



Residents' experience of supported accommodation at Kairos Housing

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Executive summary

Kairos, a Blackburn-based charity offering supported accommodation to refugees and asylum seekers, sought to understand how their residents' experienced their services. Twelve current and past residents shared their experience; three focus groups and a one-to-one interview were conducted. The following are the main findings:

General lived experience

- Residents understand there is a shortage of social housing in the UK.
- Residents believe it is inappropriate to ask them to live in hostels that also house people with complex behavioural, mental, and substance needs, as they do not have such challenges.
- Housing worries and precarity have a negative toll on residents' mental health.
- Residents are keen to play a fuller role in British society, for instance by working.
- Residents demonstrated skill and agency in overcoming challenges and taking advantage of opportunities presented to them.

Experience specific to Kairos Housing

- Residents feel seen, loved, and respected by Kairos staff, which gives them hope and self-worth.
- A sense of family has developed amongst current and past residents. They support each other in practical and emotional needs.
- Sharing life with other residents builds skill and confidence in language, and helps develop social problem-solving skills.
- Residents found practical support, such as advocacy, very helpful.
- The accommodation helps give residents autonomy and helps them feel safe.
- Residents would like more outdoor activities outside Blackburn town centre.

Literature review

Most refugees reach the host country meeting the diagnostic criteria for several psychological disorders, including trauma, anxiety, and depression (Mahmood et al., 2022). The UK asylum system often exacerbates poor mental well-being (Murphy & Vieten, 2022), because refugees feel that their narratives and experiences are denied as untrue (Chaffelson et al., 2023; Cortvriend, 2020), and they are expected to live on welfare provision that effectively marginalises them (James & Forrester-Jones, 2022). Refugees within this system often feel dehumanised and unable to plan for the future, which leads to further traumatisation (Jannesari et al., 2022) and loss of hope (Shapiro & Jørgensen, 2021).

The fact that refugees often struggle to maintain a helpful social network in their new country (Çetrez et al., 2021) further compounds distress; and, unsurprisingly, perceived discrimination as they go about their lives has a negative effect on well-being (Solberg et al., 2021). Refugees from collectivist cultures, for whom family is central, may experience additional stress if they have left families behind (Caruana & Rossi, 2022). Despite this, some refugees may improve their psychological well-being by supporting or giving service to others (S. Taylor et al., 2020).

Refugees who have brought themselves to the UK have significant skills and agency, but the asylum-seeking process denies them the opportunity to exercise this, and this extended period of aimlessness and inability to work leads to a loss of identity (Jannesari et al., 2022; Parker, 2021). A self-identity that one can contribute to society is important (Cortvriend, 2020), and refugees are keen to avoid relying on benefits (van Liempt & Miellet, 2021). It is incredibly hard to integrate when one is not allowed to work, and a very limited budget leads to further loss of identity and social support (Parker, 2021).

In essence, refugees' identity as individuals with skills, motivation, and potential is not recognised, and this misrecognition puts them in a position of social subordination, where they are barred from participating as equals in social life, whether because of structural issues or because they are not allowed the necessary resources (Fraser, 2000). This misrecognition and distortion can substantially damage how refugees see and value themselves (Taylor, 2023). This is particularly worrying for male refugees, who tend to be misrecognised as loners or criminals (Ryan & Tonkiss, 2023), and thus experience more obstacles to take part in life.

It appears that the onus for integration is on refugees, despite the barriers and limitations placed upon them (Phillimore, 2021). Therefore relations and support structures are key to facilitating refugee integration (Phillimore, 2021). This becomes key when asylum seekers obtain refugee status, and need to quickly find new accommodation. With regard to accommodation options, a safe space is very important for refugees, and impersonal and isolated environments cause poor psychological well-being and feelings of insecurity about their future (Jannesari et al., 2022). However, refugees and asylum seekers have been found to live in accommodation that is unfit for habitation, being subjected to intimidation when they complained (Cassidy, 2020). It is evident that there are various layers of precarity that refugees experience, including informal jobs, exclusion from the social safety net, and very limited bargaining power (Dimitriadis, 2023; Hobbs, 2021). Numerous UK charities have stepped in to fill this space. Refugees are thankful for the practical support that charities can offer. They build relationships with workers, and appreciate the helpful personal qualities of individual staff members (Chaffelson et al., 2023; Cortvriend, 2020).

Kairos Housing is one such charity, based in Blackburn, that offers supported accommodation to adult asylum seekers and refugees who are homeless or destitute. They provide asylum seeker residents with No Access to Public Funds (NRPF) with free, safe, and secure housing, a small weekly support payment, and practical and emotional support from staff. Refugee residents with recourse to public funds pay rent for their housing and support. The current research project aimed to understand the lived experience of Kairos residents, to enable Kairos Housing to replicate what they are doing well and potentially address gaps in their service.

Methodology

Kairos and The Open University (HREC ethics approval 4807) aimed to facilitate participation in this project, while being inclusive of the various languages, cultures, and confidence levels represented by residents. The advert, participant information sheet, and consent form were made available in English and Farsi. These were shared with current and past Kairos residents a number of weeks before the data were collected. Prior to and during the focus groups, it was made clear to participants that Kairos staff would not know 'who said what', and that participation was entirely optional. Participants were asked to identify a pseudonym they wanted to represent them.

It was thought that individual interviews could hinder flow of conversation and limit the input of residents with limited English. Furthermore, there was a concern that these might remind participants of Home Office interviews, which could potentially cause distress. Hence focus groups were run, ensuring that any participants who did not speak English had a resident-interpreter within their group. Three in-person focus groups were conducted, and another resident, who was unable to attend the groups, took part in an online individual interview. Throughout, the focus was on how Kairos Housing have helped residents, what Kairos does well, and what Kairos could do better.

We wanted participants to feel comfortable during the process. Thus food was provided prior to and during the focus groups, to help put participants at ease. The interviewer introduced herself before the start of each focus group. She shared that she is an academic with a background in psychology, a resident of Lancashire, an EU migrant to the UK, and someone who supports charities working with refugees and asylum seekers.

Twelve Kairos service users took part in this study. These included 3 past residents, and 9 who were currently living at Kairos. There were 10 males and 2 females. With regard to dependents, one woman had 2 children (high school age); and a couple had two children, one baby and one primary school aged child. One past resident has been joined by his wife and had a baby since leaving Kairos. In terms of country of origin, 6 came from Iran, 3 from Iraq, and 1 each from Yemen, Eritrea, and Ivory Coast. Ages ranged from 25 to 42. In relation to time in the UK, this ranged from 2 to 13 years. One participant had been at Kairos for 2 weeks. The rest were Kairos residents for from 1 month to 3 years.

Findings

Overarching themes were identified, namely housing, language and integration, agency, Kairos general support, and Kairos accommodation support. These are discussed below, using direct quotes from participants.

Housing

Housing was the main stressor that residents talked about. Residents acknowledged that lack of available housing was a systemic countrywide issue: "The housing sector has been completely decimated. It's been completely destroyed, even for English people ... I'm thinking, my goodness, these people are English in their own country. They have no homes. It's horrible" (Ali). Residents cannot get private accommodation, as "they need a guarantor ... and they haven't, no credit" (Harry). The link between poor housing and psychological well-being was mentioned a number of times. Samo said: "I have no nice place, you know this affects negatively on my life. If you if you come to my flat, if you look at the small kitchen, small bathroom, you're not happy ... you will be angry with yourself".

Residents worried about the **precarity of their housing situation**, before they came to Kairos. Shervan shared that this worsened mental health problems he already had: "Because I already have a mental health ... SERCO house ... for night I go to sleep there. For morning time I go out, because 2-3 times manager sees me, he says please don't come back here. Is no good. This one a big problem"; while Mustafa was aware that sofa-surfing could put him in a vulnerable situation "don't want to stop there, later on after 6-5 months they saying you need to pay me something, you need to give me that". Ali expanded on the point of housing precarity, reflecting on the psychological benefits of

stable housing: if “you don’t even have a proper address ... you have nothing”, as “without housing, you’re literally completely without a platform ... housing is where you sleep, housing is where you raise your family, housing is everything”.

Residents would like Kairos to develop further accommodation, but “they need the help from government authorities ... they need big money” (Samo). Furthermore, Kairos accommodation is not ideal for pregnant women or families with small children, according to Amir: “wife was pregnant, and she have 40 steps ... because with a family need a little bit bigger. A house”.

Refugees could find temporary accommodation at a hostel, but this was seen as a form of **misrecognition**, as residents observed that hostel users had behavioural and/or substance abuse needs which they [the residents] did not: “For example 1am 2am fighting, shouting, smoking ... 8 month nightmare” (Samo), and “a lot of people living there they are drug addicts. And that’s actually the people coming here [Kairos], this is not reason they are, you know, addicts or something” (Harry). Furthermore, it was argued that hostels do not cater for multicultural needs: “Nobody speak the language. You don’t understand the culture. The food is not halal” (Ali).

Language and integration

While residents did not talk about racism specifically, they shared that “because I cannot speak English very well. Sometimes some people they have no patience ... They never care... And actually is this very regular” (Harry). Within Kairos, they organise their own interpreting: “He’s not understanding, and then go to Shervan, come” (Mo). Though others struggle with making themselves understood: “unfortunately for him you know after I’m leaving here, they didn’t bring anyone [interpreter] ... I have a problem at that moment ... there is nobody can translate” (Shahu). Residents worried particularly about important appointments, such as medical appointments, because of the language barrier. Though **agency and group support** emerged where Ali “I rang the hospital myself and I’ve spoken to them because ... I’m more fluent in English than him ... we managed to get him an appointment within 2 hours ... I can’t go with you on taxi ... keep your phone close. Any problem give me a call back”. Jam expressed that he sees **learning English** as going hand-in-hand with acquiring problem-solving skills to live in the community: “It seems so easy to choose between English and this but honestly ... learning English also includes show you how to find the right English course”.

Residents discussed the link between language skills and successful **integration**. Ali reflected on how language is one aspect of integration. Together with housing and other lifeskills, it prevents difficulties further down the line: “Where do you think the person is going to begin? He go to council, they say, well ok, maybe come back tomorrow ... the guy is going like that [in circles]. And at the end of the day, he’s gonna go and rent some flat that is broken and then he’s complaining. You have no idea who much broken that person is gonna be forever. So within 5 years his English is not good enough. He’s completely like, you know, he doesn’t even want to learn English anymore. He’s either doing some very cheap job somewhere where they’re paying him cash money. He’s being exploited ... they’re not just hear to eat. No, you’re here to be looked after for you to learn”. Ali believes that this is something Kairos is doing very well, serving as a “**platform**” for residents to move on from. This is against a system that “encourages you to stay, sit down” (Jam), and perhaps develop poor mental well-being.

Agency

Despite significant challenges, such as having been away from their home country and family for many years, residents talked about **agency** and taking charge of their life. For instance Mustafa said that he was “trying [my] best as well to do what’s best for me, because I’ve been through a lot”, and Jam worked out for himself how to obtain a certificate of comparability for his qualifications. Residents with sufficient language skills and confidence sought to manage their own affairs: “they give me information. It is near here, 5 minutes like that. I go to register myself” (Yusuf). This helps residents in

their process of **integration**, as “they just don’t want to stay home and be on benefit or I don’t know whatever else they want to work they want to learn” (Jam). Jam shared that he is keen to “showing the route the path correct the way to asylum seekers, refugees ... sharing experiences. It happens I myself suffer from many things lack of information, how to integrate how to for example, to show the your level one... I am here I am ready to help people ... when you have a map actually in front of you know where to go”.

Kairos - general support

Residents are **navigating systems** that do not always cater for people from outside the UK, perhaps with different qualifications. Jam believes that his job applications are getting rejected because they go through recruitment consultants, who reject what looks a bit ‘different’. Kairos helped him: “I asked her if she can find contacts for to help me to find a job related to my background ... She tried because I saw myself her email, email. It was very nice email. She mentioned everything”. Translating for Shervan, Harry said: “There is no result from the Home Office, and no money, no places. They supported him. This is good for temporary accommodation. They told us you can stay here, up to find your new life ... for example for register GP ... translating some things they found some guy”. Residents described how Kairos workers have also driven them to certain appointments. Such as when Dinah (translated via Shahu and Harry) said: “help her to go to the GP, Job Centre, and other places, they help a lot”.

This offers not just **practical benefits**, such as **effective communication, but also confidence and esteem benefits**: “When you say to somebody go to college, I mean this is a headache. The person is new in England ... they’re going to go there and think, oh my God, where do I even start? But imagine [Kairos worker] walking with you to the college. She’s doing all the talking and you’re standing behind” (Ali). Yusuf expressed how the drop-in lunches help his confidence in terms of communicating in English: “We chatting with people who coming ... everybody can come and join us ... is nice ... because if you have chatting here, then outside it’ll be easy ... because now I don’t have the confidence about my English. If I speak here with people. So outside. Also, I think, I can speak with people”.

While discussing the practical help that Kairos offers, it was clear that residents felt **recognised** as ‘humans’ by Kairos staff, and this deepened their bond: “Manager is a very wonderful human being ... Emergency during the weekend ... her day off ... text her and say sorry ... stop saying sorry, it’s an emergency”(Ali). Residents indicated that they experienced love and respect from Kairos, where staff go out of their way to help them, helping residents feel more positive: “Someone supporting me, I come to again up and think positive” (Yusuf). Mustafa was told “if you feel that angry, you wanna talk to someone, just come down or send me a message or something” and Ali expressed how “When I was going through some of the most difficult time of my life ... they were giving me a call every single night ... and I’m thinking this is so humane”. This is particularly important for refugees who live in an inhumane system, leading a precarious existence that is full of physical and psychological uncertainty. Kairos gives **hope**, and Ali put it like this: “this is a miracle ... very unique ... it gives people hope and hope is everything in this immigration system”.

In terms of how Kairos is set up, residents appreciated the close relationship with ARC: “You can go visit ARC everything is free if you want ... they help Muslim people, Christian people, without a religion” (Samo). However their lives tend to revolve in a triangle between Kairos, college, and the town centre. Residents would like more outdoor activities “especially in summertime. And sometime in wintertime because the weather is so difficult” (Shervan). Previous activities were very successful because “we had a gathering with our, you know, the same countrymen for example. So that’s the reason we were happy. We have many things to talk about” (Maria). Jam fondly remembered “fairly simple projects of all raise beds and repairing bicycles. Carpentry” that he had been involved in outside Kairos, and Maria appreciated that the people who ran these small projects “taught her how to deal with flowers and plants. How to planting and also growing vegetables”.

Kairos - accommodation support

Simply having the accommodation at Kairos helps residents feel **safe**: “a safe place ... have a flat ... asylum seekers looking for safety” (Jam), and gave them **autonomy**, in a process where they are generally waiting for ‘others’ to make decisions about their lives: “If I want to sleep I go to sleep. Music, book” (Mustafa). There is only one single woman amongst approximately 10 residents, and Dinah said “Even I have not husband at the moment here. But I’m a single mum with a child, I’m never feeling you know, I’m living alone here. Somebody support me, as a woman”.

Residents all expressed deep appreciation for the quality of accommodation at Kairos, and the **independence** offered them: “The only thing they say don’t do drugs, don’t do alcohol, you know, don’t fight. Don’t start bringing women and stuff like that. But other than that, you are free” (Ali). Residents referred to **psychological safety** and recognition as someone who lives in Blackburn and wants to take part in society. For instance, if they want to apply to study, “I’ve got my housing contract ... if I get a letter from Kairos it should make it beautiful” (Ali).

Living in Kairos accommodation generally requires sharing a flat with another resident. This has its challenges, as “you’re not free to do what you want to do in your house, so you have to have respect. To find a solution” (Mustafa). Different cultures and languages make things harder: “I’m a Kurdish. He’s from Iran. Different foods, different culture, everything is different. I don’t understand Irani language. Somebody is no listening [so they signed to communicate]” (Shervan). However residents overcome this, developing **communication and social problem solving skills** as part of the process: “But if you’re patient and kind, you will learn. ... he didn’t even know how to boil the rice. I helped him and we did all of these things. And I learned a lot from him. ... cultural food ... he showed me through the video. I said OK, we’ll do it together” (Ali). Nevertheless, there are times when the tension is quite high, and possibly some volatility in the relationship develops: “He’s very dirty. He’s very fussy. I say this opposite is very dangerous ... start fighting, physical with each other, and say this is very dangerous things” (Shervan). Residents acknowledged that “at the end of the day, we’re all sitting on the same boat, and the boat is the house and we don’t have to rock the boat” (Ali).

The living arrangements at Kairos mean that residents develop meaningful relationships with residents in all the flats, which has important psychological benefits. Yusuf highlighted the value of talking to others, often in a similar situation, when he is stressed: “If you speak with people, you don’t have stress, and if I have something is worrying or something, I go to my neighbour. I say I want to talk”, and he likened this to being part of a **family**: “Family means do you think about each other. If you think about me for like a brother, it is like calling family. So if I have stress or if I have something, everybody care about me, that is becoming a family, right?” Harry also described the sense of family that develops: “You notice here we are happy we are some part of the Kairos, even I left and Shervan left here. He’s coming from Wigan, I’m coming from Preston, because we like it here and this feeling like our house like our family. All of this guy, maybe we I never see her, but she is like my family because she’s living at Kairos, in some building of Kairos ... I lived with the Shervan for 2 years. And we like brothers. We are not real brothers, but feeling like brothers with each other”. Refugees are often away from their biological families, and other residents and Kairos workers become a surrogate family in a time of challenge, particularly for those coming from family- and community-oriented cultures who are in the UK on their own.

Residents were asked how they thought their lives would be like without Kairos. Their responses were unanimously positive, such as “I don’t think they can do any things more” (Harry), “If not have Kairos, I am homeless” (Shervan), “Thanks God I have Kairos, because my friends they have no chance like me, have Kairos things and living in the hostel, and this so difficult living there” (Dinah), “I’ll be a homeless me” (Mustafa), and “Chaos” (Ali).

Discussion

Despite the focus group questions focussing solely on residents' experience with Kairos Housing, a key theme was their experience and perception of general housing issues in the UK. Residents expressed shock that "even English people" struggle to find social housing. They acknowledged that they are "foreigners", and did not indicate that their refugee status should give them priority. However they expressed their wish for good-quality and stable housing provision. Housing emerged as a key worry for participants, supporting other studies that indicated a link between stable housing and well-being (e.g. Cassidy, 2020).

Residents expressed distress about being misrecognised as people with behavioural, serious mental health, or substance problems, when they were directed to hostels for accommodation. In essence, because of their refugee status and deficiencies with housing provision, they are positioned lower down the social scale (Fraser, 2000). Residents expressed pride at living at Kairos, for instance sharing how they ensured their flat was always clean. This accommodation appeared to address precarity, giving them a fixed address they could use on official forms, enabling them to play a fuller part in British society. Through Kairos they are recognised as individuals with skill and potential, and the stability of a home and basic income facilitates a more active part in the community.

It is crucial that people feel they can contribute (Cortvriend, 2020). Residents emphasised their agency, indicating that they wanted to support peers to make their way in the UK, and speaking with pride about supporting other residents and resolving issues themselves (e.g. registering at college). It was clear that residents were keen to develop their language and other skills to enable them fulfil their identity as adults in the community. Living at Kairos gives them autonomy, supporting agency to engage with education or other community organisations. Hence residents are voluntarily contributing to the community, which in turn aids self-worth.

Residents had high praise for Kairos, both in terms of general and accommodation-specific issues. A key finding was the psychological benefits of residing at Kairos's supported accommodation. These included improved confidence speaking English because residents practised with each other, together with resources to conduct their lives and develop relationships because of easy access to interpreters in the form of other residents. This is a key outcome for Kairos, as research consistently indicates that social support predicts improved mental health (Acoba, 2024) and has an effect on resilience (Chang et al., 2023).

Challenges with sharing accommodation with new residents from other cultures emerged. These were opportunities for residents to develop social problem-solving skills, where they responded to everyday problems and resolved conflicts successfully, despite potential language or cultural barriers. These are key skills for people who want to play a fuller part in society.

Residents indicated a feeling of psychological safety, in that they felt recognised as individual human beings, valued, and loved. Unanimously, their words and faces indicated deep gratitude at how staff related to them and attended to their needs. This helped develop a sense of belonging and pride that they 'were at Kairos'. In relation, residents referred to each other as family or brothers, indicating the bond that has developed. Surprisingly, residents indicated a connection even with past residents, simply because they had Kairos in common. Being part of this family gives residents renewed hope after the difficulties of going through the asylum seeking process (Shapiro & Jørgensen, 2021). With Kairos's support, residents demonstrated radical hope, where they lead a meaningful existence by accessing the possibilities, however limited, available in the present (Kallio et al., 2021).

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