

If you have an electricity fault that might be dangerous turn off the mains electricity switch at the main fuse box and if you have no power supply telephone your supply provider.

Water

Please make sure you know how to turn off the water supply if you need to.

If you have a water leak or burst pipe, turn off the main water supply at the stopcock. Then call the emergency repair number.

Rubbish and pests

Your local council will collect rubbish. Your housing officer will tell you which day. Please leave rubbish to be collected in a black plastic rubbish sack provided.

If you discover any pests like rats, mice and cockroaches in your house, contact your housing officer or the Environmental Health department at your local council immediately.

Hygiene

Keeping your home clean will help keep you and the people around you safe from infection. Please make sure you know about food and kitchen hygiene and do not share toothbrushes, razors or other personal articles

Accidents

If you have any accidents in your home, no matter how trivial they may seem, please tell your housing officer as soon as possible.

Visitors

For your own security you must check the identity of all callers before you let them in.

Our staff, our contractors, representatives of services such as gas or electricity, and the local council all carry identity cards. If you are suspicious of any person, do not let them in and telephone the police or the organisation they represent.

Our responsibilities to you

We want to make sure that you are safe in your home. We will discuss health and safety matters with you.

We run a health and safety check in our properties at least once a month. Once a year we test the gas and electrical appliances in your home (but not any appliances you have bought yourself). These inspections are for your own safety so please make sure that someone is at home to let in the contractor.

Please contact your housing officer if you would like advice or more information on any of the above health and safety matters.



Security

Locks and keys

Your home is fitted with locks on the doors and some windows. Please make sure that you lock all doors and all windows when you leave your home and at night.

You will have been given a set of keys for your property. It is a good idea to keep a second set of keys. Speak to your housing officer.

If you lose your keys or get locked out of your house:

- Do not call the police or fire brigade or break the door.
- Instead, please tell your housing officer immediately.
- We may be able to provide you with a new set which you will have to pay for, or
- You may need to have your locks changed. You will also have to pay for this. **If out of office hours please phone the emergency contact number if you need advice about what to do.**

Insurance

Our insurance policy only covers our property and the contents we provide. It does not cover any of your own belongings. We recommend that you insure these against loss or damage. This will also cover you if you accidentally damage our property or somebody else's belongings. Your housing officer will be able to suggest suitable schemes.

3 Support services

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Your housing officer

You should already have met your housing officer. He/she should have told you how RHA operates and about your rights and responsibilities as a tenant. He/she housing officer will work with you to ensure that your support plan meets your needs as closely as possible

He/she will visit you in your home and will make appointments with you in advance. Please make sure that you keep any appointments you make and tell your housing officer if you are going to be away.

A second meeting will take place at your home a few days later. At this meeting, your housing officer will make sure you understand how to use any appliances and equipment in your home and will tell you about local services, such as schools and doctors. Please ask your housing officer about anything you do not understand.

Your housing officer will visit you at your home at least once every month. They will tell you at least three days in advance when this visit will take place.

We expect you to be polite and courteous to our staff and contractors. We do not expect them to put up with aggressive behaviour or bad language.

Support service

You will meet your housing officer again in the first few weeks to agree a support plan. Please think about what you want to achieve from your stay with us and what you need to make this happen. We can then discuss with you the best ways in which we can help and what your first actions might be.

You may have already talked about your support needs with us. These may include:

- immigration
- health
- education, training and employment
- using local shops, facilities and other services.

After this meeting, your housing officer will write up a support plan that records what you have discussed and what you have decided. You will get your own copy of this plan.

If you are seeking asylum and supported by NASS, the level of support we can provide depends on the funding we receive from NASS. This is likely to be limited, so your support plan may not cover every single area that you would like. Therefore, it is important that you think about the most important ways in which we can help you.

If you are a refugee, the support you receive is funded by Supporting People and paid for by your local authority. If your circumstances change please tell your housing officer as this payment may be affected.

Your housing officer is there to help you work out what you need to do, and may refer you to other agencies that specialise in particular areas. For instance:

If you need help with reading and writing English, you may decide that you should go to a literacy class. Your housing officer will help you find out about classes in your area. You will be responsible for going to class and keeping up with the work. When you meet your supported housing officer again, you will discuss how much your reading and writing has improved.

Future meetings

Your support plan can change in response to your changing needs. You will see your housing officer at least once a month but your support plan will be reviewed formally every six months.

Exit plan

When the time comes, your housing officer will discuss ending your support and will agree an exit plan with you. This will involve the withdrawal of services provided by us or others but may include putting in place arrangements with other agencies to continue support if needed in certain areas.



Immigration advice

What we will do to help

We recognise that your asylum application is very important to you. To give yourself the best chance of a successful decision, your claim needs to be handled properly.

Claiming asylum is a very complicated procedure. You will need help in filling in forms and help in presenting your case to the immigration authorities. Therefore, it is very important that you obtain legal advice as quickly as possible when you arrive in the UK. We will help you find a solicitor if you do not already have one. The solicitor will deal directly with the Home Office on your behalf and your housing officer will liaise with him/her.

We can give basic advice if you do not already have a solicitor and, when you get one, we will continue to take an interest in how your application is progressing. We will keep in contact with your solicitor if you need us to. However, we cannot take charge of the case or represent you in your case.

Your travel expenses can be claimed for interviews with immigration authorities, but not to visit your solicitor.

RHA staff can provide limited amounts of advice, information and assistance. For example:

You have recently received a letter from the Home Office stating that asylum has been refused. Today you receive a second letter setting out the grounds for refusing your claim. You do not know what to do. Your housing officer explains that you must seek urgent legal advice from your solicitor and discuss your case in detail with him or her as you only have 10 days to lodge an appeal should you have grounds to do so.

Other sources of assistance

A list of local solicitors and immigration advisers is at the back of this guide.

Footnote:

We have the approval of the Officer of the Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC) to provide basic immigration advice.



Money

What you can claim as an asylum seeker

If you are an asylum seeker receiving welfare benefits or help from social services or you will continue getting help this way until you get a decision on your asylum claim.

If you are being supported by NASS, you will receive a payment book that entitles you to collect money from your local Post Office every week. You must collect your money within the week of the due payment date or you will lose it.

The amount you receive will depend on your age and circumstances and is increased every year in line with inflation.

A company called Sodexho issues the payment book.

Sodexho helpline: 0845 8424444

If you have not received a decision on your asylum claim 6 months after you started receiving support from NASS, you are entitled to a one-off payment of £50. You must write to NASS to claim this. You can claim another payment every 6 months after that until a decision is made.

If you are expecting a baby you can claim a one-off payment of £300 per child. You can apply for this payment in the last month of your pregnancy or up to 2 weeks after the birth, providing that you have registered the birth with your local authority.

If your circumstances change, the money you receive may also change so please tell your housing officer.

NASS Vouchers Helpline: 0845 600 0914

This number is still used for sorting out money problems even though vouchers have been abolished.

Lines are open Monday to Thursday 9.00am – 4.45pm and Friday 9am – 4.30pm.

When calling this number you should have the following information ready:

- your NASS reference number
- your address
- the date you last cashed a payment.

What you can claim if you are allowed to stay

If you have been granted refugee status or have been given ELR, you can access the full range of welfare benefits available to all UK citizens. See the table below. If you have been granted refugee status or have been given ILR, you can claim backdated benefits from the time you registered as an asylum seeker with NASS. You have to claim these and must apply within 28 days of receiving the letter that grants you refugee status. Any money spent on your support as an asylum seeker will be deducted from the amount you receive.

National Insurance

When you apply for benefits you must apply for a National Insurance (NI) number at the same time. This means you must take evidence of your positive asylum decision with you. You will receive a temporary number that will allow your claim to be processed.

Most benefits are 'means tested', which means that only people with very little money receive them. Benefit rules are complicated and you should get advice when claiming or when your circumstances change. Your housing officer can tell you where to get advice.



Benefit	Means tested	Claim from
Income support – Money for basic living expenses OR Job seekers allowance if you are capable of work but have no job	Yes	Benefits Agency
	Yes	Job Centre Plus
Social Fund Loan or grant for furniture	Yes	Benefits Agency
Housing benefit to help pay rent.	Yes	Local authority
Council tax benefit to help pay council tax	Yes	Local authority
Child benefit if responsible for child under 16	No	Benefits Agency
Disability benefit	No, but disability assessed	Benefits Agency
Working families tax credit – if working 16hrs and have a child under 16 and less than £8,000	Yes	Ask your employer
Disabled persons tax credit	Yes	Ask your employer

Opening an account

You may want to manage your money more efficiently by having a bank account (for which you will need references and acceptable identification) or a post office account.

Where to go locally

There is a list of local post offices and other amenities inside the back cover of this pack.

Health

You have the same right to health care under the National Health Service (NHS) as any other UK resident. You can use the NHS from the moment you make an asylum application and using the NHS does not affect your asylum application.

Registering with a doctor

We strongly recommend that you register with a doctor as soon as possible. Local doctors, dentists and hospitals are listed at the back of this guide. You can choose to register with a woman doctor.

You should call in at a local medical practice to register with a General Practitioner (GP). If you cannot speak English, you may find it easier if you visit with somebody who does. You will also need to take proof that you are entitled to NHS services, such as a letter from the Home Office.

For an emergency appointment, you do not need to be registered. Just phone or visit as early as possible in the morning and ask to be seen that day.

If a doctor accepts you as a patient, you will be sent a medical card a few weeks later, which you should keep safe.

To see your GP once you have registered, you need to call or visit to make an appointment. If you will need an interpreter, you must say so at the time and say what language you need.

If you have any problems in registering with a doctor please speak to your housing officer.

Medical treatment

Your GP can provide the following types of medical treatment:

- help with physical and mental health
- referral to a hospital for specialised treatment
- free vaccinations for you and your children
- ante-natal care if you are pregnant
- a prescription that you take to a chemist who will give you medicine
- advice on birth control, free contraceptives and sexual health
- advice on services available if you are disabled.

If you have refugee or ELR status, you may be eligible for free prescriptions, dental care, eye tests and glasses. Ask your housing officer for more details.

If you are an asylum seeker, you can receive medicine and other services free by obtaining an HC2 exemption certificate. If you have any problems with this please tell your housing officer.

Your housing officer can help point you towards local health services. For example:

It can be difficult getting used to a new culture and language and you may have anxieties or feel depressed about your life or your family back home. You ask your housing officer what you can do. He/she explains that it can help to talk to a trained person and discusses different options with you. You decide to visit your GP and your housing officer refers you to a specialist agency for counselling.

Health advice and information

You can telephone NHS Direct on 0845 46 47 at any time, 24 hours a day.

Experienced nurses and advisors will give you confidential medical advice or information on health issues, and local health services. If your problem is more serious NHS Direct will call an ambulance on your behalf.

NHS Direct can provide confidential interpreters in many languages within a few minutes. You must state the language you would like to use or ask a friend or relative to make the call on your behalf.

Medical emergencies

If there is an emergency and there is a risk to life, call **999** and ask for an ambulance. You will be asked for your phone number and an address.

If there is no risk to life and you can travel to a hospital, you may need to go to the Accident and Emergency (A&E) department. It is always open and treatment is free. Do not go unless it is an emergency as A&E departments are very busy and there may be a long wait.

If it is not an emergency, but it is outside normal surgery hours you should call your GP who will advise you what to do.



Education, training and work

Child education

Education in the UK is free and compulsory for all children aged between 5 and 16. Girls and boys receive the same education.

Your children are entitled to the same education service as anyone else. Your children may be entitled to free school lunches and may receive some help with costs of school uniform and travel.

Schools are divided into **primary** (5-11) and **secondary** (11-18). Some schools may only accept girls or boys.

Education for **young people aged between 16 and 19** is free but is not compulsory. However, if you or your child want to continue their education, it is important that you discuss this with their school or education service. They may be able to go to the 'sixth form' of a secondary school, a separate 'sixth form college' or a college of further education.

Children younger than 5 can attend nursery school or receive other daytime child care services. You can find out about nearby nursery schools from your library or social services.

Nursery schools are very popular and you may have difficulty finding a free place for your child. However, there may be other services that can look after your child during the day. Your housing officer may be able to help you find local childcare services.

Finding a school

You can find a list of local primary and secondary schools inserted inside the back cover. To register your child in a school, you can telephone the school to see if they have places and make an appointment for a visit. You can also visit the school with your child and without an appointment. This may be easier if you do not speak English as the school may have someone who speaks your language. If you do not speak English you may want to bring with you somebody who does.

Schools may refuse to admit your child because they are full but they are not allowed to refuse to admit your child because of ethnic or national origins or because of language difficulties.

Religious groups or churches run some schools. To find out more about these, please ask your housing officer or local education department.

Helping your child at school

Keeping in touch with your child's school is important. Try to attend parents' evenings where you can discuss your child's progress. The school may offer extra help for your child – many children need extra help with learning English, support with homework, or activities after school.

Children sometimes have problems at school, including bullying. If your child is experiencing any difficulties, it is important that you discuss this with the teacher.

Education and training for adults

You may need special advice if you want to study English, learn new skills or find work. Ask your housing officer and look at the list of specialist organisations at end of this guide.

Higher education

This usually refers to university-level studies, for which you need certain minimum educational qualifications. You will have to pay for university and, as a refugee or asylum seeker, this may be very expensive. However, if you are a refugee, you may be entitled to a grant or loan.

Adult education

There are many courses available run by different places, such as adult education colleges, universities and community groups.

Vocational training

These are classes where you learn practical skills that lead to nationally recognised qualifications (NVQs). Popular subjects are accountancy, health and social care, computing and mechanics.

Using your skills

Qualifications gained in your home country may be recognised in the UK, but you will need to retrain or do a conversion course.

If you cannot speak English, we strongly recommend that you take lessons in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Local centres teaching ESOL and other basic skills are inserted inside the back cover. These places also often run vocational and skills courses, such as computing or interpreting, that will help you find a job.

Choose your course carefully as you may have to pay course fees. However, English lessons or basic skills or training courses are usually free of charge.

Paid and unpaid work

If you are an asylum seeker, you are not allowed to take paid work.

If you have refugee status or ELR, you have the right to work in the UK. You do not need to ask permission from the Home Office. You must go to your local Social Security office for a National Insurance number.

You can do voluntary (unpaid) work at any time without asking for permission from the Home Office. Your travel expenses may be paid. Voluntary work can be very useful in improving your English, learning new skills and preventing boredom.

If you have refugee status and are claiming unemployment benefits, please check with your benefits office to make sure that any voluntary work you do will not affect your claim.



Moving on

If you are living in temporary accommodation, at some stage you will be moving out.

If you are an asylum seeker and you are refused asylum the Home Office expects you to leave the UK and return to your home country. While this may not be possible immediately, you will not normally be allowed to continue living in RHA property unless special circumstances apply. You must speak to your housing officer to get advice about what to do next.

If you are supported by NASS and granted asylum, or, if you are already a refugee or have ELR and no longer need the support we offer then you will need to find your own permanent accommodation. You will need to talk to your housing officer at an early stage for information and to discuss your options. These may include:

- registering for housing with your local authority
- joining the waiting lists of housing associations if there are any
- getting advice from the local housing advice centre
- looking for accommodation rented by private landlords
- moving to another part of the country where housing may be easier to find
- making a first claim for welfare benefits – income support or job seekers' allowance.

If you are made an offer of alternative accommodation, it will be one offer only. If it is a reasonable offer you will be expected to accept it. If you refuse it you will be asked to leave your RHA accommodation.

If leaving the home provided by Refugee Housing will make you homeless, your housing officer will advise you where to apply for assistance as a homeless person.

The local homeless person's office will give you advice. It will only offer you temporary accommodation if the policy of your local authority considers you to be in priority need.



About the UK

The political system

The United Kingdom is a democracy. It has a government headed by the Prime Minister that is elected by its citizens and which is accountable to Parliament. Queen Elizabeth II is the head of state and is a figurehead with little political power. General elections are held every 4 to 5 years and every citizen has the right to vote. Asylum seekers and refugees are not entitled to vote.

Press, TV and radio are independent of the government.

Services and support

Many services – such as education, social services and housing – are provided by local government. These are also known as local authorities or local councils. Local councillors who are elected by citizens living in the area for which the council is responsible lead local government.

Voluntary agencies provide many services and practical help and advice. These include refugee community organisations. There are many different communities around the UK, particularly in London. However, new groups are also emerging in areas where many asylum seekers and refugees have been housed recently. The organisations are independent from the government. Many arrange cultural events for their communities and some provide practical help and advice.

Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB) provide advice on many different subjects and the Red Cross offers a family tracing service for refugees and asylum seekers.

Police and the law

The role of the police is to protect citizens and enforce law and order. If you experience crime or racial harassment, you should report this to the police. The police are independent from the government.

The UK has strict laws in many areas and what may be legal in your own country may be against the law here.

The following activities are against the law in the UK:

- Taking drugs: this includes soft drugs – such as khat or cannabis – and hard drugs, like heroin.
- Sex under the age of 16.
- Acts of violence: this includes violence against members of your own family and includes rape and female circumcision.
- Carrying a weapon, such as a knife or gun.
- Driving a car without a driving licence, road tax or insurance.

We will provide you with some advice or assistance when you move or refer you to a specialist resettlement worker. Ask your housing officer for more information.



Other information

Most large towns and cities will have places of worship for many different faiths and religions.

Sport and leisure facilities usually charge a fee but some may offer a reduced fee if you do not have much money.

Museums and galleries are normally free of charge and are a good way of spending your spare time. Towns and cities have libraries, which are free of charge and are an important source of information.

Street markets and shops in multi-ethnic areas are a good source of fresh food and are cheaper than supermarkets.

Street markets and charity shops are a good source of cheap clothing.

Useful organisations

Useful numbers (National)

National Asylum Support Service	Tel: 0845 6021739
Refugee Council	Tel: 020 7820 3000
Refugee Education and Training Advisory Service	Tel: 020 7426 5800
British Red Cross	Tel: 020 7235 5454
Immigration Advisory Service	Tel: 020 7378 9191
Drugline	Tel: 0800 776600
Careers Advice	Tel: 0800 269468
Shelterline	Tel: 0808 8004444

Community organisations

These are groups established to help and represent people of specific ethnic, religious or national backgrounds.

Libraries

As well as lending books, local libraries are good free sources of reference and other information.

Post offices

Post Offices are valuable for exchanging vouchers for cash or picking up any other benefits to which you may be entitled.

Leisure facilities

These are local services such as swimming pools and gyms and you may be able to use them for a reduced fee.

Local volunteering offices

These will tell you about local requirements for volunteers and the variety of work available.

Local authority information offices

These will be able to answer most of your questions about local services, such as transport and government offices.

Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB)

These are offices that can give you advice on most issues including benefits and immigration.

Contact details for **useful local organisations** can be found in the pocket inside the back cover of this guide.