

Wednesday, 13 May 2020

First Minister Nicola Sturgeon MSP
Scottish Government
Bute House
6 Charlotte Square
Edinburgh EH2 4DR

Email: firstminister@gov.scot

Dear First Minister,

Mears Group and the Home Office's Actions During Lockdown/Global Pandemic

I am writing on behalf of the charity Positive Action in Housing (SC027577) a refugee and migrant homelessness and human rights charity based in Glasgow. Each year, we provide crisis and casework assistance to around 2,500 families and individuals facing poverty or homelessness.

As you may be aware, Adnan Olbeh, a 30-year-old Syrian asylum-seeking gentleman with mental health problems recently died in "unexplained circumstances" in a Glasgow hotel, having been placed there by the Mears Group.

My purpose in writing to you is to ask the Scottish Government to investigate why the Mears Group, in Glasgow, the largest and most densely populated city in Scotland, forcibly moved up to 400 vulnerable men, women and children (many of whom are survivors of trauma or torture) from their homes (where many were well settled having been there for several months) into hotels, where social distancing is impossible.

This happened in April, during the Lockdown, when non-essential travel was forbidden and millions were told to "stay home, stay safe". Yet there was no imminent threat of homelessness which necessitate the moving of hundreds of vulnerable people.

People have described how they were given only a few minutes to pack, and then herded into small vans, 4 or 5 at a time. Some say they were told they would be moving to permanent accommodation, not hotels. They were not asked about their health prior to the move, or if they had symptoms – though they could be asymptomatic and therefore at increased risk to other asylum seekers and the public. Nor was any testing carried out. No regard was paid to their mental health.

Within the hotels, large numbers of people need to use the tiny lifts and dining areas several times a day. Bedding and towels are changed only once a week. Levels of hygiene are very poor.

As well as overcrowding, there is the problem of air conditioning. New [research](#) shared by the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention suggests air conditioners can be a transporter of viruses. The problem is even greater in hotels where windows can't open and poor, contaminated indoor air can't escape, and if filters are not changed regularly. We have heard several complaints from asylum seekers that they can't open the windows of their hotel rooms to get fresh air.

The Home Office cut each asylum seekers' weekly allowance from £35.50 per week to zero at a time when they badly need money. The reason given is that they get "three meals a day". But without financial support, people cannot top up mobile phones to keep in touch with lawyers, GPs, friends and family. They cannot buy fresh fruit, hand sanitiser, toiletries or travel to Food banks during Ramadan. Women have complained they have no money to buy sanitary protection. It is now left to us and others to provide emergency supplies of food, mobile phone top ups and hygiene packs.

Levels of depression are increasing. Many people are survivors of trauma and torture and suffering mental health problems because of the length of time they have been in the asylum system. People are growing increasingly desperate.

We find these testimonies disturbing, hotels are supposed to be closed during the Lockdown (but clearly not if they people are "asylum seekers" and their asylum housing provider can turn a profit during a global pandemic).

Hotel employees may also be subjected to an increased viral load in the workplace and then must go back out into the general community for a variety of essential purposes.

In their zeal to cut costs and make a profit, there are now several hotspots of potential Covid-19 outbreaks all over Glasgow. Yet this was no homelessness situation where people had to be moved out of their homes. Several accommodation providers claim that they were told by agents for Mears Group at the start of April that their flats were no longer needed because people were being moved into hotels, and they would not be paid for the remainder of their contracts.

One of the accommodation providers, who asked to remain anonymous, said: "*We were providing good accommodation for people to self-isolate, but Mears went for the cheapest deal by booking up empty hotels, paying cut price rates and removing the asylum seekers weekly allowance. Mears has taken advantage of the Pandemic to make a giant profit for itself from the Home Office contract at the cost of vulnerable people's lives*".

Immigration may not be a devolved matter, but the consequences of this particularly repellent reserved policy decision (if that's indeed what it is, rather than simple greed by a Home Office approved contractor) extend to potentially harming the native, indigenous, host Scottish population.

The public deserve to know why Mears Group forcibly moved 400 vulnerable people at very short notice during a Lockdown out of their homes and into crowded hotels (where social distancing is impossible and there is increased risk of catching the Coronavirus in crowded dining rooms and lifts).

To conclude, I would be grateful if you could investigate these matters and urge the Home Office to restore the weekly allowance of £35.50 to all of Glasgow's asylum seekers" and move people back into self-contained accommodation.

I await your reply,

Yours sincerely,



Robina Qureshi
Director