

POSITIVE ACTION IN HOUSING'S SUBMISSION OF EVIDENCE REGARDING THE USE OF HOTELS AS ASYLUM ACCOMMODATION DURING THE PANDEMIC

INTRODUCTION

Positive Action in Housing is an independent, anti-racist homelessness and human rights charity (SC027577) dedicated to supporting people from refugee, asylum seeking and migrant backgrounds to rebuild their lives. We believe in a society where everyone has the right to live safe and dignified lives, free from poverty, homelessness, or inequality. Each year, we support 2,500 BME, refugee and migrant families and individuals mainly, but not exclusively, in Glasgow.

CONTEXT

Glasgow has the biggest asylum population in the UK with 5,000 asylum seekers accommodated by the Mears Group. The policy of forced dispersal has been in place since 2000, first under Glasgow City Council and then under various private contractors.

Our housing and homelessness team deals mainly with new refugees and asylum seekers, providing pre-legal advice, information, casework and signposting. We also provide crisis support, with the support of volunteers, in the form of essential food items, clothes, digital technology, travel passes, mobile phone top-ups, crisis payments and free shelter through our hosting programme Room for Refugees.

This submission is based on qualitative and quantitative data gathered between January 2020 and February 2021. It includes numerical data from our databases and qualitative data from hotel residents.

Between January 2020 and February 2021, we provided crisis support to 626 asylum seekers and their dependents¹ who had no money or were struggling to make ends meet. Within this number, we provided crisis support to 278 asylum seekers and their dependents² living in Glasgow hotels or recently moved from a hotel to private accommodation and struggling to survive.

¹ 626 asylum seeker families or individuals comprising 689 adults and 267 children assisted between January 2020 and February 2021.

² 278 asylum seeker families or individuals comprising 285 adults and 8 children assisted between January 2020 and February 2021, who were living in hotels in Glasgow or had recently moved from hotels.

Since July 2020³ up to the present time, we have recorded 1290 self-referrals for crisis support from 804 asylum seeker families or individuals. (704 new clients + 100 existing clients). Of these, 165 people reported they were suffering mental health problems such as suicidal thoughts, or mental trauma from persecution or torture.

This Submission of Evidence is in response to Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI)'s Call for Evidence into the use of hotels and barracks as contingency asylum accommodation.

SUBMISSION OF EVIDENCE

This Submission will examine the use made of hotels in Glasgow since March 2020. It will focus on the roles and responsibilities of the Home Office and the Mears Group, and of other parties, in relation to the use of contingency asylum accommodation, including:

1. communication between the Home Office and the Mears Group, and with other stakeholders (for example, local authorities, health services, NGOs who provide support to asylum seekers), regarding the need for contingency asylum accommodation in particular areas
2. the process(es) for identifying potential contingency asylum accommodation and for testing and deciding about the suitability of specific sites, including with regard to Covid-19 safety
3. decisions about individual asylum seekers and their needs in terms of accommodation and other support, including information sharing, record keeping, oversight and review, particularly with regard to vulnerabilities and risks
4. communication between the Home Office and/or the Mears Group and individuals ("service users") regarding their asylum accommodation, including any changes to that accommodation.

³ Other than appointments, we did not record self-referrals prior to July 2020. Because of the increase in requests for help after the Park Inn Incident and because of the difficulty in seeing people face to face in our office due to Covid 19, we set up online self-referrals system to make it easier for people to reach out for help.

COMMUNICATION BETWEEN THE HOME OFFICE AND THE MEARS GROUP, AND WITH OTHER STAKEHOLDERS (FOR EXAMPLE, LOCAL AUTHORITIES, HEALTH SERVICES, NGOS WHO PROVIDE SUPPORT TO ASYLUM SEEKERS), REGARDING THE NEED FOR CONTINGENCY ASYLUM ACCOMMODATION IN PARTICULAR AREAS

There was no communication between the Home Office and the Mears Group with Glasgow City Council, Health Services and NGOs who provide support to asylum seekers⁴.

In March 2020, when Lockdown came into force, the Home Office began accommodating destitute asylum-seekers under Section 4 in seven hotels across Glasgow. They were provided with shelter, Wi-Fi, meals and toiletries. This seemed fair and reasonable in the context of the pandemic.

However, as reported in the Glasgow Press⁵ it quickly became apparent that 321 people in receipt of S98, living in private flats provided by the Mears Group, were forcibly moved from self-contained flats into hotel-accommodation with other asylum seekers from across the city at very short notice. Households of one or two single adults, or families were taken in vans 4 or 5 at a time, often with less than an hour's notice.

This happened at a time when non-essential travel, evictions and hotel stays were forbidden and millions were told to "stay home, stay safe".

Evidence began to emerge of asylum seekers going hungry, being refused medical treatment having no money to buy sanitary protection, toiletries, mobile phone top ups or bus passes for essential travel. People who were fasting were unable to access food to start their fast or to finish it. People were also complaining that they were terrified of getting Coronavirus in the hotels because they could not socially distance in lifts or when queuing for food. Women spoke of being isolated in predominantly male environments. A lack of money to buy essentials such as bus tickets, mobile phone top ups and food was the number one priority for those contacting us from within hotels.

On May 6, 2020, less than a month after moving asylum seekers from settled homes into hotels, 30-year-old Syrian refugee, Adnan Walid Elbi, died alone in his room at the Maclay's Guest House, Glasgow. The hotel was being used as asylum contingency accommodation. Adnan was suffering torture-induced trauma and suicidal thoughts, having attempted to commit suicide twice prior to his move to the hotel. He was moved suddenly and without notice from a private flat provided by Mears into Maclay's Guest House and his daily allowance of £5.39 was completely withdrawn. He could no longer cook his own food or clean his own environment. All control had been removed from him. He had fled Denmark where he had

⁴ <https://www.thenational.scot/news/18401817.scottish-charities-anger-glasgow-refugees-hotel-move/>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/apr/22/glasgow-asylum-seekers-told-to-pack-up-with-an-hours-notice>

refugee status because the hard-line government had told Syrians to return, and the Syrian community were terrified. Friends say the hotel food caused him dietary problems and his mental health had worsened. Lack of money caused added anxiety as his family in Syria needed funds to pay for his mother's hospital treatment. Five days before he died, the Home Office asked for and received a statement about his suicidal intentions from Adnan's lawyer but neither the Home Office nor Mears Group took ANY action.

We targeted emergency resources at the hotel asylum seekers because of the clear desperation for food, clothing, bus passes and mobile phone top ups.

Mears Group stated⁶ on May 21, 2020, following the death of a suicidal Syrian refugee, Adnan Walid Elbi, in the McLays Hotel, that it *"kept the authorities and the charities and NGOs we work with informed, implemented their recommendations and addressed any concerns. In cases where hotel accommodation was not suitable for particular service users, due to health or other welfare considerations, they have remained in alternative accommodation. We did not move families to hotels and there are no pregnant women in the hotels."*

In a statement⁷ posted on 14th May 2020, the Scottish Refugee Council called on Mears Group and the Home Office to:

"explain why Hundreds of people have been moved recently from either single occupancy or two-bedroom flat accommodation to hotels procured by Mears and the Home Office. The man is reported to have been in one of these flats before being moved to a hotel. The Home Office and Mears must explain, in a public statement; why they adopted this plan and how it was deemed compliant with public health instructions; who precisely they consulted on this plan and when and in what terms; and how they considered vulnerabilities before, during and after moving each of all those affected".

Had Scottish Refugee Council been consulted about the hotel moves they would hardly be asking Mears and the Home Office who they consulted. As a key charity supporting asylum seekers in Glasgow, we were never consulted either. There were zero communications about the move to hotels, and there was considerable anger at the suggestion that they had.

Sadly, almost 18 months into the Contract, we have become accustomed to these transparent untruths and denying the testimony of refugees when we have raised the issue of serious breaches of health and safety. The Home Office has backed up the Mears Group's position and there is no accountability that we can detect. The regular safety gears that protect us as citizens appear to simply evaporate when it comes to asylum seekers. There is a wilful helplessness on the part of every agency that should take responsibility, as if asylum seekers are not full human beings, deserving of the time and consideration of their human rights.

⁶ <https://www.mearsgroup.co.uk/news/statement-by-mears-in-response-to-the-scottish-refugee-council>

⁷ <https://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/devastating-death-in-hotel-used-for-asylum-accommodation-in-glasgow/>

THE PROCESS(ES) FOR IDENTIFYING POTENTIAL CONTINGENCY ASYLUM ACCOMMODATION AND FOR TESTING AND DECIDING ABOUT THE SUITABILITY OF SPECIFIC SITES, INCLUDING WITH REGARD TO COVID-19 SAFETY.

“We needed to make a decision, so we made the decision, rightly or wrongly, to move everyone from the initial accommodation apartments into hotels, and that was a blanket decision, because we felt that we could assess and support people better in that setting”.

John Taylor, Chief Operating Officer of Mears Group admitted that there were no assessments at a press briefing on June 25, 2020.

There appeared to be no process in place whatsoever for identifying suitable asylum accommodation with regard to Covid 19 safety. a sudden scramble for accommodation and no coherent strategy.

The Serviced Accommodation Providers

The Mears Group stated⁸ it was necessary to move people into hotels “because of problems securing lets during the lockdown”.

This is a transparent untruth.

In May 2020, we were contacted out of the blue by a number of serviced accommodation providers, who collectively numbered 21 and provided 200 flats to Mears Group in Glasgow through two go-between agencies.

The serviced accommodation providers informed us that they were given no notice whatsoever of the decision to move people out of their accommodation. One day they were providing a contract with months still left. The next day they were told by the go between agencies that the remainder of the contract would not be honoured, and their flats would be emptied the next day. They accommodation providers also advised us that the reason that asylum seekers were being taken out of flats and put into hotels and even stripped of their meagre daily allowance of £5.39 was to cut costs and generate a greater profit for Mears Group. It was not, as Mears Group and the Home Office claimed, to keep people safe. See appendix 1: letter sent by one of the serviced accommodation providers explaining their concerns.

The serviced accommodation providers stated that the asylum seekers had been effectively duped into moving by Mears. They said Mears had told asylum seekers they were moving to

⁸ <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/18546061.mears-breaks-silence-bloodbath-glasgow-hotel-used-house-asylum-seekers/>

“long term accommodation”; that no one was ever told or given notice of where they were going, they were simply shipped like Amazon parcels, sometimes in the middle of having breakfast. See letter from one of the accommodation providers at the end of this submission.

Park Inn June 26th, 2020.

Six weeks later, in the Park Inn Hotel, Badruddin Abdalla Adam attacked and stabbed six people in the Park Inn Hotel in Glasgow before being shot dead by police.

His deteriorating mental health had been raised previously with staff by another hotel resident and he himself is alleged to have sought help after reportedly being forced to self-isolate 24/7 for 20 days in the Park Inn with suspected Covid symptoms.

Why were 90 people who were likely to have suffered mental trauma during and previous to their asylum journeys being crowded into hotels? Amongst them were trafficked women, unaccompanied asylum seeker children and survivors of torture and persecution. By many accounts, there were reports of hunger and an pressure cooker environment. It was not a peaceful place to be as everyone had their own worries, on top of Covid 19.

This incident left the other 90 residents with lasting trauma. Many reached out to charities for help accessing trauma counselling placing an unprecedented burden on community mental health services exacerbated by the institutionalisation of asylum-seekers in unsuitable hotel-style accommodation.

In the aftermath of Park Inn, on June 29, 2020, Chris Philp, the immigration minister told Parliament⁹ that:

“the contractor, Mears, moved ... 321 people from the serviced apartments into hotels because it was judged that, as the coronavirus epidemic took hold, the serviced apartments were not appropriate and not safe.”

The Minister failed to explain how a hotel could be safer than a private apartment during a global pandemic and Lockdown. He failed to explain how crowding 90 people into a hotel - where social distancing was impossible in lifts and dining areas and corridors - was safer for asylum seekers but not for the general population (who were advised against staying in hotels during Lockdown).

He failed to explain why “stay home, stay safe” did not apply to asylum seekers. What he stated was a transparent untruth and was in direct contradiction to Public Health Guidelines about Covid 19.

He further stated that:

⁹ <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/debates/?id=2020-06-29c.25.0>

“It was done for safety reasons, and that has been entirely borne out by the subsequent statistics. Glasgow accommodates slightly over 5,000 asylum seekers, ... and during the coronavirus epidemic over the last three months or so, of those over 5,000 service users, only two have tested positive for coronavirus, and both, I am pleased to say, have fully recovered. Among those people accommodated in hotels there has not been a single confirmed case of coronavirus. So, the steps being taken to safeguard the public, and to safeguard the asylum seekers in particular, have been successful.”

Again, the Minister failed to explain how the policy of moving asylum seekers from private accommodation into hotels was safer, or in line with public health guidelines. Nor did he address the fact that there had been zero priority given to mass testing of asylum seekers, even where Covid was identified.

For example, in October 2020 there was a Covid outbreak in the McLays Hotel Glasgow. People asked to be tested and relocated ASAP to clean, unshared accommodation, but they were not offered a Covid test before being moved.

(Echoes of this same “logic” can be detected in Mr Philp’s statements made in January 2021 about the Napier Barracks when he openly blamed 130 asylum seekers for getting Covid 19 after crowding them into dormitories with only a bedsheet for a screen between beds, limited toilets, cold water and no soap. The Minister had effectively trapped people in a deadly situation and was now blaming them for succumbing to the disease his policies exposed them to).

The reason provided by the Mears Group was unanimously “due to the pandemic”. As one resident explains: “just apparently cos of covid, then I ask how you take me from a place I was alone and bring me in a hotel where there's no social distancing but was not answered” (response 20).

Another was told they were being moved so “they would not catch covid-19 from using cash [support]”.

There were apparently no challenge or reprimand of Mears Group or the Home Office’s actions by the Scottish Government or Glasgow City Council. Despite the strict legislation of the Lockdown, this was allowed to simply pass.

There was little consideration given to identifying “potential contingency asylum accommodation with regard to Covid-19 safety”. The decisions that the Mears Group and the Home Office took to move people into hotels from private accommodation at the height of Lockdown went completely against Public Health Guidance.

Tartan Lodge Hotel

At another hotel, the Tartan Lodge, several of the 31 residents complained about bed bugs, that they were being malnourished and fed substandard food in reused cartons. A former UN worker from Central Asia who was claiming asylum after fleeing for his life advised us that he had complained about the food on one occasion at Tartan Lodge. He said he was told that if he complained he would be sent to a detention centre and then from there he would be deported back to where he came from. We arranged to provide food from restaurants and volunteers for the next two weeks and brought media attention to their plight. This led to a dramatic improvement in food provision before Mears group hurriedly moved people into rundown shared flats.

Covid-19 Safety

The fact that space outside the rooms represented a risk of contamination reinforced the point raised previously. Further, it appears that hotels were not appropriate to ensure safety for the residents from Covid-19. Social distancing proved to be difficult or impossible, especially when moving from one's room to another area, or around lunch.

Some of the people we assisted complained that the rooms had no window, or that windows were locked, and they could not open them. Aside from the usual advice that was to let air circulate in indoor areas, this triggered a feeling of imprisonment for some of the residents.

DECISIONS ABOUT INDIVIDUAL ASYLUM SEEKERS AND THEIR NEEDS IN TERMS OF ACCOMMODATION AND OTHER SUPPORT, INCLUDING INFORMATION SHARING, RECORD KEEPING, OVERSIGHT AND REVIEW, PARTICULARLY WITH REGARD TO VULNERABILITIES AND RISKS;

Failure to assess risk and vulnerabilities

Asylum seekers are not asked about their vulnerabilities or risk assessed before moves into hotels or out of them into accommodation. They are not even given the address of the place that they are being moved to. This is routine. This denial of agency can have dangerous consequences for human beings.

Since January 2020, we have supported 281 asylum seekers in hotels in Glasgow. We specifically asked people if they had been assessed in terms of their mental health or physical health by Mears Group before being moved.

Everyone we spoke to said they had not been assessed in terms of their vulnerability, risks from someone else or to do with Covid 19 risks when sharing flats. In fact, they did not know what we were referring to. They described the hotel moves as sudden and without documentation. Nadia described Mears Group staff rushing to her hotel room one evening to request a signature after we raised the question of whether people knew they were being moved or had even consented. They described the moves to flats as being sudden and often cancelled at the last moment. They described never being told when they could leave the hotel. They described never being told the address of where they were being moved. They were simply told to be ready.

Case Study – Baby Adriel

Mercy was due to be moved with her baby son Adriel by Mears in August 2020. She had no money and was accepting food parcels from African food banks and had sought a crisis grant from our charity because she was destitute and had been in touch with Migrant Help. She had lost her job after her limited leave to remain expired and had no money. Adriel's father, Eric, was due to help them move to a new Mears flat but neither Mercy nor Eric knew where they were being moved to. So the plan was that she would let Mears Group take her to the new place and then she would contact him and give him the new address. Sadly, she died in the flat and her son was left alone for 4 days. Eric was frantically trying to get a hold of her and returned to the old flat but heard no sound. He assumed she must have moved. When asked why he did not know where to look, he replied *"because Mears doesn't give asylum seekers the address of the accommodation"*. It took 4 days before he finally was able to raise the alarm, the police broke down the door of the flat and found the mother dead and the baby clutching an empty bottle, having lost weight and too weak to cry.

Mears Group Admitted Failing to Carry Out Assessments – Then Backtracked

As a charity that works closely with Registered social Landlords who are committed to best practice housing standards, it is clear that there is no assessment of people’s needs. When people are being moved into hotels from flats, they are given little or no notice. Therefore, it follows that it is not possible to be assessed for whether a move is appropriate or not if you don’t know you are being moved in the first place.

On Thursday 25 June, the day before the Park Inn incident, John Taylor, Chief Operating Officer of Mears Group admitted¹⁰ that the asylum housing provider failed to carry out assessments before placing trafficking victims, pregnant women and children in accommodation that put them at risk – then backtracked on the statement hours later. During a media briefing organised by Mears, Mr Taylor said a “blanket decision” was made late March to move people into hotels, and that no assessments were carried out of individual needs before people were transferred – which charities said was likely to constitute a “serious breach” of the company’s contract.

Mr Taylor said that once asylum seekers had been moved into hotels it became “obvious” that this setting “wasn’t appropriate” for some people, including pregnant women, people who had suffered trafficking and family groups, and that action was then taken to identify these groups and “safely” move them back out of the hotels and into smaller properties.

A spokesperson for Mears later told The Independent newspaper Mr Taylor was wrong to state that assessments were not carried out prior to moving asylum seekers into hotels. But Mr Taylor had said during the press briefing:

“We needed to make a decision, so we made the decision, rightly or wrongly, to move everyone from the initial accommodation apartments into hotels, and that was a blanket decision, because we felt that we could assess and support people better in that setting”.

Case Study – Asylum Seeker Placed With Mentally Ill Flatmate

Yasmin* is a senior health professional seeking asylum and studying for her professional exams. She was placed by Mears in a flat with a woman who, it later transpired, had tried to kill herself. Yasmin found her demeanour frightening and was having to intervene in various mental health crises while staying in the flat. The crisis team had to be called out on several occasions including when the woman began screaming and removing her clothes. Yasmin took to staying outside the flat and we got her a donated bike. She asked Mears Group to move her many times without any success. On one occasion, she states that the Mears housing Officer told her, “you’re a doctor, you should know how to handle someone who is mentally ill”, to which

¹⁰ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/home-office-contractor-asylum-accommodation-hotel-coronavirus-a9586036.html>

Yasmin replied, “yes but doctors don’t normally live with their patients”. No risk or vulnerability assessment was done in this case.

Case Study – Asylum Seeker Moved One Day After Cancer Surgery

In one case, a man who had had cancer surgery the day before, was told he was being moved the next day. One day’s notice. He was not told where. Mears Group knew yet they were still moving him. Anyone who carried out a vulnerability or risk assessment would have known he needed extra attention. Instead, he was moved, still in his surgical stockings, without a food supply, without Wi-fi or cash. He was given an Aspen Card. In order to activate it he needed to phone a number. His data was low. After months living without a penny in a hotel, this was to be expected. When he was moved, he did not know where he was, the flat was beer and dirty, and the internal glass door was smashed. For cleaning all he had was l’m up and a brush and nothing else. Our volunteers attended to provide food money and help him and his flatmate know the local area on the day that they were moved after he informed us office address when he. He kept in touch with us digitally, like 200 to 300 others.

If it is true that people were assessed for vulnerability or risk before being moved into hotels, or out of hotels into flats, then there should be documentation and Mears should be asked to produce each and every single copy. Certainly, our service users cannot produce a single copy or recall any such assessments.

Case Study – Three People Complained To Mears and the Home Office About Aggressive Occupants - No Action Taken

In a separate case, we wrote to the Home Office on August 3, about two unrelated individuals, who were each moved into shared accommodation in Glasgow on 30 and 31 July respectively. Each man subsequently complained about being forced to share with an in-situ occupant Y who appeared to be aggressive with a disturbing mental state. On 30 July, F refused to accept the accommodation because the other occupant Y was extremely hostile. The Mears Housing Officer acceded to his request. We lodged a complaint, but this was dismissed. On 31 July, K was moved into the same accommodation with the same occupant. He stayed one night, but was terrified that the man would attack him, and slept with a chair wedged under the door handle. He fled the flat early the next morning to return to Tartan Lodge. He was never advised by Mears that there was an outstanding complaint against Y, and it would appear that the matter was not investigated, no risk assessment had taken place. On August 3rd, 2020, we wrote to Chris Philp, the immigration minister, and the Home Office to lodge a formal complaint regarding the transfers by Mears on 30 & 31 July 2020. We wanted to know why Mears moved someone into a shared flat without checking the mental state of the other occupant, especially as we had raised concerns. Amarjit Bains, AASC Contract Delivery Director for the Mears Group, replied to us on 14 August, stating: “We don’t accept that people are being transferred in an unreasonable way ... The asylum seeker mentioned in your letter, who was in situ at prior to your clients’ moves, was assessed by a Mears Housing Manager and gave no indication that he suffered from mental health problems as suggested ... If Mears staff were

given any indication that the resident posed a threat to any fellow residents, we would not have placed asylum seekers in the household”.

After this correspondence, a third unrelated man contacted us in September 2020, in a distressed state, saying that he was suffering from domestic violence from the man he was forced to share with. We recognised that this was the same address with the same aggressive flatmate. M says he endured 5 weeks of terror and was in a constant state of fear inside the accommodation. He says he endured bullying, physical threats, was spat upon and sworn at by the other occupant, Y. He further states that Y ordered him to clean the flat and not to leave. M became convinced the man would kill him and he was traumatised at having to stay there with him 24/7 throughout the Lockdown.

According to M’s testimony, he told Mears his concerns, but the housing officer S dismissed his concerns. M says that Migrant Help and Mears each told him there was nothing they could do. He says he felt isolated and alone. On September 19, 2020, M called the Police after a particularly vicious incident where he says he was threatened, spat upon and sworn at. The police interviewed M and advised him not to return to the property for his own safety. M stayed with another asylum seeker for three nights, who himself was jeopardising his occupancy by allowing him to stay. He returned out of desperation around 22 September. The man was not there, and he was terrified of him returning. After a week or so, Mears Housing Staff told M the man would not return, without giving any apology or explanation.

The police arrested and charged the occupant, Y. M had bad memories from the flat and requested a move.

When we advised M that he was the third occupant to have been terrified in this flat, he was shocked and asked why Mears did not inform him before moving. He was unaware, until we advised him, that there had been previous issues with the occupant Y. This matter had been raised by the service users and Positive Action in Housing with the Home Office and Mears but dismissed out of hand.

He sought an explanation as to why he was moved to an address where Mears was alerted not once, but twice before, to concerns about aggressive behaviour from the other occupant. M suffered sleepless nights and anxiety because of the fear and bullying at the address by the other occupant. The Home Office in response dismissed our concerns rather than investigate the complaint.

In light of the Park Inn tragedy, where mental illness was believed to be a factor, the cavalier attitude of Mears’ Housing Management towards people under its duty of care is of continuing cause for concern to this charity. We hoped the Home Office would take our complaints on behalf of asylum seekers seriously and hold Mears to account. Instead, the Home Office dismissed our concerns, and we believe asylum seekers mental well-being and their lives are being put at risk because of incompetence and straight-out disregard.

Many questions remain:

- Would Adnan Walid Elbi have died if he had remained in private accommodation, cooking his own food with his meagre allowance?
- Would the Park Inn tragedy have occurred if 90 hotel residents were allowed to self-isolate in private accommodation?
- Would M have suffered 5 weeks of threats and harassment from his new “flatmate” if Mears had taken seriously the first two complaints from two others?

Only a fully independent public inquiry can answer these and other questions.

COMMUNICATION BETWEEN THE HOME OFFICE AND/OR THE MEARS GROUP AND INDIVIDUALS (“SERVICE USERS”) REGARDING THEIR ASYLUM ACCOMMODATION, INCLUDING ANY CHANGES TO THAT ACCOMMODATION.

In general, we found that the Mears Group dismissed serious concerns that we raised about asylum accommodation.

For example, we sent photographic evidence¹¹ to John Taylor, COO, and the Home Office showing extremely filthy accommodation that was extremely cluttered and asked for remedial action to be taken and our client to be moved. Rather than take on board our concerns and remedy the problem, Mr Taylor instructed his housing officer to go to the flat and take another set of photos - minus the dirty areas. Our client had that morning been sent a letter from the Home Office informing her she could be moved. The Housing Officer S arrived at her flat and took photographs and told her she would not be moving after all and that Mears was “not happy” about Positive Action in Housing highlighting her case. Mr Taylor then replied to us with his sanitised photos and stated that we were misrepresenting the situation and that the flat met the standards. We replied by asked why our client had been given false hope and told she would be moving. We had no option but to involve the Glasgow Press who went round and took a third set of pictures and verified what we had said. That made headlines. The next day a Mears staff member arrived with a home Office representative to inform our client that she was not moving. The next day three cleaners arrived to deep clean the flat and the cooker was replaced as new.

When asylum seekers complain to the Mears Group, they are often treated as if they made their complaint up or simply dismissed as complaining unnecessarily. This is not the way a normal housing provider reacts. A complaint provides an insight to flaws in the system that need fixed.

Culture of Fear

Charities and other community organisations are banned from entering hotels to assist or provide support to residents.

Repeatedly, we have been told by asylum seekers that they don’t want to complain in case it affects their asylum claim. It seems to be fixed in people’s minds the close links between their asylum claim and Mears Group. We have not seen this level of fear within asylum contracts before. We therefore ask whether this is a deliberate strategy to keep down complaints and evidence. It would certainly fit with the home Office’s commitment to a hostile environment. The impact of a culture of fear is that complaints about conditions are suppressed and it is more difficult to get hard evidence from very frightened people.

¹¹ <https://www.glasgowtimes.co.uk/news/18888507.asylum-seeker-forced-live-dirty-glasgow-flat/>

One woman who had been staying at the Park Inn before the June 26 incident described how she was being shown to her room and was then told by a smiling staff member from Mears Group, “We can call the home Office any time”. Sara, a University graduate from Kuwait, said later she would dwell on the words, as to why they were said, were they said just in passing, or was there something more sinister. She had time to dwell on this.

The transition out of hotels was marked by disorganisation and haste. Several service users were in fact moved into substandard accommodation, without ongoing support (Wi-Fi, money, essential, working appliances), with dangerous flatmates.

Many hotel residents reported they received incorrect, confusing or worrying information from Mears Group staff about the consequences of not leaving their flats. One resident reported:

“I was only told that if I didn’t go at the time my home office case will not be accepted” (response 23).

Several hotel residents reported that they were told they could not have visitors otherwise they would be sanctioned. Though this might make sense in relation to the context of a pandemic, this measure should have at least triggered stronger efforts to support people in isolation who had limited means to stay in touch with friends and family. Indeed, some did not have a phone, and had to rely on the kindness of fellow residents in order to contact their loved ones, or, more pragmatically, their solicitor.

Mental Health Support

The absence of financial support suppressed the possibility of residents to decide what need to prioritise. The inability to make choices contributed to further challenges on their own perception of self-dignity.

It appears from several testimonies that not only the services provided in hotels had a negative impact on residents’ mental health, but also that not enough resources were put into mental health support for hotel residents. It has been well known to the Home Office and local authorities’ homelessness teams that hotels are not suitable for long-term accommodation, due to human concentration, lack of privacy, lack of agency and overall institutionalisation involved, and that there have been previous examples of the damaging impact of extended stays in hostels.

People with experience of domestic abuse, torture, imprisonment, trafficking or victims of hate crime were also accommodated in hotels.

30% of all individuals staying in hotels who asked for our help reported a form of mental health issue, whether stress, anxiety, PTSD, depression, etc. IN addition, our Questionnaire for Hotel Residents reflects similar sentiment amongst hotel guests.

“Thanks to everyone but living for 11 months with little money is hard. Just give me a work permit so I can work. My brother is sick, and I just want to be able to take him to see my mother sooner” (response 7)

“If people are not given any money in the hotel and other help that a refugee needs is not given on time, it will have bad effects because they do not provide us with any facilities such as a laptop for learning the language” (response 11)

“No that's all but am against hotel there was time I almost commit suicide but then I thought of my daughter back home” (response 21)

"I hope you can help me with moving to a flat, I can't keep on living like this I'm depressed 😞" (response 22)

Basic Everyday Needs

A significant number of asylum seekers have been in hotels for as long as 8 months or 11 months or even a year. At the time of writing there are several families being accommodated in hotels, with no risk assessment done to assess the psychological harm done to children or family life.

Most self-referrals and requests to us from those in the hotels included a request for cash support. The Home Office states that emergency accommodation is full-board and therefore cash support is unnecessary for subsistence, however the Courts have disagreed and awarded the sum of £8 per week to hotel asylum seekers backdated to October. However, this money has yet to be paid. The reasons why people contacted us for cash support varied, but the priority reasons were:

Phone top-ups: Although Wi-Fi was provided in the hotels, with no cash support residents could not top-up their phones for phone calls, texts or calling abroad.

Food for dietary requirements: those with diabetes or other health conditions reported they often skipped meals due to the inappropriateness of food.

Personal and Specific toiletries: there was no or limited choice for toiletries. This included products for those with Afro-hair, sanitary product choice.

Travel: although we are in the middle of a pandemic, many residents asked for cash support to assist with travel. This was to access community support in the city (including a clothing charity, food bank collections, or other charity support). When the lockdown eased in the Summer and Autumn of 2020, people were unable to visit other parts of the city to meet friends, exercise etc.

Due to a lack of financial agency amongst hotel residents, the issues with the support provided by the Housing Provider were highlighted.

- Food: Food was found to be repetitive, of poor quality, sometimes in too small quantity, and inappropriate to some people. The lack of agency on the food provided (as opposed to regular Section 95 and Section 4 support) had a significant impact on the ability for residents to feed themselves and played negatively on the mental and physical health. Reports on food varied from hotel to hotel. The situation in one hotel was so bad that we intervened and ensured charitable provision of meals for hotel residents. We provided meals to the residents there with the help of local volunteers.
- Evidence of insufficient food provision came with Ramadan, when the absence of cash support meant that hotel residents who wanted to engage in their religious practice could not do it.
- Other items: The fact that all essentials were meant to be provided by hotels meant that residents had no agency, including on items that are intimate and personal, such as hygiene products, but also clothes. Some women reported either no, or incorrect sanitary items upon arrival at the hotels.
- Clothes: A number of people we assisted reported having only a few pieces of garments that they had been relying on for several months without having the possibility to acquire new ones, cleaner, and more suitable. Shoes and clothes were worn out, and in some cases, laundry was available once a week only. As the weather conditions change, this problem will only become more substantial, as the need for waterproof and warm shoes, as well as warm clothes (including winter jackets) will be more pressing.

Accessing Community Support

We awarded crisis support to 285 asylum seekers who were living in hotels or moving out of them. The number of people asking for assistance with health and ESOL/college provision was significantly higher amongst hotel residents than those in dispersal accommodation.

In the early months of 2020, hotel residents were not able to register with GP's, having to rely on the overstretched NHS Asylum Bridging Service. This delayed referrals for mental health support as well as underlying health conditions. We welcome the change where hotel residents are now registered with a GP, however, many still seem uncertain about their rights regarding accessing healthcare, including receiving the covid-19 vaccination.

A striking illustration of this institutionalisation came as we organised to provide additional food for residents of the Tartan Lodge Hotel. As we organised to deliver the food and ensure media presence, so people could speak about their poor living conditions and the length of time they were being kept in the hotels, the doors were kept closed deliberately for half an hour, and residents were prevented from coming out of the hotel.

On multiple separate occasions, we were contacted by Mears Group staff working in hotels asking how we could help their residents access financial support, clothing, ESOL classes. We are a medium sized charity trying to assist people left vulnerable by the home Office asylum contract during Covid and a major outsourcing company with a £1.2B contract was asking us to effectively prop up their contract.

CONCLUSION

Having had to consistently intervene with humanitarian support for over 20 years since forced dispersal first started in Glasgow and having observed the operations of private contract after private contract, we can safely describe the past 18 months under the Mears Contract as the most inhumane we have ever witnessed. Throughout Lockdown, our staff and volunteers have been working on the ground directly with refugee and asylum seekers to distribute support and listen to testimony. We have witnessed countless suffering and zero scrutiny or assessment of risk or vulnerability.

Our evidence highlights abuses of human rights by asylum contractors with zero background in direct housing provision. They are financed to the tune of billions by the U.K. Government. Serious questions need to be asked about their role, and whether they are really accountable for their wrongful actions. Are they even equipped to be housing and arranging schools, GPs and health care for people who are left vulnerable by the state after experiencing considerable mental trauma previous to and during their asylum journey? And worse than that, they then indifference and denial once they seek asylum here.

Mears Group has a contract to execute – transporting asylum seekers into hotels or flats - and anyone who gets in the way of that contract, because of human frailties, becomes a problem to be minimised. A culture of fear appears to be used to suppress complaints and ensure compliance.

The argument used by the Home Office and Mears Group that hotels were safer has no basis in fact and indeed contravenes Covid 19 legislation, public health guidance about social distancing and avoiding crowded places and “staying safe, staying home”. Asylum seekers were forcibly moved from their homes into crowded hotels with others who were suffering their own mental trauma.

It is galling that the immigration minister Chris Philp openly told Parliament on June 29, 2020 that hotels were safer than private accommodation. He then went onto blame 130 asylum seekers for getting covid 19 at Napier Barracks after crowding them into dormitories. These words were said during a lockdown when the government message to millions of people was to stay safe stay home. And hotels were ordered to close. No such consideration was or is afforded to refugees, as if they are not considered to be full human beings.

It was an act of gross negligence to forcibly remove asylum seekers from their private accommodation (where they can do things for themselves, such as wash their own clothes, make their own food, clean their own accommodation); crowd them into hotels with 90 to 100 other people going through similar trauma; institutionalise them and take away all their agency; remove their most basic £5.39 a day and their basic freedoms to choose the most simplest of things, like washing clothes, or buying ingredients for the most humble meal, but something that suits their diet.

Although we are highlighting the situation regarding asylum contracts in Glasgow, we believe that it reflects a racist, hostile environment that is being played out across the UK. What happened at Napier Barracks is the logical continuation of what is being suffered here. People protested the injustice of their living conditions for months and were dismissed. The outcome of treating people as less than human was textbook-predictable.

It's important that we continue to highlight the abuse of human rights suffered by people seeking asylum in the UK, to avoid it becoming normalised. It's also important that we resist the hostile environment being perpetrated by the Home Office, and specifically its own ministers from the Home Secretary down.

History needs to remember that in March 2020 in Glasgow, during Lockdown, the UK Government did not allow refugees to stay safe, stay home. They were crowded into hotels that were emptied to keep "us" safe. Sadly, neither the Glasgow City Council or the Scottish Government used Covid 19 powers to stop or punish the insanity of such a move during a Global Pandemic.

The asylum issue is not going away, the number of refugees in the world is growing by millions each year, we need a solution that is fit for human beings so that we can rebuild our lives without hinderance and contribute to society equally.

This pandemic has taught us that we are all potentially vulnerable and that world economies are not immune to being destabilised and creating havoc in our lives.

Asylum seekers are forbidden to work, hold bank accounts, save money or stand on their own feet while they await a legal resolution to their asylum claim. It can take years. This makes them wholly dependent on Home Office asylum housing contractors who are purely focused on making a profit from the misery of vulnerable people who, conveniently, are languishing for years waiting to get a resolution to a genuine problem.

If people are capable of seeking refuge thousands of miles away from home then they are capable of being able to build on their own resources as generations of immigrants have done in this country, and build communities of support, rent or buy their own accommodation and build from there.

If asylum seekers can work and save and make independent choices, they can regain their agency while they await a decision on their case. This is good for the country as it increases our tax base and reduces the burden on the state. It reduces the need for asylum contracts that control and undermine every aspect of their lives. Finally, it means they are more likely to be able to fend for themselves whatever the outcome of their asylum claim.

If asylum seekers are not encouraged to be independent from the start, then lucrative asylum contracts handed out by the UK government will thrive, but they will do lasting damage to the

individual. Leaving people on the margins with no hope is more likely to create problems for “us”, not just “them”.

Robina Qureshi
Freya Dargavel
Tim Lehuraux

Positive Action in Housing

19 February 2021

Sent: Friday, May 1, 2020 12:11 am
To: PositiveActionInHousing
Subject: FAO: Robina Qureshi re: Mears: Glasgow Asylum seekers

Dear Miss Qureshi

I read an article re "Asylum seekers moved in to Glasgow Hotels" in which Miss Qureshi commented and would look to inform you that i was working in one of the Serviced accommodations provided to Mears for Initial Accommodation and were emptied over the month of April.

Once the people were moved there were times that there were 4-5 people in a welfare vehicle moved at the same time

The people were lied to and told they were moving to long term accommodation
We had people coming back and saying they were not happy with the food and could be up to 30 people in queues at Breakfast/Lunch/Dinner times when they were first moved.

Furthermore all companies have been refused payment for the last month of stay for the Asylum accommodation, with no grounds given.

Mears double booked hotels for the period they were contracted to us, and had enough funds to pay Hotels and accommodation, then tried to irritate contracts with housing providers by hiding behind the guise of booking agents and now blatantly have refused payment for services used in April.

A company the size of Mears with a Home office contract to act like this especially in times of this Pandemic is shocking and shows there lack of business acumen as they demonstrate by with-holding payment and once this pandemic is over how do they expect to go back to the providers they have ripped off.

As a company we had spoke to Mears on a number of occasions to go in to a direct Contract as per previous contractor SERCO had done to provide accommodation, but it seems they were happy to plunder public funds and book via 2 Booking agents who were both adding commissions to the stay's, which in-turn inflated the cost to Mears by at least 30%.

Mears have been given a contract to house vulnerable people, they lack local knowledge of the housing market as they use National companies to source accommodation which is on Mears doorstep, they have angered local providers by their actions in the first 6 months of the Contract by leaving them unpaid and in the lurch at this most difficult time.

Will they look to come back to the providers and expect them to work with them on this highly sensitive project when there will be no trust and have a limited resources to house Asylum seekers, at times on Demand in a quality environment.

We would like this information to be public as they are using public funds and so that companies will not be in the same situation as ours whereby they have not been paid and now are struggling to pay staff.

Would be happy to talk in more detail if required, and would appreciate anonymity.

Kind Regards

Monday, 21 September 2020

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

Email: firstminister@gov.scot

Dear First Minister,

Request for Assistance from the Scottish Government

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

Monday, 21 September 2020

Rt Hon Priti Patel MP
Home Secretary
Home Office
2 Marsham Street
London SW1P 4DF

Dear Home Secretary,

Death of Ugandan Asylum Seeker Mercy Baguma (34) in Glasgow

I am writing on behalf of Positive Action in Housing, a refugee and migrants' 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, Mercy Baguma, a 34-year-old Ugandan asylum-seeking lady was discovered dead on August 22nd 2020 in unexplained circumstances in her accommodation in 24 Kennedar Drive, Glasgow. Her death is the third to take place among Glasgow's refugee community in less than 4 months. Post-mortem results are pending.

Mother and baby had not been heard from between August 18th and 22nd. According to her former partner Eric Nnanna, Mercy was discovered dead in her hallway by police. Her 15 month old baby was discovered clutching an empty milk bottle in an extremely weakened state, having suffered extreme hunger for several days.

At the time of her death Mercy and her baby had been accepted for support, and were under the duty of care of the Home Office. (Several years before, Mercy had limited leave to remain and was working, however when this expired, she lost her job and ran up rent arrears). Mercy contacted our office on August 11th to seek a crisis grant, stating that Migrant Help had not yet provided her with financial support. Mercy had been awarded Home Office support but still not received it - a common occurrence. My purpose in writing to you is to raise concerns in relation to this case:

1. According to Eric Nnanna and other evidence we have seen, Mercy was to be picked up with her baby from her doorstep at 24 Kennedar Drive, Glasgow G51 by Mears staff and moved to a Mears flat on August 19th, 2020. This information will also be recorded and known to Mears, Migrant Help, the Home Office and the Govan based agency that helped Mercy apply for Home Office support in Glasgow. Yet, when asked by the media about its involvement with Mercy, Mears responded that Mercy was not in a Mears flat. This then created the impression in the public eye, during a growing twitterstorm circulating unhelpful false narratives, that Mears and the Home Office were not involved in the accommodation of support of Mercy and her baby in the lead up to her tragic death. Could you also explain why the

Home Office contractor, Mears, sought to distance itself from Mercy's case when questioned by the press?

2. For the record, can you confirm that Mears staff did go to 24 Kennedar Drive on August 19th to move Mercy and Adriel? Assuming this to be the case, we would like to know why Mears did not raise the alarm when Mercy did not answer her door to Mears. That would certainly have saved the baby from experiencing days of isolation and extreme hunger while his mother was dead or dying.
3. Eric Nnanna states that he did not know where Mercy was being moved. He says this is because "Mears doesn't give addresses to asylum seekers". For this reason, Mercy could not give an address to Eric. On Thursday 20th August 2020, having not heard from her in two days, he went to knock on the door of her old flat. All he heard was silence. He therefore assumed that Mercy had been moved by Mears to the new flat. If Mears had given the address to Mercy, she would most certainly have informed Eric and her friends, and he could have checked if she had in fact moved by going to the new address and raising the alarm. He could not have imagined the horror that lay on the other side of that door, that the reason for the silence was that their baby son was basically starving since 18th/19th August when Eric and Mercy's friends last had contact, and that Mercy was dead, or dying. Please advise why asylum seekers are kept in the dark about something as basic as where they are being moved to.
4. We have previously highlighted the practice of withholding of addresses from asylum seekers. Most people do not know where they are being moved until they arrive on the doorstep on the day of the move. And even then, they do not know where they are, and without WIFI, they are lost. People don't know their rights. Many asylum seekers believe that Mears has influence over their asylum case. They are therefore terrified to complain or give their identify. In our experience, Mears tends to keep people in the dark about when and where they are moving, and therefore people do not know what to expect, what questions to ask or even what they can complain about. This also conveniently leads to a reduction in complaints about poor service.
5. Is there a Housing Rights document for Asylum Seekers housed by Mears which we could have sight of?

Finally, you may be aware that on Wednesday 9th September 2020, at the request of David Linden MP, the U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson agreed to intervene in Eric Nnanna and Adriel's case with yourself and consider granting asylum on humanitarian grounds. We would ask that you give this case your consideration.

I await your reply,

Yours sincerely,



Robina Qureshi
Director