

Claiming Asylum in the UK: The Individuals in Limbo

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The Individuals in Limbo— Who Are They, and What Have We Overlooked?

Asylum seeking is widely recognised to be a major policy issue in the UK. Much debate is focused on rising application numbers, illegal passage through small boats, and the socio-economic implications of refugee integration into society. However, comparatively less focus is put on the individuals in prolonged confusion waiting for their application and appeal outcomes, and on how and why the asylum system has failed them.

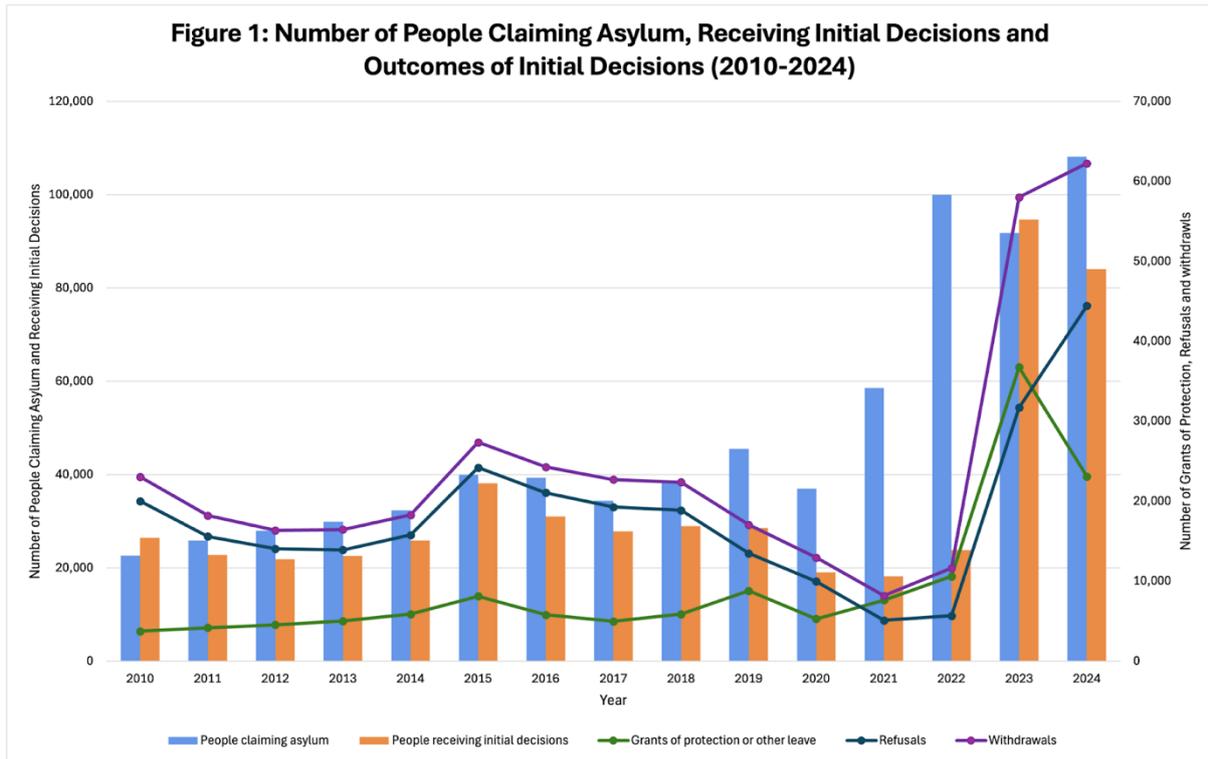
This article draws attention to the “individuals in limbo”, those stranded in confusion, helplessness and endless waiting for their application or appeals decisions. This report will start off by offering a statistical overview and relevant analysis on the number of people waiting for their initial and appeal decisions. Then this report will analyse the living conditions of these individuals in limbo and evaluate whether government provisions for them are adequate. Afterwards, further analysis is conducted on the mismatch between government investment, efficiency and provision quality to explain the increasing number of individuals stuck in limbo and their poor living conditions. Finally, this report will conclude by offering some policy recommendations.

How Many Individuals are in Limbo— A Statistical Overview

Asylum applications and initial decisions

Statistics showed that there has always been a mismatch between the number of people claiming asylum and the number of people receiving initial decisions. As shown in Figure 1, the Home Office has consistently processed fewer asylum claims than it receives. An overall increasing trend in the gap between the number of people claiming asylum and receiving initial decisions is observed, even peaking at 76,069 in 2022.

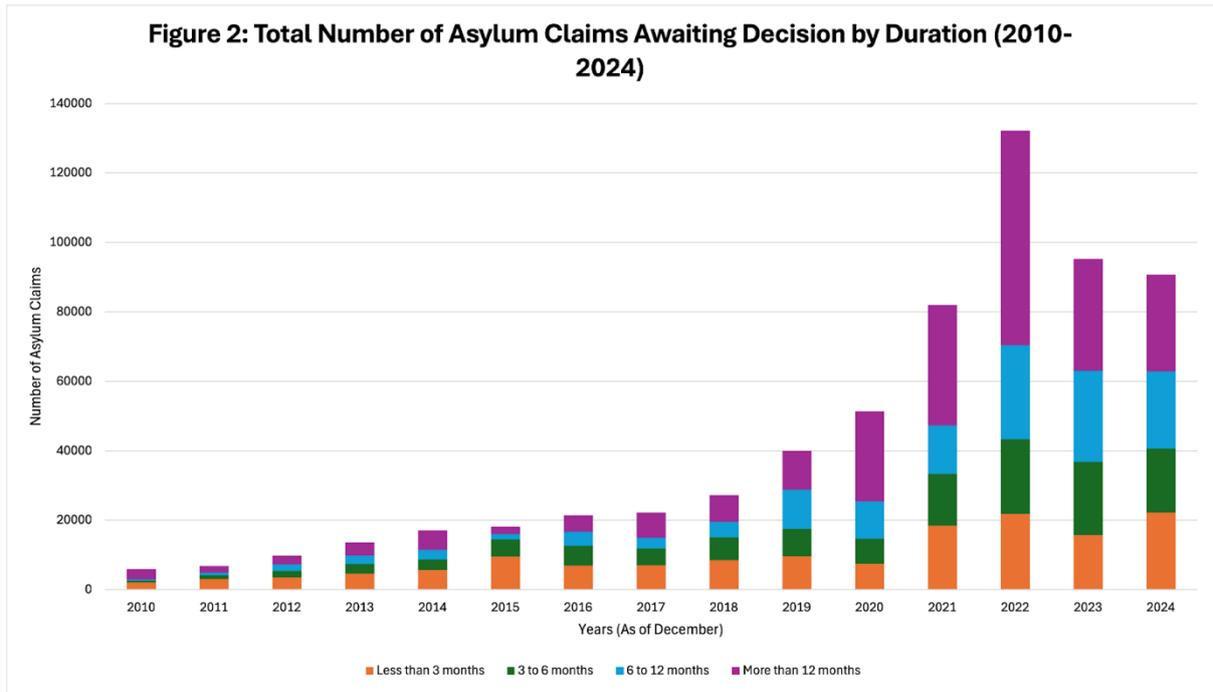
Although the gap between the number of people claiming asylum and receiving initial decisions has seen improvements as compared to the peak in 2022, asylum backlogs suggest that the number of pending applications as well as their waiting time have been on the rise. This suggests that government efficiency regarding application assessment and approval is low, and that there is an increasing number of asylum seekers stranded in limbo awaiting their decisions.



(Source: Asylum Summary Tables, Year Ending June 2025, 21 August 2025, Home Office Author’s Presentation)

Figure 2 breaks down the time needed for main applicants to receive the outcomes of their initial decisions from 2010 to 2024. In 2024, 55% of those awaiting initial decisions had to wait more than six months to receive their outcomes. Decline in the backlog also slowed considerably in 2024, even increasing in the third quarter before falling back in the last three months of the year (Cuibus, Walsh, and Sumption, 2025). This is largely due to the Illegal Migration Act 2023, which prevented anyone who arrived after March 2023 without valid entry clearance to be granted any right to remain. As a result, the Home Office stopped processing any asylum claims until after the 2024 general election. Unable to tackle the huge backlog, they are now seeing the highest number of new asylum applications (Home Affairs Committee, 2025). As of the year ending June 2025, 55% of main applicants must wait more than six months, and 27% of applicants must wait for more than a year (Home Office, 2025).

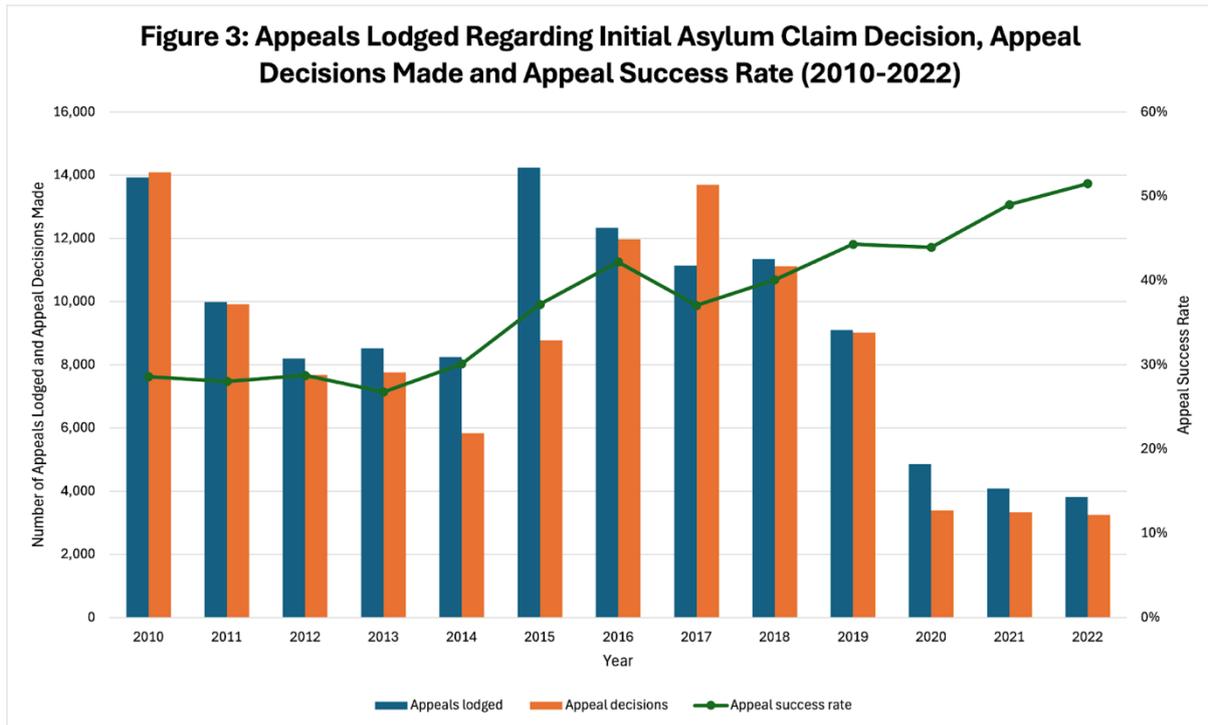
These trends cast doubt on the operational functionality and efficiency of the asylum system. Government inadequacy to process the applications generates increasing portions of individuals in limbo: individuals who have prolonged periods when they are unable to work or move freely, living in uncertainty and deprivation as they are forced to depend on government support and are at the same time limited by relevant policies.



(Source: Asylum Summary Tables, Year Ending June 2025, 21 August 2025, Home Office Author's Presentation)

Appeals to initial decisions

Examination of initial and latest grant rates of appeals further supports the claim that the administrative capacity of the government is low. The gap between latest and initial grant rates has narrowed due to less time for appeals and reviews to be conducted, as shown in the increasing disparity between appeals lodged and appeal decisions made from 2020 onwards (Home Office, 2025).



(Source: Asylum Summary Tables, Year Ending June 2025, 21 August 2025, Home Office Author’s Presentation)

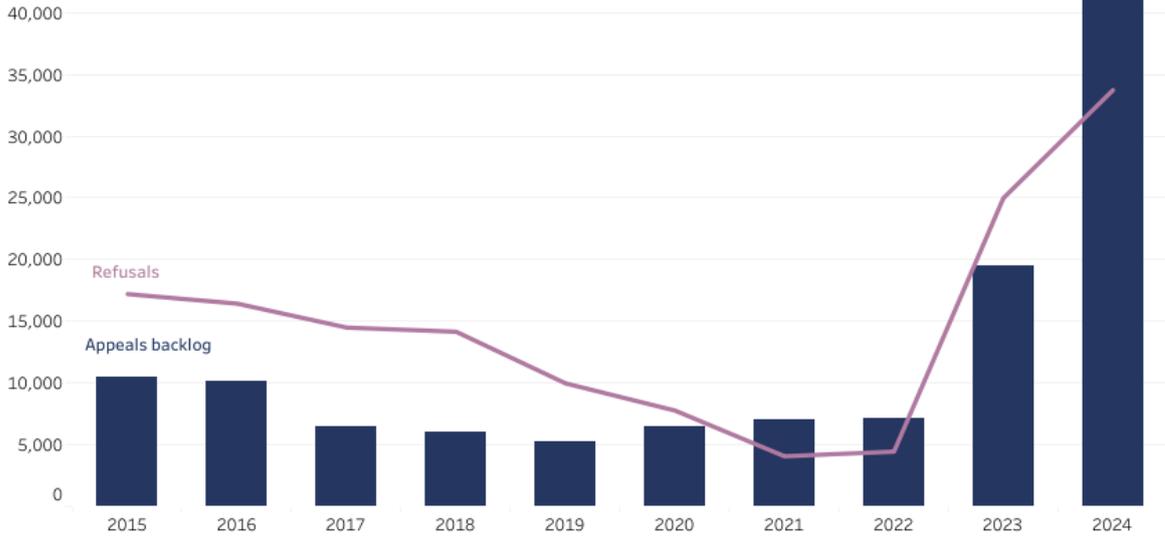
As the previous set of data overlooks the large number of appeals waiting to be addressed in the system, Figure 4 provides further details on the number of individuals stuck in the asylum backlogs, also documenting an increasing trend in the number of pending applications and refusals. The number of pending appeals at the First-tier asylum tribunal has risen sixfold in two years to 42,000 at the end of 2024, whereas the number of refusals rose sharply from 6,000 in 2022 to 44,000 in 2024 (Cuibus, Walsh, and Sumption, 2025). Despite government attempts to tackle the challenges by improving legal representation through increasing aid fees and recruiting more judges, the Migration Observatory predicts a growth in the appeals backlogs nonetheless and is skeptical of government capacity to process the increasing appeals (Cuibus, Walsh, and Sumption, 2025).

Hence, the appeals system fails to decrease the number of individuals stuck in limbo and rather exacerbates the situation. The significant drop of 20% in grant rate between 2023 and 2024 in Figure 1 aligns with the soar in initial refusals and appeals backlog between 2023 and 2024 in Figure 4. Increasing appeals backlogs suggest that a significant proportion of those who have received their initial decisions are still stuck in limbo, where instead of waiting for initial decisions to asylum claims, they wait for appeals decisions after initial refusal. Thus, not only is the current asylum system inefficient, it also generates and sustains a large portion of individuals in limbo either waiting for their initial decisions or appeal outcomes.

Figure 4: Number of Negative Initial Decisions on Asylum Applications and the Number of Open Asylum Cases Before First-Tier Tribunal (2015-2024)

The appeals backlog reached 42,000 at the end of 2024, after the number of refusals increased sharply

Number of negative initial decisions on asylum applications, and number of open asylum cases before a First-ti..



Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Home Office Immigration Statistics, Table Asy_D02, and Tribunal Statistics Quarterly, Table FIA_4.

Notes: Refusals include main applicants only. Appeals only include First-tier Tribunals and not higher courts.



(Source: Figure 3, The UK’s Asylum Backlog, 28 April 2025, Mihnea Cuibus, Peter William Walsh and Madeleine Sumption)

Living Conditions of Individuals in Limbo

Long waits for initial appeals decisions not only delay the humanitarian protection that asylum seekers are searching for. They intensify and prolong the deprivation and hardships experienced by asylum seekers when they are stuck in limbo. This section analyses current government support for asylum seekers, how individuals are harmed by the inadequate provisions being made, and implications for the functioning of the asylum system.

Government Provision for Asylum Seekers— Accommodation and Cash Support

The UK government provides support primarily in the form of accommodation. Accommodation is non-negotiable, individuals are randomly allocated to houses, flats, hostels or hotels

all around the UK. They have no choice over the type of and the location of the accommodation they reside in, nor do they have any control over the people that they would like to live with (Home Office, n.d.). The system, which is originally designed for short-term contingency use, has been normalised due to the growth in asylum and appeals backlogs, which caused the demand for accommodation to outstrip supply (Home Affairs Committee, 2025).

Quantitative research on mental health of asylum seekers living in hotels suggests that their mental health is detrimentally impacted by their living conditions. Although the term ‘hotel’ invokes connotations of luxury and enjoyment, individuals raised concerns over issues like lack of privacy, poor food quality and social isolations when living in hotels. They also speak of feeling frustrated and helpless in their inability to improve their living conditions (Spira et al. , 2025). In particular, research participants claimed that their basic needs were not met despite being in hotel accommodation. They mentioned how daily meals provided by hotels are inadequate, and claimed that they are often forced to live without essentials despite having budgeted their weekly allowance (Spira et al. , 2025). Data made available to The Guardian after a freedom of information request showed that 463 complaints were made about the meals provided in accommodations in 2023, complaints even including the lack of milk for children (Taylor, 2024). A survey conducted by the Refugee and Migrant Forum of East Sussex and London (RAMFEL) revealed that ‘malnutrition and weight loss [are] recurring themes’ among asylum seekers in accommodation. 34% of respondents also report not receiving the adjustments they need for their medical condition or disability (RAMFEL, 2025, pp.17-18).

Additionally, government cash support for asylum seekers is below subsistence standards (Ramachandran, 2024). Asylum seekers are fully dependent on the government for financial support as they are barred from work and excluded from most mainstream benefits (Ramachandran, 2024). Their weekly allowance is limited to £49.18 if they have to purchase their own meals, and £9.95 if they reside in catered accommodation, of which both amounts are way below government financial support for individuals with low-income (Home Office, n.d.). With the growing number in asylum backlogs, we can hypothesise that many individuals in limbo would have been surviving on asylum support for long periods of time, which increases their risk of falling into destitution. Apart from being materially deprived, some asylum seekers also claim that they felt vulnerable and meaningless due to their economic inactivity and lack of rights in a survey (Ramachandran, 2024).

While some might view the destitution experienced by asylum seekers as evidence of poor government policy and management, some argue that destitute conditions imposed on asylum seekers are deliberate designs to control them and to deter further asylum claims (Ramachandran, 2024; Dickson & Rosen, 2020). If they are indeed deliberate designs, then this article argues that not only do government policies fail to serve their purpose, they also severely harm the wellbeing of asylum seekers.

The increasing number of people claiming asylum and in the asylum backlogs highlight how asylum claims seem to be unaffected by destitution. In particular, the increasing size of the backlogs also emphasises strained capacity and organisational struggles experienced by the UK government. Designs of destitution can be regarded as neglect when significant numbers of asylum seekers report low levels of physical and mental wellbeing as a result of poor accommodation, inadequate allowance and economic inactivity (Ramachandran, 2024). Although the UK government has tried to improve the conditions of asylum seekers, such as by increasing their allowance in late 2025, improvements are minor and still fail to meet the needs of asylum seekers (Home Office, 2025).

Policy Recommendations

Shift Towards Alternative Accommodations

This article suggests a shift away from contingency hotels to dispersal housing or long-term accommodations in order to reduce financial burdens on the asylum system. Ideally, if the government is able to shift to alternative modes of accommodation and reduce spending, the money conserved can be re-allocated to address other issues in the system

Contingency accommodations are over-relied on by the government in recent years to house asylum seekers. The Home Affairs Committee noted how hotels are significantly more expensive than dispersal accommodation. The estimated average cost per person per night of accommodating asylum seekers is £23.25 in dispersal accommodation, as compared to £144.98 in contingency hotels. Additional costs are mostly due to services provided by hotels such as onsite catering and security (Home Affairs Committee, 2025). Consequently, spending on asylum support rose from £739 million in 2019/20 to £4.7 billion in 2023/24, of which £2.1 billion of the £4.7 billion was spent on hotels. Additionally, the Home Office predicts current contracts regarding contingency hotels to cost them £15.3 billion over the ten-year term if they were set up (Home Affairs Committee, 2025).

The shift to costly contingency accommodations is related to growing asylum claims and appeals backlogs, which led to increased pressures on accommodation. While this report acknowledges that the shift to dispersive alternatives is difficult given the large influx of asylum seekers, this report believes that it is necessary for the UK government to switch to cheaper modes of accommodation in order to alleviate the financial burdens on the asylum system. Change can be pragmatic, but it is necessary that the government takes action to cut these extra costs.

Improving the Capacity of the Asylum System

If the government invests the money into improving the capacity and efficiency of the asylum system, they can reduce the number of individuals in limbo and government spending on asylum seekers. Government spending on the asylum system is proportionate to the size of asylum and appeals backlogs. As asylum seekers are not allowed to work when their applications are pending, the UK government is expected to shoulder their costs of living. The more asylum seekers are stuck in the backlog, the heavier the financial burden on the government.

Heightened pressures on accommodation is related to increasing asylum and appeals backlogs. The government had to resort to contingency accommodation to house the large numbers of asylum seekers. Under the current system, investments are directed to the maintenance of the asylum system rather than to its improvement. The over-reliance on contingency accommodation highlights a vicious cycle where government inefficiencies create and sustain more individuals in limbo, then increasing the financial burdens on themselves. When the government is incapable of keeping up with the influx of asylum applications or appeals as a result of little improvement made towards the system, the cycle repeats itself. Hence, this article argues that the government needs to invest more money and resources into improving the capacity of the asylum system. While investment might lead to increased spending, this report believes that the additional spending will be balanced out by decreases in the number of individuals in limbo and a subsequent decrease in spending in the improved system.

Conclusion

This report shows how the UK asylum system is characterised by administrative inefficiencies that leads to an increasing number of individuals in limbo. This report has cited statistical evidence to prove that asylum and appeals backlogs remain high, with a prominent number of individuals having to wait for a long time before they receive relevant outcomes. This continuously creates more individuals in limbo and traps them in long waiting periods. The structural challenges such as unsatisfactory accommodation and insufficient financial support faced by asylum seekers are exacerbated by prolonged waiting periods, severely harming their physical and psychological wellbeing.

Increasing individuals being stuck in long-term limbo undermines individual wellbeing and the credibility of the asylum system. Ultimately, this article identifies a misalignment between intent, practice and policy outcomes. Attempts to improve the asylum system have not been translated into enhanced administrative productivity or living standards for asylum seekers. Additionally, whilst much focus is put on downsizing the backlogs, little focus is put on the living conditions of asylum seekers that are in the backlogs, which causes many to overlook the possible humanitarian concerns in the asylum support system.

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