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Housing, the hyper-precarization of asylum seekers and the contested politics of welcome on Tyneside

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Abstract

This paper analyses the role of housing in shaping the contested politics of welcome in the North East of England. It argues that changes to state provision of asylum seeker housing and the introduction of new legislation to create a hostile internalised bordering regime have led to a hyper-precarization of asylum seekers, which has been contested through a range of political projects at the urban scale. On Tyneside, these projects coalesced around struggles for improvements to state-provided accommodation for asylum seekers. The analysis reveals that whilst asylum housing has become key to the articulation of the politics of welcome within cities outside of London, it is spatially and temporally differentiated. The differential political projects shaping ‘welcoming’ at the urban scale emerge from contestation between a range of actors. On Tyneside, this contested politics arises from two key shifts: a change in national and local government in 2010 and 2011, which catalysed an oppositional politics of welcome amongst regional politicians; and the emergence of a new civil society initiative on Tyneside, whose direct action destabilised the relatively sedimented existing political landscape of welcome in the region, making space for differentiated asylum seeker political subjectivities.

Keywords

asylum, welcome, precarity, austerity, contestation

1. Introduction

In the first issue of this journal, the editors suggested post-2008 as a framing for exploring contemporary housing crises (Vilenica et al., 2019). In this paper, I extend this

post-2008 framing to include the UK's austerity politics, which completed the privatisation of asylum seeker accommodation after 2012 (Darling, 2016). This *hyper-precarization* (Lewis et al., 2015) of asylum seekers has not been able to unfold unopposed. I argue that analysing a case study of struggles to improve asylum seeker housing on Tyneside in the North East of England offers insights into the dynamics of contention shaping different political projects of welcome operating in and through urban space. This study reveals that whilst asylum housing has become key to the articulation of the politics of welcome within cities outside of London, it is spatially and temporally differentiated. The differential political projects shaping 'welcoming' at the urban scale emerge from contestation between a range of actors. In particular, I maintain that this contested politics emerges from two key shifts: a change in national and local government in 2010 and 2011, which catalysed an *oppositional* politics of welcome amongst regional politicians; and the emergence of a new civil society initiative on Tyneside, whose direct action destabilised the relatively sedimented existing political landscape of welcome in the region and created possibilities for *transformative contention* (McAdam et al., 2004).

The case study explored in this paper is that of asylum seeker housing on Tyneside in the North East of England. Specifically, it focuses on the city of Newcastle-upon-Tyne and surrounding areas. The analysis emerges from ethnographic research, primarily participant observation, undertaken in the region in the period from April 2015 to September 2018 with a group of activists campaigning to improve asylum seeker housing in the city. This observation was triangulated by analysis of political and public debates from secondary sources, as well as unstructured interviewing and observations with local civil servants and politicians and the voluntary and community sector (VCS). I begin by placing the hyper-precarization of asylum seekers in the UK in the 'post-2008' context both nationally within the UK and then also specifically on Tyneside. Next, I summarise the framing literature on the politics of welcome. The paper then moves to explore the contested politics of welcome by focusing on three key themes: firstly, I illustrate how housing emerged as central to politics of welcome on Tyneside; secondly, I situate the politics of welcome during this period as *oppositional* to national government and particularly the policy of the hostile environment; finally, I look at the dynamics of contention within the politics of welcome locally after 2015 by focussing on the contribution of an organisation called the Migration and Asylum Justice Forum and responses to it from actors in the public and the VCS.

2. Hyper-Precarization and Accommodation for Asylum Seekers in the UK

Precairety has been associated with the rise of insecure and flexible labour market conditions in advanced capitalist economies (Standing, 2011; Ross, 2008). However, the term has come to be expanded in different ways, e.g. to encompass questions of housing (Ferreri et al., 2017; Ferreri and Dawson, 2018), as well as to explore how precarization might be differentiated, e.g. due to immigration status (Lewis et al., 2015). As working conditions have become increasingly punitive (Cassidy et al., 2019), so too we have seen a shift in access to stable housing options for these groups, particularly in large cities. As Ferreri et al. (2017) have argued, there is a need to incorporate housing into accounts of precarity. Hyper-

precarization would incorporate the impact that immigration status has upon housing precarity, as well as labour market conditions. In this section, I introduce the UK's asylum accommodation system both prior to and following the introduction of austerity politics. This is then followed by a description of the specific impacts of austerity on asylum accommodation.

2.1 Asylum Accommodation and Austerity Politics

Since 1999, asylum seekers in the UK without the funds to support themselves¹ have been forced into housing in a number of 'dispersal areas', predominantly in parts of large northern cities and post-industrial areas where low-cost housing is in ready supply (Phillips, 2006) on a 'no-choice' basis. The UK government recently abandoned its six-month target for the processing of asylum claims and the average time now spent waiting for an asylum claim to be decided is two years (Allison and Taylor, 2019). Temporariness is a supporting pillar to the logics of the asylum system, i.e. the placing of asylum seekers into housing supplied by the state and refusal to provide access to the labour market, higher education and state support. It suspends asylum seekers outside the frameworks and institutions of the state that support the lives of residents with status, yet in everyday life such an apartness cannot be enacted. Local residents, local authorities, the VCS in dispersal regions are all needed in order to fill the gaps in the support provided by the central government.

Austerity politics emerged from the global financial crisis (Hall, 2017) and they are ideologically intertwined (Hall, 2019). In the UK, austerity has shaped the hyper-precarization of asylum seekers in two key ways since 2010: firstly, by reducing the budgets of local authorities and secondly by completing the privatization of housing for asylum seekers. Residents of asylum seeker housing in the UK are not tenants of the properties in which they reside, although they do sign an agreement with the housing provider when they move in to a property. Instead, the legal framework for their housing relates to the contracts between the Home Office and housing suppliers, and the standard of housing is protected only by minimum standards, some of which have remained unchanged in law since 1935 (Wilson and Barton, 2018).

The first contracts for asylum seeker accommodation emerged from the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act and were renewed in 2005, but with reduced funding, which the Labour administration argued would save £37 million in 2004-5. This put increasing strain on the local authorities with the most asylum seekers, such as those in Glasgow. By 2010, relationships between the HO and some of the key local authorities providing asylum accommodation had become strained.

In 2010, when the coalition government came to power, they sought to introduce austerity measures across government departments. The October 2010 spending review fixed spending for government departments until 2014-15. For the Home Office, which had an annual budget of £10.2 bn, current spending was to be reduced by 23 per cent and capital

¹ These asylum seekers are generally in receipt of 'section 95' support, which refers to the section of the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act that specifies support for destitute asylum seekers.

spending by 49 per cent (HM Treasury, 2010). By 2010, the HO had 22 contracts (13 suppliers) to provide asylum accommodation, which were a mixture of local authorities, private providers and the third sector. In 2011-12, asylum accommodation cost the HO £150 million. In March 2012, the HO signed six new contracts (Commercial and Operating Managers Procuring Asylum Support - COMPASS) with three providers (two each): Serco (Scotland and N Ireland; N-W England), G4S (N-E England, Yorkshire & Humber; E Midlands and E of England), Clearsprings Group (Wales and S-W England; London and S-E England). The choice of two companies that had no experience in providing housing to vulnerable groups and were primarily experienced in security and defence was widely understood to be linked to the ongoing securitisation of borders and the lives of border-crossers (Tyler et al., 2014; Darling, 2016), which became even more pronounced within the everyday context after the introduction in 2014 and 2016 of legislation associated with the 'hostile environment' policy (Cassidy, 2019; Yuval-Davis et al., 2018; Yuval-Davis et al., 2019).

The COMPASS contracts sought to save £140 million over seven years. In 2012-13, the savings were just £8 million. As new contractors with no experience of this type of provision both G4S and Serco struggled to implement the contracts from the beginning (National Audit Office, 2014). This meant that meeting housing supply demands in a number of areas was only achieved through sub-contracting. For G4S, who had the contract for the North East, Yorkshire and the Humber, this meant using Jomast, the interim supplier (2010-2012), for housing asylum seekers in the North East in particular. As we shall see, this process of sub-contracting presented particular challenges to the local authority as they tried to enact a politics of welcome through improvements to asylum housing in the region.

Nonetheless, COMPASS contracts simplified the process for the Home Office. When asylum seekers made their initial claim for support, they were allocated to one of the six regions and the provider was responsible for transporting them to an 'initial accommodation' centre in that region temporarily whilst the Home Office determined their eligibility for support under section 95, after which time they were transferred to longer-term accommodation. 'Providers must propose a property to the Department within five days, and should normally complete the dispersal process within nine days' (National Audit Office, 2014, p. 10). Under the terms of the COMPASS contracts, providers were required to consider a range of social cohesion, housing and community factors alongside cost when proposing properties to be used for dispersal accommodation for asylum seekers. These factors include the availability and concentration of accommodation; the capacity of local health, education and other support services; and the level of risk of increased social tension if the number of asylum seekers increases within a given area.

Local authorities had the right to refuse accommodation in their area being used for asylum seekers, if they thought these issues had not been fully considered and if there were concerns relating to the cluster limit. However, local authorities only have 72 hours to consider a request (Home Affairs Committee, 2017) and in a meeting with Newcastle City Council in 2017, they indicated that the timeframe was insufficient for them to assess all the potential factors involved, e.g. local population, schooling, etc.

2.2 The Impacts of Austerity Politics on Housing for Asylum Seekers

The financial constraints of the 2012 contracts have led to even greater concentration of asylum seekers into the most deprived parts of dispersal areas, where accommodation is cheap and more readily available. The number of asylum seekers accommodated under section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 has risen steadily since 2012; yet, the number of local authorities which have agreed to participate in dispersal has not increased at the same rate. In September 2016, 121 authorities out of 453 (27 per cent) had asylum accommodation within their boundaries. According to the Immigration Minister, in November 2018 the total number of authorities who were willing to participate had risen to just 150 (33 per cent) out of which 129 were actively supporting dispersal.

Our region has something like 14% of national cases. We are about 9% to 10% of the national population, so there is clearly an inequity there. That is worsened by the fact that only seven of the 30 authorities in the region are receiving dispersal placements at the moment, which is probably around half the population of the region. That means that in some of our wards we are well in excess of the one in 200 recommendation. In fact, in Stoke-on-Trent, 10 wards are beyond one in 200. (Councillor Roger Lawrence, Chair of the West Midlands Strategic Migration Partnership cited in Home Affairs Committee, 2018).

Middlesbrough Council's Chief Executive reported that clustering was placing a strain on local schools (Home Affairs Committee, 2017, p. 18).

Several organisations have raised concerns about conditions in dispersal accommodation. Many of these are summarised in a report that was published by the Home Affairs Committee in 2017. The Committee describe how they 'have received evidence that people are being placed in accommodation that is unfit for habitation or which ends up in such a condition due to poor maintenance' (ibid, p. 26). The report further notes issues with vermin, asbestos, cleanliness, poor quality or unusable furnishings and facilities (ibid). The Committee also revealed failures to deal with complaints and that some asylum seekers were subject to abuse and/or intimidation when making complaints; they raised concerns about the efficacy of the inspection regime. Finally, there were also serious concerns about the lack of consideration given to the needs of individuals when allocating them accommodation and overcrowding. Whilst the COMPASS contracts² stipulated that individual circumstances

² The COMPASS contracts were initially set to run for five years (2012-2017), but just as they had done in the previous contract cycle, the Home Office did not have alternative arrangements in place by the end of the contracts and they were extended for two years until 1st September 2019, in spite of all the issues described above. On that date, the contracts were replaced by two new contracts with four providers. The new Asylum Accommodation and Support Services Contracts (AASC) cover just six regions, four of which will be supplied by two of the COMPASS contract-holders: Serco and Clearsprings. G4S lost their bid for the new contracts to Mears Group, a social housing maintenance contractor and provider of care accommodation (Home Office, 2019). However, Mears Group did take on much of the infrastructure and resourcing from G4S, including senior staff. Alongside the new AASC contracts, the Home Office also introduced a new Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility Assistance services (AIRE) contract, which was awarded nationally to Migrant Help. Rather than the 5-year contracts that had previously run, the AASC and AIRE contracts are for ten years at a cost of £4 billion (ibid).

must be taken into account when placing asylum seekers in accommodation, the evidence given to the committee suggested that this was frequently not the case.

3. The Politics of Welcome

One of the emergent responses to the (neo)nationalist turn in some Northern states has been political movements of ‘welcome’, such as Cities of Sanctuary (CoS). These politics of welcome have been the focus of academic research (Darling, 2010; Bagelman, 2016; Gill, 2018). Indeed, the politics of welcome operate not only at a sub-national level, i.e. in cities, but also transnationally, through movements such as *No Borders* (Nyers, 2010; Bauder, 2019). The underlying premise of the politics of welcome is that making someone feel welcome is about more than permitting entry; and much of the focus of these political projects have been about making new arrivals feel welcome and comfortable *in situ* (Gill, 2018; Meier 2018). Darling (2018) proposes that welcome brings together positive engagement with difference and fragility.

Whilst Gill (2018) has sought to distinguish between spontaneous, solidaristic welcome, e.g. that which emerged in response to the migration into Europe in 2015-16, and bureaucratic, institutionalised welcome, other commentators (Vuolteenaho and Lyytinen, 2018) have suggested that such a dualism masks the complexity of the politics of welcome in practice. As we shall see in the example explored in this paper, different political projects of welcome come into dialogue with one another, as well as more ambivalent (Meloni, 2019), cautious (Vuolteenaho and Lyytinen, 2018) and also unwelcoming positionalities in everyday life. The subsequent negotiation and contestation shapes an emergent politics of welcome in particular contexts. Indeed, Meloni (2019). in her research with young migrants in Canada argues for a need to understand the ambivalence in belonging, which arises from the inner tension between desires and constraints. The politics of welcome, therefore, demonstrate an interplay of desires, i.e. to welcome strangers, with constraints, which may be social, political and/or economic. As Squire and Bagelman (2012, p. 150) have argued in relation to recent urban sanctuary initiatives, not only are they heterogenous and context specific, but sanctuary itself is a ‘political site of contestation’.

Similarly, we need to recognise that individual migrants are differentially positioned in relation to politics of welcome; with some being more readily welcomed than others (Norum, 2018). For Darling (2013) moral urbanism is dependent on creating the perception of hospitality towards a ‘deserving few’. Yet these negotiations as they unfold in urban space are not solely about the well-trodden paths of creating ‘good’ or ‘deserving’ migrant subjects, they also shape normative ideas of migrant (de)politicality. So, for example, the City of Sanctuary movement in the UK, as analysed by Squire and Darling (2012) specifically sought to avoid lobbying and campaigning and focused upon transforming culture. Whilst the movement shaped sanctuary as a political struggle, it often situated that political struggle in specific spaces, e.g. the museum (ibid). Similarly, Bagelman (2013) situates this struggle in the ways in which some migrants might challenge the ‘politics of ease’ created by the VCS and local authorities as part of the dis-ease embedded in the infrastructures of forced waiting

for asylum seekers in the UK. For Bagelman (*ibid.*) this politics focuses not upon challenging or transforming national policy towards asylum seekers, but focuses instead on ‘easing’ some of the impacts of it at a local level. However, this focus on minor or quiet politics and practices (Askins, 2014; 2015; Squire and Darling, 2013) has also served to exclude ‘louder’ or more visible forms of migrant politicality. The struggle on Tyneside, as we shall see, centres also on making space for differentiated practices of political agency.

At the same time as some migrants may be ‘more welcome’ than others, so too the wider politics and political projects of welcome need to be understood as dynamic sets of processes and practices, which are continuously being negotiated; perhaps better understood as ‘welcoming’ (Darling, 2018). This negotiation is often framed by shifting bordering regimes (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019), based upon securitization discourses that seek to limit spaces in which illegalized migrants or those without established status (such as asylum seekers) are able to establish themselves. ‘[T]he in-between spaces of welcome are in constant danger of being overwhelmed by the forces of suppression’ (Sparke, 2018, p. 216). Thus, welcome is a dialogical construct related to the politics of unwelcome; localities are replete with spaces of both hospitality and hostility (Bagelman, 2018). Therefore, conceptualising welcoming as a process also involves developing an understanding that incorporates the ‘varying durations, demands and levels of commitment’ (Darling, 2018, p. 220).

Changes to the institutional infrastructures of welcome, such as the shifts in the provision of housing as the result of austerity politics described in this paper, are part of this process, and also have impacts on the resources needed by those seeking to enact welcoming on a local level. ‘Welcoming refugees necessitates certain aptitudes and resources, such as the ability to communicate with those being welcomed, the time to spend with them and, often, the interpersonal skills to interact appropriately with traumatised people’ (Gill, 2018, p. 93). In dispersal areas in the UK, these aptitudes and resources have often been situated within the VCS, as well as with local authorities, who provided housing, as well as other support. Many of the critics of the new housing providers that emerged after 2012 related specifically to their aptitudes and experience, or lack thereof, in welcoming asylum seekers and refugees. The ‘labour of welcoming’ (Pascucci, 2018, p. 238) is itself precarised in many cases. In Pascucci’s research this precarization relates to local staff within iNGOs, which contrasts with the more stable employment for senior, international workers, primarily from the Global North. However, in the North East of England, as we shall see, employment related to supporting asylum seekers and refugees can also often be precarised, serving to reduce opportunities but also willingness to engage with particular forms of political agency.

4. Housing and the Politics of Welcome on Tyneside

In this section of the paper, I explore asylum seeker housing and the politics of welcome during the COMPASS contract period on Tyneside in the North East of England. The conditions described in the report by the Home Affairs Committee were found in much of the housing there, where the contractor G4S supplied some of the housing and much of the

rest was provided through a sub-contractor Jomast.³ I argue that housing and, in particular, the provision of good quality accommodation for asylum seekers, became a central focus of the politics of welcome during this time. Housing is essential to the processes and practices of making the UK's dispersal areas 'home' within the political projects of welcome and reflects the ways in which in-and-exclusion are deeply embedded across home and city scales, as well as being linked to im/mobilities (Blunt and Sheringham, 2019). Such politics seek to re-shape the ways in which urban spaces are inhabited (MacFarlane, 2011) through shifting the materialities of domestic life for asylum seekers. The production of space through inhabitation (Lefebvre, 2003) does not solely take place as a result of top down processes or bottom up struggles (Dadusc et al., 2019) but also within the meso, where layers of governance collide with everyday practices and struggles. Unlike Dadusc et al. (2019), who explore squatting and accommodation beyond the state, the focus here is upon struggles within state-provided accommodation, which seek to transform this provision.

Political projects of welcome on Tyneside sought to improve not only material conditions but also to challenge the underpinning politics – austerity, neo-liberalisation and the privatisation of state services – that shaped these conditions. Key foci of welcome on Tyneside included: the condition and maintenance of the housing; forced room sharing amongst unrelated adults and overcrowding; the privatisation/re-nationalisation of asylum accommodation. The home-city geographies (Blunt and Sheringham, 2019) of welcome in the region encompassed national and local politicians, civil servants from local authorities, the VCS, and also local activist and campaigning groups, such as the Migration and Asylum Justice Forum (MAJF).

Asylum accommodation was a central site for the enactment of politics of welcome across dispersal areas, including Glasgow and Sheffield (Darling, 2010; Darling, 2018), however there were some contextual differences which meant that these politics were differentiated *in situ*. The differential capabilities of the local authorities to enact political projects of welcome were evident in their struggles to prevent adult asylum seekers from being forced to share bedrooms with unrelated strangers. Newcastle City Council tried to draw upon welcoming in other cities, specifically Sheffield (Rotherham, 2017), by introducing a policy that barred forced room sharing amongst unrelated adults within the local authority's area in 2017. Labour Party councillor Joyce McCarty, deputy leader of the Council and member responsible for housing at that time argued that sharing a bedroom with a stranger was unacceptable.

It can exacerbate mental and physical health problems and increase tensions between individuals and communities," she said. "We don't expect anyone else to live in this way and believe it is unfair to impose these requirements on asylum seekers who are sent to live in our city without any say in where they live. (cited in Perraudin, 2018).

³ A Teesside-based property development company that rose to national prominence in January 2016, when it was found to have painted the doors of all their asylum seeker accommodation in the North East with red paint. Tenants argued that the move had made their homes identifiable and the target of racist attacks (Mason et al., 2016).

As a local politician, McCarty argued that being at home must be based upon equity of inhabitation within the city with other residents. She pointed to the fact that asylum seekers are already not afforded a choice over where they live and argued that once they are in the city that they, as the local authority, consider this equity to also be important in sustaining ‘welcoming’ through alleviating potential tensions within communities.

The COMPASS contracts were ambiguous in the demands they made on providers in relation to liaising with local authorities. Section 2.4.1 stated that providers must, ‘[M]aintain effective on-going consultation and liaison arrangements with the Authority, relevant Regional Strategic Migration Partnerships and Local Authorities with regard to the location of accommodation in the Specified Region and the allocation of Service Users to that accommodation’ and that the accommodation they provided must ‘comply with the requirements of the Local Authorities’ including the ‘agreed capacity for the particular locality’ (section 4.2.1.(1h)). However, this provision really focussed primarily on the cluster limit and not the individual capacities of properties. Nonetheless, the contracts also stated that providers shall, ‘[R]egister accommodation of multiple occupation with the relevant Local Authority and before placing any Service User within the relevant accommodation certify to the Authority that the Local Authority has no objection to the accommodation being used for its intended purpose and that all necessary planning consents have been obtained’ ((section 4.2.1.(2a)). This section of the contract was operationalised by Sheffield City Council to enact its policy that banned room sharing for unrelated adults and prevented overcrowding through regulations for Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMOs). The change to Sheffield’s HMO standards is documented in a report to the Council from 2017.

To address the issue, a proposed revision to the standards is that all single persons sharing rooms have to agree to share in writing. In addition, the floor space standards for these rooms have been increased to double size of a single bedroom (Rotherham, 2017, p. 5).

However, the local authorities on Tyneside were unable to use the same approach and contributed to further unevenness in the politics of welcome emerging across cities. The housing in Sheffield is provided by the main contractor G4S and they agreed to comply with the new standards, but in the North East of England, although the same contractor – G4S – operated, much of the housing was provided by Jomast, as a sub-contractor. A key issue in Newcastle was that the local sub-contractor to G4S, Jomast, clearly chose not to adhere to the Council’s policy. The owner of the sub-contractor, Stuart Monk, refused to recognise the local authority’s role, stating ‘[The council] has no power - that’s the local authority going on a frolic of its own’ (cited in Johnson, 2018). However, he also critiqued the policy itself, ‘[P]lenty of people have to share accommodation. I shared a room with my brother for 30 years’ (Stuart Monk cited in Johnson, 2018).

On Tyneside, the Council’s approach to housing as part of a politics of welcome was not supported by a legal basis. Housing standards are governed nationally by the 2004 Housing Act. There are two sections of the 1985 Housing Act, which have remained unchanged since 1935, and are used to determine if a property is legally overcrowded: the room standard and the space standard.

There is overcrowding wherever there are so many people in a house that any two or more of those persons, being ten or more years old, and of opposite sexes, not being persons living together as husband and wife, have to sleep in the same room. [...] a room means any room normally used as either a bedroom or a living room. A kitchen can be considered to be a living room provided it is big enough to accommodate a bed (Wilson and Barton, 2018, p. 4).

The space standard then determines how many people can be accommodated in a property based on two tests – room number⁴ and room size⁵. These standards mean that as long as a room is larger than 10.2 square metres, then it can be used to house two unrelated asylum seekers or one adult asylum seeker and two related children under the age of ten. This practice was in widespread use on Tyneside by 2015. It was clear that it presented a significant barrier to political projects of welcome locally.

One asylum seeker, 28-year-old Jerome, said sharing a bedroom had left him with ‘no privacy’, and that sharing his space with another man he didn’t know and who didn’t speak his language caused him a large amount of stress (Bulman, 2018).

Every adult, no matter their circumstances, deserves to live with dignity. That means – at the minimum – having a bedroom of their own where they can rest and have their own space. [...] Jomast should listen to the council and listen to the people of Newcastle and end its deplorable reliance on forcing strangers to share bedrooms (Sam McGill, member of and spokesperson for the Migration and Asylum Justice Forum, cited in Bulman, 2018).

We reiterate that, whatever the vagaries of legislation, the overcrowding and forced co-habitation of unrelated adults in the north-east is an affront to their dignity and a threat to their mental and physical wellbeing. (Migration and Asylum Justice Forum, cited in Perraudin, 2018).

The VCS had also been pushing for changes to room-sharing through the RSMP meetings, which brought them together with local representatives of the Home Office. ‘This practice needs to stop immediately to allow people to live with dignity and start to recover from their experiences while feeling safe and secure’ (Maurice Wren, chief executive of the Refugee Council, cited in Perraudin, 2018). This approach to housing for asylum seekers reflects what Bagelman (2013) has called the ‘politics of ease’, which became the focus of those involved in sanctuary city initiatives in the UK. Such a politics seeks to ease the discomfort of the

⁴ one room = two persons
two rooms = three persons
three rooms = five persons
four rooms = seven and a half persons
five rooms or more = ten persons plus two for each room in excess of five rooms.

⁵ A child below the age of one does not count and a child between the age of one and ten counts as a half person. The room size is:
less than 50 square feet (4.6 square metres) = no-one
50 to less than 70 square feet (4.6 - 6.4 square metres) = half a person
70 to less than 90 square feet (6.5 - 8.3 square metres) = one person
90 to less than 110 square feet (8.4 -10.1 square metres) = one and a half persons
110 square feet or larger (10.2 square metres) = two persons.

periods of waiting when most asylum seekers are unable to work and many are housed in accommodation provided under the COMPASS contracts. However, as the example has shown, this politics of ease as part of an approach to welcoming was differentially constrained by the contractual arrangements between a national government department and individual contractors and sub-contractors. A post-2008 analytical framing, therefore, enables us to understand how austerity politics shaped regional inequalities in the state provision of accommodation for asylum seekers. When contracts were awarded to companies with no experience of such provision as part of cuts to the Home Office's budget, the dependence on sub-contractors constrained the desires of local political projects of welcoming. In the next section of the paper, I explore these tensions between national and local authorities and the emergence of an oppositional politics of welcome.

5. Asylum Accommodation and an Oppositional Politics of Welcome

In this section, I am going to explore the emergence of a politics of welcome in Newcastle, in particular, as part of an *oppositional politics*, which resulted from changes in national and local government following elections in 2010 and 2011. Whilst cities of sanctuary have been argued to be examples of 'governmental activism' (Verhoeven and Duyvendak, 2017), where authorities work with and mirror the activities of social movement organisations in opposing areas of policy, I argue that Newcastle City Council's engagement with a politics of welcome is better understood in terms of well-established oppositional party political processes and practices. Prior to 2011, the City Council's commitment to a politics of welcome was somewhat muted. Although they had been one of the first local authorities to agree to house asylum seekers after the announcement of the new dispersal system in 1999, support for a politics of welcome amongst local politicians at this time was much less regularly and clearly articulated than in the period since 2011. I argue that it is therefore important that we pay attention not only to the geographies but also the temporalities of political projects of welcome, i.e. why particular political projects emerge in certain places and certain times.

In 2000, concerns amongst local politicians, civil servants and the VCS emerged in the press (Kennedy and Armstrong, 2000) about the numbers of asylum seekers to be dispersed to the North East of England. When the numbers to be relocated to the region were subsequently reduced in 2004, one of the members of parliament for Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Jim Cousins (Labour), stated, 'I am pleased the number of asylum seekers being lodged in Newcastle is reducing and particularly pleased at the winding down of provision by private sector for profit organisations' (cited in Jacobs, 2004).

Newcastle-upon-Tyne was the third city in the UK to become a City of Sanctuary (CoS) in 2013 (after Sheffield in 2007 and Swansea in 2010). The emergence of cities of sanctuary has been (Darling, 2010) and continues to be the focus of research into urban responses to neo-nationalism, particularly in the global North, as groupings within large, cosmopolitan cities have sought to re-imagine urban spaces as open and welcoming in the face of growing national anti-immigration discourses and policies (Yuval-Davis et al, 2018; Canning, 2019).

The national and international context in which Newcastle became a CoS was very different to that which had framed its two predecessors. On top of the global financial crisis in 2008, the UK saw a change of national government in 2010 due to a process that had morphed the crisis from one of global financial markets to one of state over-spending on welfare, thus giving rise to austerity politics (Hall, 2019). The Coalition government of the centre-right Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats also adopted an anti-immigration agenda, not only in promises to ‘reduce net migration’, but through increasing the internal reach of the UK’s bordering regime through the ‘hostile environment’ (Yuval-Davis et al., 2018; Cassidy, 2018). These changes intersected with an increasingly punitive (Cassidy, forthcoming; Cassidy, 2019) asylum system that was designed not only to degrade those forced to use it to try to secure their status but also to maximise refusals of asylum claims (Canning, 2019).

Whilst many of the large northern cities that have been key sites of dispersal have predominantly been held by Labour Party majorities, unusually Newcastle City Council was led by the Liberal Democrats from 2004 until local elections in 2011 when the Labour Party gained control once more. This meant that after the elections of 2010 and 2011, local council leaders in Newcastle and members of parliament from the region were also in political opposition to the government in Westminster.⁶ These *oppositional politics* were evident in a speech made by the Member of Parliament (MP) for Middlesbrough, a city in North East England, in a debate in Westminster pertaining to asylum seeker housing in 2016:

[a]gain, the Tory Government punishes Labour councils and gives support to their Tory boroughs. [...] It is beneath the shires and City bankers to trouble themselves with such matters—leave it to the northerners, the Scots and the Welsh—because those in their cosy world do not want to be troubled (Andy McDonald, HC Deb, 2016: c608WH).

Within Newcastle City Council, key local politicians became vocal in their politics of welcome after the return to leadership of the council in 2011. It was the Council and this *oppositional politics* that became more influential in shaping the City of Sanctuary initiative and the associated political project of welcome.

Newcastle has always welcomed refugees fleeing war and violence. [...] As a city of sanctuary, we work with all our partners to ensure we remain a welcoming city. We will continue to do that’ (Joyce McCarty, cited in Wearmouth, 2015).

⁶ In 2007, when Sheffield became a CoS, there were 1147 asylum seekers in receipt of section 95 support living in the city, 2.4% of the national total of 45,643, compared to 2.6% or 1239 in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. In 2013, there were 361 asylum seekers living in Sheffield (according to the same measures), compared to 344 in Newcastle, 1.7% and 1.6% of the national total of 21,058 respectively. Finally, by the first quarter of 2019, there were 840 (1.8%) in Sheffield and 1151 (2.5%) in Newcastle. Of the ten local authorities with the highest numbers of asylum seekers at the end of the first quarter 2019, Newcastle ranked fifth. Of these ten local authorities, four were in the North West (Liverpool, Manchester, Bolton and Wigan), three were in the West Midlands (Birmingham, Sandwell and Stoke-on-Trent), and one from each of the North East, Wales and Scotland. At the end of December 2018, the North East had the highest number of asylum seekers relative to its population (1 supported asylum seeker for every 550 inhabitants), while the South-East had the lowest relative number (1 for every 14,670 inhabitants). Glasgow was the local authority with the most supported asylum seekers (1 for every 153 inhabitants), followed by Stockton-on-Tees (1/215) and Middlesbrough (1/216). 190 of the 392 local authorities listed (48%) contained no supported asylum seekers (Sturge, 2019).

Yet this politics of welcome also sought to extend beyond the city itself to calls for local residents to support refugees elsewhere and to differentially position the city in comparison to a national government focusing on creating a 'hostile environment' for migrants.

We are asking residents to contact the local refugee support teams or the North East Solidarity with Calais Migrants group to offer food or clothing for the people there. And the leader of the council is setting up a meeting next Saturday in the Civic Centre to bring people together to see what more we can do, at 11am. Do come along (Joyce McCarty, cited in Wearmouth, 2015).

For McCarty, being a CoS is not spatially restricted, but she situates Newcastle within Europe and the 'European crisis'.⁷ The city becomes connected to Europe through the crisis but also through its particular positioning as a CoS, suggesting not only a politics but also a *geopolitics* of welcome, in which the city is differentially placed in relation to other places. However, at times, the politics of welcome also focussed upon a post-migrant discourse, in which welcome meant providing the same standards of living and housing for asylum seekers as for other residents in the region. 'Providing safe and secure housing for everyone in Newcastle, including asylum seekers, is extremely important' (Jane Streather, Cabinet member for public health and housing (Labour Party) at Newcastle City Council, cited in Bulman, 2018).

In addition to positioning debates within their political projects of welcome, local and national politicians also used housing for asylum seekers to articulate their opposition to the austerity politics of the Coalition and later Conservative governments, as well as neo-liberal policies that had privatised state services. One local MP from the North East embedded the debate on asylum seeker housing in austerity by suggesting that it was part of the wider impacts of austerity on his local authority.

Of course, we want to carry on providing succour and support for our sisters and brothers, but the Government simply abuses our good nature. That support and sanctuary should come with a commitment to support the local services that have to respond. My town has been hammered by the lunacy of austerity. My local authority has suffered cut after cut, so that I am now questioning whether it can even begin to discharge the barest of statutory functions. (Andy McDonald, Member of Parliament for Middlesbrough (Labour Party) cited in HC Deb, 2016, col.608WH)

Local Labour MPs also engaged in critique of the underlying neo-liberal logics of the privatisation of asylum seeker housing in debates in Westminster.

The whole exercise has been turned into a profit-making, value-extracting one for the likes of Stuart Monk and his company Jomast to make millions of pounds of profit from. (Andy McDonald, HC Deb, 2016: col.607WH)

⁷ This quote also needs to be placed in the context of the referendum to leave the European Union, which was set to take place in June 2016. The deputy leader was clearly also seeking to situate the city firmly within Europe.

There is no doubt that there are huge profits to be made in the business, otherwise those landlords would not be in it. (Alex Cunningham, Member of Parliament for Stockton North (Labour Party), HC Deb, 2016: col.604WH)

Therefore, the politics of welcome does not extend to offering the same access to housing for asylum seekers as the wider population, focusing instead upon a political critique of the privatisation of the state. A just inhabitation of the city for asylum seekers remains constrained within state provision, which continues their dependency and offers none of the alternatives emerging from ‘corridors of solidarity’ that connect grassroots movements in differential political projects of welcoming (Dadusc et al, 2019).

What on earth are we doing as a country? Why do the Government think that the right thing to do in response to a humanitarian crisis is to create a structure that is all about making money—profits created by handing over taxpayers’ money to private companies? There is something wrong here (Andy McDonald, HC Deb, 2016: col.608WH).

This critique of neo-liberal policy-making was not limited to national politicians, but was evident locally, ‘We are just being very clear with the private sector that people who are fleeing war and torture won’t find themselves in a situation where they are being economically exploited’ (Nick Forbes, Labour politician and leader of Newcastle City Council after 2011, cited in Johnson, 2018). Yet, there was a divergence in the narrative within local oppositional politics, which opposed not only current government policy-making, but also that which had dominated in the decades prior to the new coalition government, when the Labour Party had also been in power nationally. ‘It should sadden us and fill us with grave concern that decades of government policy have forced very vulnerable people fleeing conflict to be solely reliant on minuscule amounts of state support’ (Nick Forbes, cited in Holland, 2019). Local politicians’ critique of national policy-making recognised the roots of privatisation in the Labour administration, which had introduced private contracts for the supply of asylum accommodation in 1999-2000.

The local authority used their oppositional political project of welcome to move beyond local policy-making and seek change nationally. They passed a housing motion, directly addressed to national government, that sought to prevent the overcrowding in mother and baby ‘hostel-style’ accommodation. The motion stated that the ‘City Council calls on the Government to provide the necessary resources and powers to do more by [...]: amending contracts to private housing providers for asylum seeker families so that no child should live in Housing of Multiple Occupation’ (Newcastle City Council, 2018a, p. 12). They resolved to write the Prime Minister, Chancellor of the Exchequer and Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to seek a Government response to the issues stated in their motion. In June 2018, they also travelled with representatives from other local authorities to put the case directly to the immigration minister in Westminster. However, they garnered no support from government ministers and accounts suggested that the immigration minister had been dismissive of their claims. This was exacerbated, seemingly, by some disagreement amongst the local authorities present as to which were the most pressing issues to be addressed in relation to asylum accommodation. Therefore, even where

political projects of welcome centred around housing and home, there was discord relating to how to ‘comfort’ (Meier, 2018) those in this accommodation. Whilst home is constituted at the intersection of domestic and political worlds (Dadusc et al., 2019), we also need to recognise that these political worlds are contested and uneven spatially and temporally.

6. Contested Politics of Welcome

In the previous section, I focused on the politics of welcome that developed after 2011 in Newcastle, as being shaped by opposition amongst local politicians to national government. Nonetheless, local politicians and the City Council were not the only actors that engaged in political projects of welcome on Tyneside. In this final section, I show how the City Council’s position was also transformed through local processes and practices of contestation. I argue, in particular, that the creation of a local civil society initiative – the Migration and Asylum Justice Forum – unsettled the ‘quiet politics’ (Askins, 2014; 2015) of collaboration, which had developed between the Council and organisations within the VCS and pushed for a much more radical rethinking of welcome that would hold local authorities accountable to the very asylum seekers they claimed to be welcoming. The Forum was not only ‘loud’ but was run through a prefigurative politics (Ince, 2012) that included asylum seekers and refugees and centred not only their voices but offered them space and support from activists to drive forward campaigns that mattered to them. The Forum offered space for differential political agency, i.e. whilst they engaged in ‘loud’ activism and protest, members were also able to support these campaigns in a range of different ways.

Organisations in the VCS supporting refugees, asylum seekers and migrants in the city and wider region predominantly focused upon service provision and advice, with some advocacy. According to Tyler et al. (2014, p. 5), this situation had been of concern to migrant and asylum support groups during their research in 2010-12, when economic survival began to dominate and prevented what they call ‘oppositional forms of practice’. Rising unemployment in the region and concerns about the impacts of the 2008 crisis and subsequent austerity on their staff and income had, consequently, come to play a much greater role in shaping the politics of welcome locally.

Most of these groups on Tyneside were set up in the 1990s when asylum seekers first began to be dispersed to the region. Whilst there were some employees who were from the refugee community, the sector – particularly senior positions within the organisations – were dominated by white, British-born workers, many of whom had worked in the field for decades, often moving between senior roles. There were notable exceptions, such as a black women’s organisation, but by 2015 some members of the asylum-seeking community had grown suspicious of key figures from the support organisations and frustrated by their lack of action and support in resolving housing issues.

In part, this inaction emerged from a lack of funding that had led certain VCS organisations into contracts with the Home Office or housing providers (Tyler et al., 2014), which often mandated reporting of changes in circumstances for individual asylum seekers and led to rumours amongst asylum seekers of collusion between parts of the VCS and the

Home Office. In Newcastle, this was exacerbated as VCS organisations worked together under the umbrella of the citywide group (Hirschler, 2015), which at that time was being chaired by the City of Sanctuary initiative. This meant that over time, the political project of welcome associated with the local authority and also the ‘politics of ease’ that dominated welcoming in the context of the VCS had become deeply rooted and intertwined, yet increasingly ‘quiet’ and distant from the asylum seekers in the region.

It was in the context of this shift in the positionality of the VCS that the Migration and Asylum Justice Forum emerged in April 2015. The Forum was formed when a group of activists put together a film screening amid concerns about the impacts of the UK’s hostile environment policies, primarily – at that time – the 2014 Immigration Act. The MAJF initially sought to challenge the impacts of this particular legislation and to raise awareness of it within the city. The ‘loud politics’ of protest and activism that emerged from the Forum was at odds with the approach developed by the VCS. At a meeting of VCS organisations in Newcastle and Gateshead working with migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in 2017, when asked about how they would feel about having a local campaigner on asylum issues based in the North East, the CEO of a local migrant and asylum NGO said that she would ‘welcome a quiet presence’.

Many of the protests organised by the MAJF were not supported by the VCS; yet, the MAJF were initially invited to join the citywide group. However, in a vote in 2016, members of the Forum decided against such a collaboration as asylum seekers within the MAJF were concerned about the sharing of any information on their personal experiences with the Home Office. It was clear that the ‘quiet politics’ and ‘politics of ease’ (Bagelman, 2013) that had come to dominate welcoming in the city and wider region was exclusionary, but also constrained the development of differential asylum seeker subjectivities. For example, a local forum for refugee-led organisations speaks of developing ‘a collective voice’, i.e. singular, and focuses upon ‘influencing, empowering and supporting’ in relation to policy and practice communities. This quiet politics of ease was clearly unsettled by the activities of the MAJF.

The work of the MAJF was emergent and moved from the generic, i.e. opposition to the hostile environment, to the specific, i.e. improving living conditions for some of the city’s most precarised populations. The Forum’s bi-weekly meetings soon became dominated by asylum seekers looking for help with their housing. They spoke of poor conditions, unresponsive providers, racist abuse from staff and arbitrary moves and disruption as well as threats to report them to the Home Office if they continued to pursue their complaints. The city’s VCS was able to provide some support, but a key figure in one local organisation admitted that they heard housing complaints on a regular basis but struggled to find someone to signpost service users to for help and support. As well as asylum seekers, the Forum’s membership also included members drawn from the local community from a range of different political and social positionings, however a number did belong to a national anti-racist, anti-imperialist organisation.

The MAJF's political project of welcome was loud; including attempts to make visible the issues facing asylum seekers and other migrants in the city through a range of street protests from 2015 to 2019. Protests were not inclusive of all members of the Forum and some asylum seekers, particularly women, sometimes felt unsafe about the counter-protestors that MAJF's actions drew from the far right, specifically the English Defence League (EDL).⁸ The MAJF's street protests took two forms. First, they targeted Jomast's offices in Middlesbrough and then Newcastle with more traditional protests.⁹ Second, they undertook street protests in more central locations in Newcastle to raise awareness amongst local residents about asylum seeker housing in the city. The objectives of the protests shifted as the COMPASS contracts drew to a close and the Home Office prepared and tendered for the new Accommodation and Support Services Contracts (AASC) and Eligibility Assistance services (AIRE) contracts.

Figure 1

Campaign Leaflet for MAJF
from March 2018.
Source: Author

Decent housing for asylum seekers! Decent housing for all!



Monday 5 March
JOMAST OFFICE MIDDLESBROUGH
2 Queens Square TS2 1AA 11.30am

The Home Office has contracted out the provision of housing for asylum seekers to the notorious G4S who have subcontracted private company JOMAST in the North East. JOMAST are making a fortune whilst housing people in run down, overcrowded accommodation. Often unrelated same sex adults are expected to share bedrooms and JOMAST cram multiple families into flats and hostels, leaving families struggling to share kitchens and bathrooms with no space for the children to play.

Newcastle City Council passed a policy against forced room sharing in March 2017 but when they issued environmental health notices against over-crowding, G4S and JOMAST refuse to comply and the issue will now go to a first-tier property tribunal. If the council win this could help to end bedroom sharing across the region

JOMAST: Hear us say!
No forced bedroom sharing! One room one person!
No forced house sharing! One house one family!



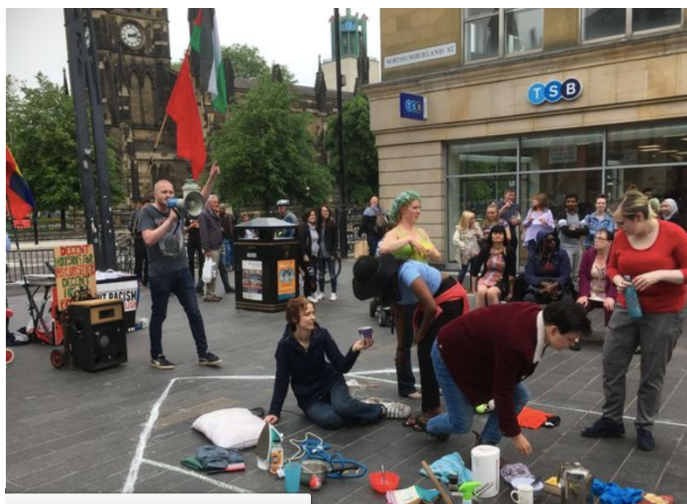

⁸ The English Defence League occasionally organises far-right demonstrations in Newcastle and these are often countered by a group called Newcastle Unites, which was founded in May 2013 to challenge racism, fascism and Islamophobia and celebrate multiculturalism. In 2016, the MAJF organised a march and protest against the hostile environment and the UK government's recent anti-immigration legislation, which the EDL held a counter-demonstration to. Rather than join the original march and demonstration organised by MAJF, Newcastle Unites organised a counter-counter-demonstration, which caused some confusion at the time with the MAJF's message being lost in the ensuing press coverage (Graham and Eden, 2016).

⁹ These protests often involved marching from a designated point with banners and placards and then positioning themselves outside of Jomast's offices chanting and singing and handing out leaflets to members of the public. They also often entered the building to present letters of demands for improvements to accommodation, which had been compiled with occupants of Jomast's housing.

Figure 1 provides an example of how the MAJF combined public awareness raising with more specific demands. The leaflet explains the contracting and subcontracting system from the Home Office and highlights overcrowding and unsafe conditions for children and families. It also making demands, which do not specifically reference asylum seekers. Their approach contrasts sharply with the local authority’s narrative, which focused on the generic principle of welcome, rather than specific details of the material barriers asylum seekers might face in feeling at home in the city.

Figure 2

Street protest organised by the MAJF in May 2018.
Source: Author



In May 2018, the MAJF undertook a street protest in a prominent location in the centre of Newcastle where they drew a house on the street that met the room standard and performed sleeping, cooking and washing in the tiny space (Graham, 2018). Whilst the majority of protests involved marching, chanting, placards and banners, creative performance did begin to become more prominent and also introduced collaborations with other groups. Stuart Monk, head of Jomast development company subcontracted to provide housing for asylum seekers, sought to discredit the activities of the MAJF by describing them as a ‘bunch of communists’, whilst depicting his firm as ‘a commercial contractor doing a job’ (cited in Johnson, 2018). There is a clear appeal to normative assumptions of liberal democracy, where business plays a key, central role in such a society, unlike the protestors.

The MAJF also sought to disrupt the existing channels for addressing housing issues between the VCS, local authorities, Home Office and providers by supporting asylum seekers to press their cases for improvements. Between May 2017 and August 2019, the MAJF submitted more than 30 complaints to providers G4S and Jomast. In February 2018, the MAJF put together a dossier of the cases they had investigated and complained about for Asylum Matters.¹⁰ This was subsequently submitted to the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI), and went into the evidence used for a report published in November 2018 (Bolt, 2018). The dossier was also used to draw attention from the local media to one of the most poorly maintained and overcrowded properties in Newcastle – a mother and baby unit, which spread over three residential houses (Seddon, 2018).

¹⁰ A small national NGO campaigning and advocating for refugee and asylum seekers’ rights.

The MAJF developed a process for these complaints¹¹ that stretched across the provider and their subcontractor and sought to gain a swift response.

We always phone up compass [sic] service centre then follow up with an email to [service centre email address] and copy in [named Jomast local manager]. If that doesn't get answers or swift action we email [COMPASS complaints address] (personal email communication with MAJF volunteer, February, 2018).

Senior managers from G4S and Jomast did meet eight of the occupants of their accommodation in a face-to-face meeting in Newcastle in May 2018. The meeting was organised by the MAJF.¹² Whilst this approach was not orientated to changing policy, it led to immediate improvements in housing conditions, particularly in properties supplied by Jomast.

In addition to raising public awareness of housing issues and putting pressure on housing providers, the MAJF also sought to contest the politics of welcome being led by the City Council. In particular, the Forum was concerned that the Council was not doing enough to implement the policies associated with their political project of welcome and attended Council meetings to put questions to councillors on a number of occasions. For example, the MAJF visited an Newcastle City Council meeting in June 2018, to ask how the Council planned to implement its policy to prevent the forced room sharing of unrelated adults in asylum accommodation. This dynamic of the MAJF questioning and pushing the Council regarding policy decisions was an important part of the contested politics of welcome.

The Lord Mayor invited Sam Cordery and colleagues (Migration and Justice) to put a question to Council around room size requirements, the issue of Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMO) licences to properties where forced bedroom sharing of unrelated adults was taking place and whether or not the Council would apply a new condition to HMO licenses through the new powers afforded them. Councillor McCarty (Deputy Leader and Housing) responded that the Council had been proactive to stop forced bedroom sharing. Draft legislation would enable the Council to set minimum bedroom standards which would apply to all new landlords seeking licences. The new HMO regulations would come into effect on 1 October 2018 and the Council would adopt the new standards. However, the Council would need to test what it was trying to do legally to negate any further legal costs. Council and colleagues were assured that asylum

¹¹ The MAJF described most of the complaints as being related to 'bedbugs, leaks, black mould, broken boilers, broken washing machines, broken heating, no hot water, broken floorboards, holes in mattresses, faulty front doors that lock people in, missing child safety gates, overcrowding concerns, concerns for child welfare, broken showers, forced moves and bedroom sharing'. Most have been in Jomast accommodation but two were in directly managed G4S accommodation. 'Many times I have had to call multiple times about the same problems. The boiler at the mother and baby hostel was only just replaced in November despite reporting it consistently from April by ourselves and from Surestart (who are making complaints on a weekly basis too)' (personal email communication with MAJF volunteer).

¹² G4S requested that subcontractor Jomast attend the meeting and both owner Stuart Monk and manager of the company's asylum housing, Colin Mason, were there. Eight asylum seekers sat across from the providers and detailed the issues with their housing. Stuart Monk refused to speak or respond directly to any of the occupants. He sat with his back to the group and whispered comments to Colin Mason, who then spoke on his behalf.

seekers and refugees continued to be welcome in our city and that the Council would continue to lobby government for better outcomes (Newcastle City Council, 2018b).

When Newcastle City Council introduced its ‘no room sharing’ policy and it became evident that it would be difficult to enforce, the MAJF continued to question the Council on this issue in public meetings. In the minutes from one such meeting in 2017, the response from one of the councillors records that the local authority would continue to pursue improved housing within existing infrastructures in which they also felt *at ease*.

Councillor Streather advised that the Council shared the concerns and would work with the Forum on standards going forward. Regulations were not sufficiently flexible to consider space issues, and this could have a detrimental impact on families. The Council was already involved with the North East Migration Partnership and the development of asylum contracts which included consideration of how children were accommodated. The Council was committed to bring about improvements (Newcastle City Council, 2017, p. 3).

The politics of ease within which welcoming was embedded in the North East needs to be understood not solely as emanating from ‘easing’ the discomforts of seeking asylum, but has also come to be shaped by a desire for a sense of ease for those within local authorities and much of the VCS. Approaches to addressing issues in asylum housing in the North East were the focus of *contained* contention (McAdam et al., 2004), working within existing practices, processes and infrastructures, such as the North East Migration Partnership, rather than seeking to transform them. This desire closed down space for actors and actions that did not fit within the existing political project of welcome, which although not completely stable did sediment over time and became dominated by the City of Sanctuary initiative; primarily a collaboration between the local authority and the VCS. I have argued that the founding of the MAJF introduced a new actor and set of actions – primarily ‘loud’ politics – that shifted the dynamics of contention into what McAdam et al. (2004) consider to be *transformative* contention.

7. Conclusions

In this paper, I have analysed the struggle for improvements to accommodation for asylum seekers provided by the UK state in the North East of England. I have argued that this struggle emerged after 2010 as part of a post-2008 framing, the result of changes driven by both the austerity agenda and the ‘hostile environment’ policy. Cuts to Westminster budgets as a result of austerity politics, whose rationale was grounded in the 2008 global financial crisis, drove the introduction of new national privatised contracts between the Home Office and three companies, two of which had no prior experience in providing housing to vulnerable populations (Tyler et al., 2014). At the same time, the then Home Secretary Theresa May announced the introduction of a ‘hostile environment’ that would seek to make the survival of undocumented migrants more difficult through embedding immigration checks into more and more routine encounters in everyday life (Yuval-Davis et al., 2018; 2019).

I have claimed that there is a need to understand this struggle as a contested politics of welcome, which is spatially and temporally differentiated from similar struggles in other parts of the UK. Up until 2015, the politics of welcome on Tyneside were dominated by a collaboration, which developed from 2011 onwards, between the international City of Sanctuary movement, Newcastle City Council and migrant and asylum support organisations within the VCS. I have shown that this particular political project of welcome supported a ‘quiet’ political positioning for asylum seekers, which sought cultural transformation and ‘influencing’ rather than campaigning and direct action. Whilst politicians in and from the region located the poor standards of housing for asylum seekers in the region as central to the politics of welcome, they primarily operationalised this in *opposition* to the Coalition and later Conservative governments in power in Westminster. Politicians furthermore used existing political structures, such as strategic migration partnerships, as well as parliamentary debates, to further this political project. Their attempts to assert particular policies of welcome that would make asylum seekers more at home in the city, such as the end to room sharing of unrelated adults, were constrained by a lack of compliance by one local company supplying housing in the region. This company not only refused to halt this practice, but challenged the legitimacy of the Council’s power to enact such moral urbanism (Darling, 2013) in the context of dominant neo-liberal ideologies operating within the provision of asylum accommodation (Tyler et al., 2014).

However, after 2015, this political landscape of welcome was transformed through the creation of a Forum, a loose collective, of asylum seekers and activists, who soon adopted the struggle to improve housing for their members. As well as providing practical support with complaints, the Migration and Asylum Justice Forum created a platform for a ‘loud’ politics of welcome directed at challenging not solely the creators of the austerity agenda and the hostile environment in Westminster, but also those in the local authorities and VCS who had promoted a ‘quiet’ politics of welcome. This politics merely promoted an ‘easing’ of the conditions for those awaiting a decision on an application for asylum (Bagelman, 2013). Whilst there were clear commonalities in the aims and objectives of these political projects, the Forum operated a prefigurative politics, which made space for a range of asylum seeker positionalities. In their meetings, every member was given the opportunity to present their views and actions and interventions were arrived at via consensus, often through heated debate and disagreement. The existing politics of welcome in the city that had been dominated by the VCS and the city council produced *habitats* (Dadusc et al., 2019) in which only particular behaviours – quiet, acquiescent – were welcomed. However, whilst many of the Forum’s actions might have been loud, spaces were also created for those who wished to remain quiet in public. These members helped to create placards, wrote press releases and even attended smaller meetings with the City Council. In short, the Forum was not prescriptive in the political subjectivities that emerged within its auspices and its practices. Whilst small in scale, it had a wide-reaching impact on the politics of welcome on Tyneside.

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