

# **Navigating Options, Avoiding Pitfalls: Key Tools for Reception and Housing in Today's International Protection Landscape**

Global Refugee Accommodation Working Group  
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# Introduction

The tools presented in this document make up a skeletal policy framework designed to support policymakers, municipalities, NGOs, and international actors in selecting and implementing safe, affordable, decent, and dignified housing solutions for refugees, asylum seekers, and other vulnerable people that have been displaced from their home.

The framework draws on comparative practice, practical learning, and global examples gathered within the Global Refugee Accommodation Working Group (GRAWG), and is intended to support reception and housing systems in light of today's political reality which is marked by, among other, a waning interest in providing third country solutions and emphasizing "a whole-of-route approach" to international protection. With a few exceptions, resettlement programs, in particular, face existential challenges, and asylum systems are not far behind. Although GRAWG remains committed to resettlement as a viable large-scale solution, we understand that refugees will continue to need shelter and housing wherever they are on their journeys. The framework therefore presents models and solutions appropriate to different steps on the route (including transit countries and third countries of asylum), highlighting the specific constraints and opportunities of different types of situations and solutions.

The framework places an emphasis on brevity, clarity, directness, and strategically important considerations, not least:

- Under which general conditions specific housing solutions work best and how to anticipate and mitigate problems.
- The crucial importance of having surge and post-surge pathways for solutions.
- An easy-to-follow decision tree that can help staff, especially inexperienced staff, make the right calls given the context and circumstances.
- An overview of common failure modes and how to avoid them.

You can read the sections as standalone tools or together as one framework covering different challenges and the solutions intended to address them.

The framework is not comprehensive in any way. It is intended as a living resource that can be adapted to different national and regional contexts and expanded with case studies, tools, and other decision tools. For a growing library of cases, studies and resources, please [visit our website](#).

# About GRAWG

The Global Refugee Accommodation Working Group (GRAWG) unites key stakeholders, including refuge and resettlement states, United Nations agencies, academia, and non-government organizations/nonprofits to collaboratively ensure global and cross-sector coordination, communication, and collaboration on accommodation and housing challenges and opportunities to ensure dignified and safe living situations for people on the move worldwide.

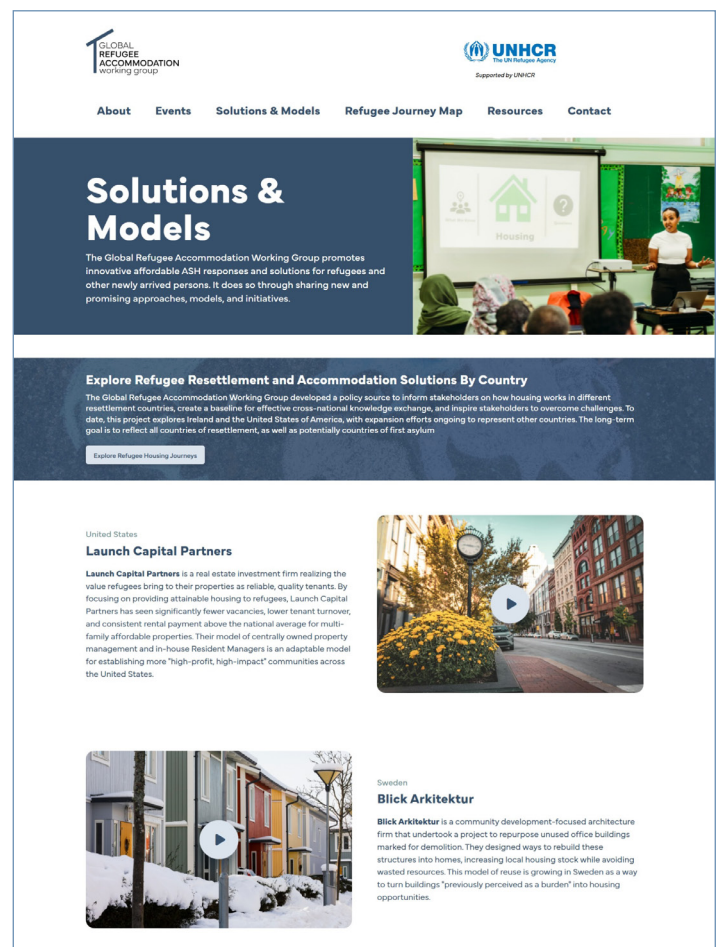
GRAWG was born during the 2023 Consultations on Resettlement and Complementary Pathways (CRCP), formerly known as the Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement (ATCR). Stakeholders from across the globe observed that housing is one of the most pressing issues for resettlement states. Yet, there was no space devoted to housing in the CRCP or any other high-level global forum on resettlement. To raise the visibility of this issue and begin to address it, Church World Service and the Irish government issued a call-to-action to form a dedicated working group around housing under the CRCP. The group set out to:

- gather all relevant stakeholders from all levels to explore and share solutions, new and old;
- to collaborate and to learn from one another; and
- to keep apprised of the latest developments around housing for refugees.

Since 2023, the group has steadily grown its membership and evolved to become the go-to platform for stakeholders seeking models, new ways of thinking, and effective solutions to the problem of finding safe, affordable, and decent housing for resettled refugees across the globe.

The [GRAWG website](#) is the main hub for information on the Working Group, offering:

- information on [GRAWG events](#);
- accommodation [solutions and models](#) from around the world;
- an interactive [Refugee Housing Journey map](#);
- [helpful resources](#); and
- an [expression of interest form](#) to join GRAWG.



Screenshot of the GRAWG website

# Housing Options: When They Work Best, and Key Considerations

## 1. Modular and Relocatable Housing

Purpose-built, prefabricated housing units that can be deployed quickly and relocated or repurposed after use.

When it works best:	Key considerations:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Medium-term displacement situations (1–5 years)</li> <li>• Availability of land and municipal planning approval</li> <li>• Political interest in long-term reuse (e.g., affordable or student housing)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early agreement on post-reception use</li> <li>• Integration of services (health, education, language, social activities, employment support)</li> <li>• Connection to public transport and local facilities</li> </ul>

## 2. Host Family and Community-Based Accommodation

Temporary accommodation with private households, supported through matching platforms and monitoring mechanisms.

When it works best:	Key considerations:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early or sudden displacement phases</li> <li>• Contexts with strong civil society engagement</li> <li>• Lower numbers or short expected stays</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Screening, safeguarding, and mediation capacity</li> <li>• Clear expectations for hosts and guests</li> <li>• Access to social services and exit options</li> </ul>

## 3. Emergency Surge and Preparedness Housing

Pre-identified housing capacity that can be rapidly activated during sudden increases in arrivals.

When it works best:	Key considerations:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Countries exposed to rapid inflow fluctuations</li> <li>• Decentralized governance systems with municipal roles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regular updating of housing inventories</li> <li>• Clear activation and deactivation protocols</li> <li>• Neutral public communication strategies</li> </ul>

## 4. Buffer Capacity Models

Maintaining flexible reception places that can be scaled up or down depending on need.

When it works best:	Key considerations:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Volatile asylum systems</li><li>• Strong central coordination with local agreements</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Financial arrangements for standby capacity</li><li>• Planned reuse of facilities after deactivation</li><li>• Avoiding prolonged emergency-mode reception</li></ul>

## 5. Migrant Resource and Transit Centers

Short-term accommodation integrated with protection, health, and information services along migration routes.

When it works best:	Key considerations:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• High and continuous transit flows</li><li>• Strong cooperation between governments and international actors</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Compliance with humanitarian standards</li><li>• Clear mandate and duration of stay</li><li>• Complementary alternatives (private accommodation, cash-for-rent)</li></ul>

# Surge and Post-Surge Housing Pathways

Housing systems in the context of international protection must be designed for fluctuation. Planning should explicitly distinguish between the **surge phase** — when arrivals rapidly increase — and the **post-surge phase**, when demand subsides and emergency capacity is no longer fully needed.

## Surge

During a surge, priority should be given to **speed, scalability, and continuity of protection**. This often means activating preparedness capacity, buffer places, host-family accommodation, and short-term collective or modular solutions. Decision-making authority should be clear, and activation protocols pre-agreed, to avoid ad hoc and costly emergency responses.



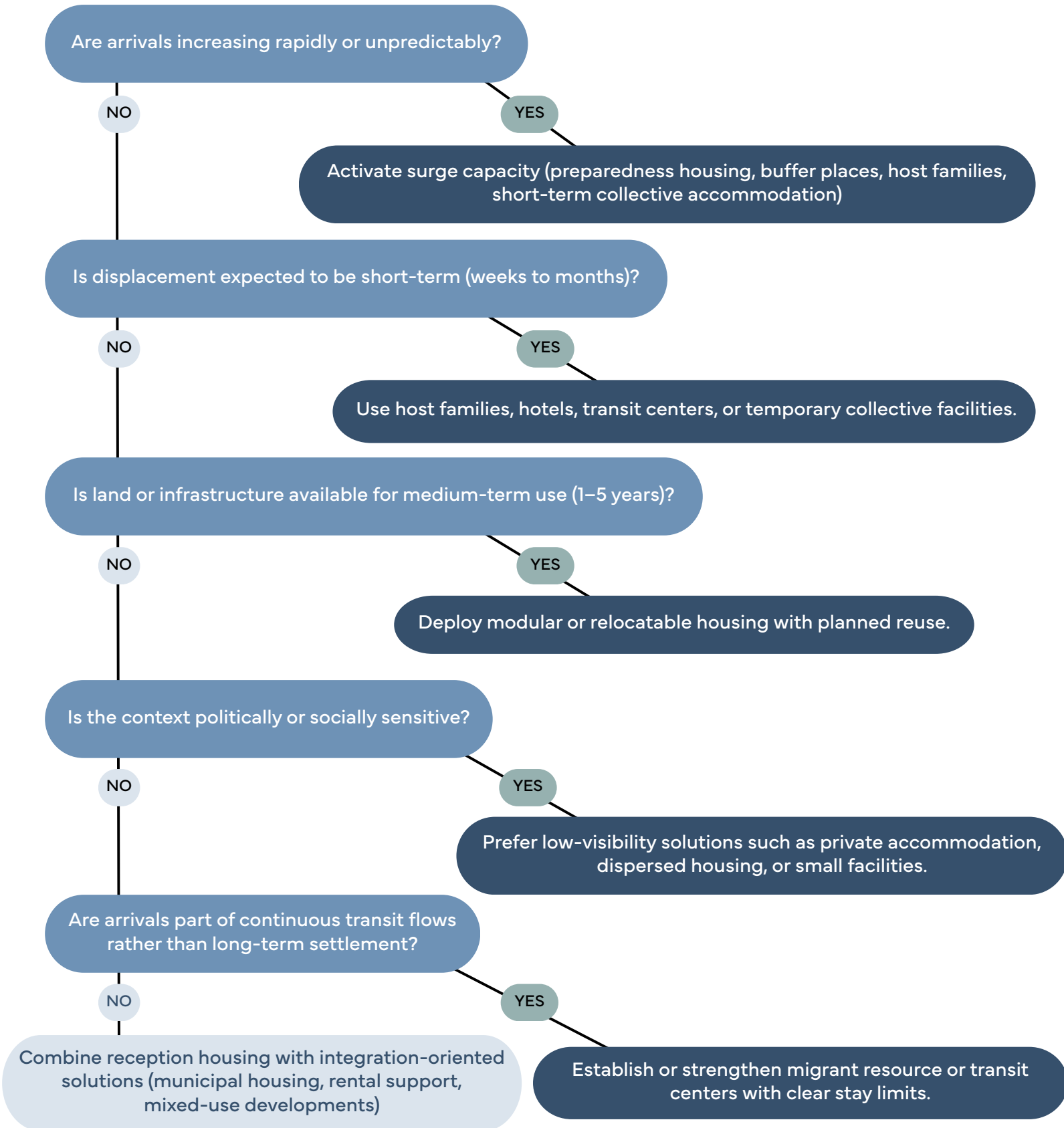
## Post-Surge

Modular units can be relocated or converted into affordable housing, student housing, or temporary accommodation for other groups. Reception centers can be partially deactivated and retained as standby buffer capacity. Private accommodation arrangements may shift toward longer-term rental support or community-based housing.

After a surge subsides, housing infrastructure should transition rather than disappear. Planning for this transition from the outset reduces political resistance, improves cost-efficiency, and strengthens system resilience.

# Selecting Housing Solutions

Use the following questions to guide housing choices in refugee and asylum reception:



# Common Failure Modes and How to Avoid Them

Problem	Mitigation
<p><b>1. Surge without an exit strategy</b></p> <p>Emergency capacity is expanded rapidly, but no plan exists for deactivation, reuse, or transition once arrivals decrease. This leads to prolonged use of suboptimal accommodation, political backlash, and rising costs.</p>	<p>Require every surge activation to include a defined post-surge pathway (reuse, relocation, standby buffer, or decommissioning).</p>
<p><b>2. Buffer capacity without stable funding</b></p> <p>Reception places are formally designated as standby capacity but lack financial arrangements to keep them viable. Facilities then deteriorate or are lost altogether.</p>	<p>Secure multi-year financing or standby contracts that explicitly cover low-occupancy periods.</p>
<p><b>3. Temporary solutions becoming permanent by default</b></p> <p>Short-term accommodation (e.g. hotels, emergency centres) remains in use for years, often with declining standards and high costs.</p>	<p>Set maximum intended duration from the outset and trigger mandatory review points.</p>
<p><b>4. Housing planned separately from services</b></p> <p>Accommodation is developed without parallel planning for health care, education, employment support, or transport, undermining autonomy and integration.</p>	<p>Treat housing as part of a service ecosystem, not a standalone asset.</p>
<p><b>5. Over-centralization and weak local buy-in</b></p> <p>Decisions are taken at national level without sufficient municipal involvement, resulting in implementation delays or local resistance.</p>	<p>Involve local authorities early and ensure benefits for host communities are visible and tangible.</p>
<p><b>6. One-size-fits-all approaches</b></p> <p>A single housing model is applied regardless of arrival dynamics, population profiles, or political context.</p>	<p>Design mixed systems and use decision tools to guide model selection.</p>

# Conclusion

This framework synthesizes global practice into actionable guidance for refugee and asylum housing policy. The real-world examples demonstrate that success depends not on adopting a single “best practice” model, but on:

- Understanding context-specific variables (arrival patterns, political environment, local capacity)
- Building flexible systems that can adapt across surge and post-surge phases
- Integrating housing with essential services from the outset
- Engaging local stakeholders as partners, not implementation vehicles
- Planning for transitions and exits before activating emergency capacity

Policymakers should use this framework iteratively — applying the decision tree, learning from documented failure modes, and adapting models to local realities.

Effective refugee housing policy requires not just technical competence but political commitment to dignified, integrated, and forward-looking reception systems.



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