



Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Asylum accommodation, HC 769

Tuesday 26 January 2016

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Members present: Keith Vaz (Chair); Victoria Atkins, James Berry, Mr David Burrowes, Nusrat Ghani, Stuart C. McDonald, Naz Shah, Mr Chuka Umunna, Mr David Winnick.

Questions 1 - 170

Examination of Witness

Witnesses: **Peter Neden**, Regional President UK and Ireland, G4S, **John Whitwam**, Managing Director, Immigration and Borders, G4S, and **Stuart Monk**, Owner and Managing Director, Jomast, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: Can I call the Committee to order? This is part of the Committee's remit in looking at the work of the Home Office, in particular on this occasion the provision of accommodation for asylum seekers. Mr Neden, Mr Whitwam, Mr Monk, thank you very much for coming in at such short notice. We really do appreciate it.

Could I start with you, Mr Neden, on an issue that has arisen today? The chief executive of your Medway training centre has just resigned. Is that right?

Peter Neden: Yes, that is correct.

Q2 Chair: Why has he resigned? Is this as a result of the allegations made in respect to the alleged abuse at the training centre?

Peter Neden: It is a direct result of the footage that we saw in "Panorama", where we saw behaviour that was entirely unacceptable, and that is why we have taken the strong action that we have. Five members of staff have been dismissed, four more have been suspended, and our centre director has now also resigned. We are of course co-operating with the police and the local authority in the investigations, and we welcome the announcement this morning by the Secretary of State about creating an independent improvement group at Medway.

Q3 Chair: You must have been shocked when you saw those allegations because you sit at the top of a very large organisation, you have employees, and this must have come as a shock to you. Was that the first time you knew that this was happening at the centre?

Peter Neden: I was shocked and appalled by the allegations, and more so when we saw the footage on “Panorama”. Behaviour of that sort has absolutely no place in our business.

Q4 Chair: Of course, and this Committee has said that on a number of occasions when indeed we have mentioned this to G4S and other providers. We are glad that action is being taken.

Mr Monk, the issue of the red doors has arisen as a result of an article by Andrew Norfolk in *The Times*. If it is true that your company, Jomast, has painted the doors of asylum seekers in red, then that of course would be despicable, would it not?

Stuart Monk: Those doors were painted red probably 20 years ago, or we probably owned those properties over 20 years, and before the advent of asylum accommodation, in actual fact. There was a practice for us to paint the properties those colours in those days, and when we began to transfer the use of those properties by private tenants we did not change the colours.

Q5 Chair: It goes further than that, does it not? What the article reveals is that this was a deliberate act by your company. I did not ask you, “When were they painted?” If they indeed were painted on the doors of those who are asylum seekers, this would point to perhaps a darker age in history when we would somehow identify the doors of certain types of people with a certain colour. That is the point I was making. If indeed that was the case, that would be unacceptable, would it not?

Stuart Monk: It would be unacceptable if that were the case.

Q6 Chair: You are telling this Committee that there was no deliberate decision to paint those properties in red—

Stuart Monk: Exactly.

Chair: —contrary to what we have seen in the newspapers, and contrary to what the Minister told the House in the Commons last week?

Stuart Monk: Exactly.

Q7 Chair: The Minister is wrong?

Stuart Monk: Yes, he is.

Q8 Chair: He is, and you have told him that?

Stuart Monk: I have not told him anything. I have not spoken to him. I have not been asked the question by him. I have not talked to him.

Q9 Chair: The Immigration Minister came before the House of Commons, expressing concern about this. You have not bothered to contact the Home Office to say, “Actually, all our properties have the doors painted red”.

Stuart Monk: The Home Office has been inspecting these properties for 20 years. It has been well aware they have been painted red.

Q10 Chair: It knew that the doors of asylum seekers were being painted red?

Stuart Monk: It has been inspecting the properties. Yes, that will be the case. Yes.

Q11 Chair: The Home Office was aware of this?

Stuart Monk: Yes.

Q12 Chair: What you are saying is, because they were aware of it, if they were concerned, they should have said to you, as the owner of the company, “This is not on. You should not have doors painted red, identifying asylum seekers, because this would be despicable to do so”?

Stuart Monk: Exactly.

Q13 Chair: But they never said this to you?

Stuart Monk: That is right.

Q14 Chair: Nobody said it to you?

Stuart Monk: No. Nobody said it to us.

Q15 Chair: It is very odd, because this morning I spoke to Ahmad Zubair, one of your former tenants, who was an asylum seeker, and he told me that he had gone to your staff and told them specifically over the years—this was two years ago—that he was suffering from abuse because the door of his house was red, and the doors of other asylum seekers were also red. He then went with a pot of paint and he painted his door white because he was fed up of having people abusing him because they identified the property as being the property of an asylum seeker. Your officers then went around and repainted the front door red. That is not acceptable behaviour, is it?

Stuart Monk: We were not aware of any reported incident giving rise to any issues regarding that red door. There was no reported incident. There has not been a reported incident regarding a red door issue received by my company or by G4S in all of the time that we have been providing this service. There has not been one single reported incident.

Q16 Chair: Former councillor Suzanne Fletcher approached you, approached Parliament, approached representatives of G4S—and I will put it to them—and she, a local councillor, said that this was the case this morning on BBC Radio Middlesbrough. The former Member of Parliament for Redcar, a member of the Public Accounts Committee, two years ago said that he was concerned that asylum seekers were subjected to abuse because the doors of their properties were painted red. It appears that everyone knew about this, Mr

Monk—the Home Office; Mr Zubair and other people living in those homes; Suzanne Fletcher, a local councillor; and the local MP for Redcar—but you and your company knew absolutely nothing about this.

Stuart Monk: We had no reported incidents from any asylum seekers.

Q17 Chair: You have no emails that have been sent to you, expressing concern that the homes of asylum seekers have been painted red?

Stuart Monk: Not from any asylum seeker, no.

Q18 Chair: Have you had it from G4S?

Stuart Monk: No.

Q19 Chair: From nobody?

Stuart Monk: Nobody.

Q20 Chair: The first you heard of it and saw of it is when you opened *The Times* last Tuesday?

Stuart Monk: The reporter had spoken to me and I was not in a position to make any comment.

Q21 Chair: Why?

Stuart Monk: Because I am not allowed to make any comment under the contractor provisions.

Q22 Chair: You have now decided to repaint these doors?

Stuart Monk: Yes.

Q23 Chair: Why, if you have done nothing wrong?

Stuart Monk: Because what was not an incident or what was not an apparent issue became an apparent issue. The Home Office has been around and inspected all of the properties again just to see that they are all compliant properties, and they have instructed us that we repaint them a different colour.

Q24 Chair: Mr Monk, as the owner of this company, you are in receipt of many millions of pounds from the taxpayer, indirectly from G4S. Should you not have taken it upon yourself, knowing that this is a contract that you value, to make sure that you act in a humane way, and, being notified of this, you should have acted immediately to try to see what was going on? You are telling us, very Pontius Pilate-like, that you had nothing to do with this and you did not know about it.

Stuart Monk: We have had no reported incidents from any asylum seekers regarding doors at all.

Q25 Chair: Ever?

Stuart Monk: Ever.

Q26 Chair: You have looked at all your files?

Stuart Monk: That is correct.

Q27 Chair: Do you know that if witnesses give evidence to Committees and it subsequently turns out that they have misled the Committee, it is a very, very serious matter?

Stuart Monk: Indeed I do. What I am saying is I am not aware of any reported issues from asylum seekers regarding the issue of red doors.

Q28 Chair: How many properties do you have for asylum seekers in Middlesbrough?

Stuart Monk: Of the order of—

John Whitwam: 298.

Stuart Monk: 300, I was going to say.

Q29 Chair: Sorry, Mr Whitwam, we will come to you. I think the witnesses should be allowed to answer their own questions. We will come to G4S. How many properties?

Stuart Monk: Over 300, I would say.

Q30 Chair: Those are for asylum seekers?

Stuart Monk: Yes.

Q31 Chair: How many of those properties have red doors?

Stuart Monk: G4S have done a physical count and it is about 59% of the houses, I do believe. That is the position that they are—

Q32 Chair: That is 59% of the 300?

Stuart Monk: Of the houses. That figure includes apartments, which will not have red doors. What I am saying is, of the dwelling houses, I think that there are just a little bit over 200 houses.

Chair: You have 200 dwelling houses? We will adjourn the Committee and come back because I cannot hear you over the bell. We will adjourn the Committee shortly.

Sitting suspended.

On resuming—

Q33 Chair: Mr Monk, you were just telling us how many dwelling houses you had that were available for asylum seekers. You said the number 200, is that right?

Stuart Monk: I think 200, yes.

Q34 Chair: 200? How many of those have red doors?

Stuart Monk: It is 59%. G4S have done a calculation. They have been around and inspected and calculated it.

Q35 Chair: Of the dwelling houses? 200?

Stuart Monk: That is what they tell me, yes.

Q36 Chair: Let us turn to you, Mr Whitwam. You had your hand up; I assume you were not trying to leave the room?

John Whitwam: I am sorry.

Q37 Chair: These are very serious matters, because I am sure you would accept—and certainly from the statements we have seen from the company—that if doors were painted a certain colour, in this case red, to identify asylum seekers, this would be a despicable and horrifying thing to do?

John Whitwam: I agree with you completely.

Q38 Chair: Do you want to, on behalf of G4S, dissociate yourself from any assumption that this is in fact what happened?

John Whitwam: I would, and I would like to add some detail, if I may?

Chair: Please.

John Whitwam: This was raised by Suzanne Fletcher in 2012. G4S looked into it, found there was no policy, then looked into our service centre. You may or may not know that there is a service centre that is run 24/7, and we take about 2,500 calls every month from the 17,000 asylum seekers that we accommodate on behalf of the Home Office. We saw that there had been no suggestion from any of those asylum seekers of the linkage between intimidation—certainly intimidation has existed—but not linked to either red doors or any other element of identification.

In 2014 it was raised again with my predecessor in similar surroundings to these and again it was looked into. So, it was looked into at the suggestion of Suzanne Fletcher. Twice we have looked to see whether or not there is any indication that a service user—an asylum seeker—has raised this as an issue, and we found that they have not, and we receive an awful lot of calls about it. We have also gone back and looked at our own managers. I have 130 people in the North East, Yorkshire and Humberside. There are nearly 50 of my team there. There is no evidence. Nonetheless, this was raised by *The Times* that then caused us to go up and count every single house. There are 298, so just shy of 300.

Q39 Chair: All owned by Jomast?

John Whitwam: I do not know whether they are owned by, but certainly controlled by.

Chair: Controlled?

John Whitwam: We subcontract in Middlesbrough, so of the 298 houses, last week when the story broke we went up and we counted every one. Through the letterbox we put a letter reminding the asylum seekers, “If you fear intimidation or have anything that is going wrong for you, then ring the number,” which is our contact centre, and we counted every door that was red and every door that was not. 175 doors out of 298 were red and, as Mr Monk said, that is about 58%, 59%.

Q40 Chair: Mr Monk says the Minister is wrong to be concerned. Do you agree with him?

John Whitwam: This is a live issue. I think it is wrong—

Q41 Chair: But do you agree with Mr Monk that the Minister is wrong in what he said to Parliament last Tuesday? One would imagine that the Home Office would look into this very carefully before they sent a Minister to the Dispatch Box to make a statement.

John Whitwam: There may be too many negatives in that for me to understand your question. What I am clear about is the—

Q42 Chair: All right, let me say this: do you think the Minister was right in what he said?

John Whitwam: The Minister was right to point out that, had this been a policy issue—

Q43 Chair: No, he regarded it as being a policy issue because somebody gave an assurance that these front doors were going to be painted a different colour.

John Whitwam: Yes.

Q44 Chair: I find it very odd, if you think there is nothing wrong with it, that there is no policy to have painted the doors red, that you now initiate a procedure to paint them different colours. Why would you do that if you think you have done nothing wrong?

John Whitwam: I understand, absolutely.

Q45 Chair: It sounds very much as if you felt that you did do something wrong and therefore let us put this matter beyond discussion and paint the doors different colours.

John Whitwam: I understand the question. That is not the case. We have yet to find any linkage between the colour of door, or any other identifying feature of any of the properties, and the intimidation. We have taken some soundings on this. We have also spoken to the senior police officer in Cleveland who confirms that, to his knowledge, there has been no linkage between antisocial behaviour and red doors. Nonetheless, we have

undertaken as a precaution to paint the doors so there is no predominating colour, and that started yesterday.

Q46 Chair: How long will that take?

John Whitwam: I do not know. With your permission, I would ask Mr Monk, who is carrying out the painting.

Q47 Chair: Yes, of course. Mr Monk, who is carrying out the painting? Are you doing this yourself, or—

Stuart Monk: Yes, yes.

Chair: You are? You are personally going around and repainting the doors?

Stuart Monk: My company.

Chair: Your company is?

Stuart Monk: Yes.

Q48 Chair: When will it be finished, because it sounds, if it is such an easy thing to do, presumably you would do this very quickly and put all this beyond doubt?

Stuart Monk: A couple of weeks. Of the order of a couple of weeks.

Q49 Chair: A couple of weeks? Because we were told months, when the Minister appeared before the House. So it is two weeks?

Stuart Monk: We decided that we should accelerate that.

Q50 Chair: Mr Whitwam, you have not sent any emails, or the company has not received any emails, about the concerns about these doors a few years ago. Mr Swales, the Member of Parliament for Redcar, was on the radio this morning indicating that he had raised this before with yourselves.

John Whitwam: I have no record of that.

Q51 Chair: You have no email trail—

John Whitwam: I have spoken to everybody: my predecessors and people who have been at every single one of the strategic migration partnerships for the North East, of which there was one today. There is neither record of it nor recollection from the people who were there present.

Q52 Chair: Is the COMPASS contract really important to G4S?

John Whitwam: It is fundamentally important to us.

Q53 Chair: How much is it worth?

John Whitwam: In terms of revenue it is worth £60 million a year, on average. It depends entirely on how many asylum seekers come in. But you will also be aware that the full story is that this is a loss-making contract for G4S.

Q54 Chair: You have said that to the Committee before when we have asked you how much does it cost to put an asylum seeker up in one of the accommodations with yourselves. You have said you are making a loss on this. You are making no profit on this at all?

John Whitwam: Correct.

Q55 Chair: Why are you doing it then?

John Whitwam: We have an obligation. We have a contract with the Home Office. My job is to make sure we deliver against that contract.

Q56 Chair: I want to bring Mr Burrowes in next on the email issue. I am just looking at your report, the strategic report of Care and Justice Services. You are the head of Care and Justice Services?

John Whitwam: I am not, no. I am head of the COMPASS project, the COMPASS contract, which is part of Immigration and Borders. A different part of the business.

Q57 Chair: Then Mr Neden could answer this question. In your strategic report for the year ended 31 December 2014, it said this, “In 2012 the company entered a contract, the COMPASS contract, with the Ministry of Justice for the provision of accommodation to asylum seekers, from 2012 to 2017, with a potential extension of further years at the customer’s request.” Is that correct?

Peter Neden: It is the Home Office.

Chair: But it is not the Ministry of Justice, is it?

Peter Neden: It is the Home Office.

Q58 Chair: Why would you say, on a contract as important as this, that you had entered into a contract with the Ministry of Justice, when of course COMPASS is a Home Office contract?

Peter Neden: I can only apologise for that error. I was not aware of that.

Q59 Chair: It is not to me. Thank you for the apology; we always like apologies at this Committee. But presumably it is for your shareholders and for anyone else who is dealing with your company. That is a fundamental error, is it not?

Peter Neden: It is a mistake, yes. The contract is with the Home Office.

Q60 Chair: How will you correct it?

Peter Neden: We will correct it in the next Annual Report.

Q61 Chair: In respect of fines due on the Ministry of Justice contract for electronic tagging, how much was your fine?

Peter Neden: From memory, we paid back £105.8 million.

Q62 Chair: Back to the Ministry of Justice?

Peter Neden: Back to the Ministry of Justice.

Q63 Chair: Has it all been paid?

Peter Neden: Yes, it has.

Q64 Chair: Is it not embarrassing to you, as the president of this company, covering Europe and the United Kingdom, that G4S is constantly in the news for all these matters, first of all in Medway, then in respect of the electronic tagging issue, now in respect of the red doors? Is that not an embarrassment? Do you not feel the company is perhaps going in the wrong direction?

Peter Neden: Clearly, some of those events are very disappointing, but I do not think that describes the full record of our business. I lead a business in the UK and Ireland that employs 40,000 people. We serve thousands of customers, and as I walk around and visit the prisons where we are helping offenders turn their lives around or visit Wimbledon where we are keeping visitors safe, or indeed visit the schools and hospitals where we are cleaning wards after Ebola victims have been treated, I see a group of people that are really passionate about what they do and work very, very hard. I am very, very proud of the work that we do. If you would like to visit any of our facilities, or indeed the COMPASS programme, we would be very happy to have you, or any member of the Committee.

Q65 Chair: We had a similar statement from Mr Buckles when he last came before the Committee. I think you also have a company song, and maybe even a flag of your own.

Peter Neden: I am not aware of a flag and I am not aware of a company song.

Q66 Chair: Please tell Mr Hartley, who signed off this statement on 9 April 2015, that there is a difference between the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office.

Peter Neden: I will have that corrected.

Q67 Mr Burrowes: An asylum seeker who contributed to the North East Regional Refugee Forum and DASUK made the comment, that was agreed by all those asylum seekers who form that group, that “All we ask for is to be treated with dignity and respect.” Is that what you ask for as far as all those who work for you in relation to those houses? Can I ask all of you that, and also is that what you think is the case in relation to the COMPASS document?

Peter Neden: The COMPASS programme is—

Q68 Mr Burrowes: Do you agree with the same mission statement, effectively, as the asylum seeker who spoke on behalf of all his group, “All we ask for is to be treated with dignity and respect?”

Peter Neden: Of course I think that people should be treated with dignity and respect.

John Whitwam: I not only think people should be treated with dignity and respect, but they should also be given adequate accommodation.

Stuart Monk: Absolutely.

Q69 Mr Burrowes: If we go to this email exchange, who was the security company’s social cohesion manager in 2012?

Peter Neden: I am not aware of who the social cohesion manager was at that date.

Q70 Mr Burrowes: Do you know?

John Whitwam: It is before my time, but I can tell you who is now.

Q71 Mr Burrowes: It is 2012, because this is the email that *The Times* has seen, that told Teeside asylum campaigners that he had asked the audit assurance team at G4S to look into the issue of the red doors. Have you seen that email trail?

John Whitwam: I have not seen the email trail but I do know this was raised by Suzanne Fletcher twice, as I said, in 2012 and 2014.

Q72 Mr Burrowes: There are emails with your staff in relation to the red doors?

John Whitwam: You have asked me if I have seen the email. The answer is no. I am aware that Suzanne Fletcher raised it and we looked into it on two occasions, in 2012 and 2014—on both occasions finding that there was no policy, only recently having counted every single house to find there is a little over half of the houses that are red.

Q73 Mr Burrowes: The comment that was made to *The Times* was that, “We reviewed the issue at the time and it was not considered significant enough among asylum seekers to warrant repainting the doors.” That is accurate?

John Whitwam: I do not dispute it, but I cannot say because I do not have that in front of me.

Q74 Mr Burrowes: That is apparently what was said just a few days ago, by G4S. Do you agree with that comment? “We reviewed the issue at the time—”

John Whitwam: I do agree with those comments, but those are not my words.

Q75 Mr Burrowes: No, but you agree that on behalf of G4S, “It was not considered significant enough among asylum seekers to warrant repainting the doors?”

John Whitwam: I would not use those words. What I would say is, on the two occasions it was looked into—

Mr Burrowes: I am just asking whether you agree with that comment.

John Whitwam: I would not use those words.

Q76 Mr Burrowes: This was a spokesman on behalf of G4S. Peter Neden, do you agree with that?

Peter Neden: If we knew then what we know now—

Mr Burrowes: I am just asking about the comment a few days ago that was on behalf of G4S, whether it was accurate, that you had reviewed the issue at the time and it was not considered significant among asylum seekers to warrant repainting the doors.

Peter Neden: If I may? At the time we looked at it, we found that we had no complaints from asylum seekers—

Q77 Mr Burrowes: It seems to be that the basis of not doing anything about it was the lack of complaints from the asylum seekers?

Peter Neden: Lack of complaints from the asylum seekers, confirmation from the police that they did not feel there was a safety issue, inspection by the Home Office and the local authority that the properties we were providing were suitable, and on the basis of that we concluded that we did not need to repaint the doors. We have now decided, as a precautionary—

Mr Burrowes: So there is a big hoo-ha in the press—

Peter Neden: We have now decided, as a precautionary measure, just to be absolutely certain, that we will get on and repaint the doors.

Q78 Mr Burrowes: The spokesman for G4S said, “With the information now available, we can see that our earlier decision was ill-judged.” In what way was it ill-judged, the decision back in 2012? That is what G4S says.

John Whitwam: If I can answer for me? The reason I did not agree with that statement is because this is not a question of significance. One person who feels that their door—

Q79 Chair: Sorry, order, Mr Whitwam. The point that Mr Burrowes is making is that this is a statement on behalf of a company of which you are sitting in front of the Committee for. Mr Neden asked for you to be brought here. If you do not agree with statements put out by your own company then you should say so. Was this a statement put out by G4S or not? Mr Neden?

Peter Neden: I do not know the exact words. I—

Chair: He has just read it to you three times.

Peter Neden: I do not have the exact words that we sent out as our—

Chair: He will read it to you again.

Peter Neden: I do not have the exact words—

Mr Burrowes: I have the words right here—“We reviewed the issue at the time and it was not considered significant enough among asylum seekers to warrant repainting the doors. While there was never any policy to discriminate among asylum seekers, with the information now available, we can see that earlier decision was ill-judged and we have committed to repaint the doors within a matter of weeks.” That was a statement on behalf of G4S. I did not see a subsequent note in *The Times* that it was incorrect or in error. That was a statement from G4S.

Q80 Chair: The point that Mr Burrowes is making is that it is different to the evidence you have just given us or what Mr Whitwam has just given us, which is that, “We have not done anything wrong. The Minister was told certain things and he came before the House. We have never had any complaints, but we are going to repaint the doors”. What Mr Burrowes has just said, having read out the email—I am just trying to spell it out so there are not too many negatives for you, Mr Whitwam—

John Whitwam: Thank you.

Chair: —is that you have said it was not significant and the decision made previously was ill-judged. Do you accept that the decision made previously was ill-judged? That is all Mr Burrowes wants to know.

Peter Neden: As I say, if we had known then what we know now, that people were concerned about their safety, we would have got on and—

Q81 Chair: You stand by the statement of your company, that it was an ill-judged decision not to do anything?

Peter Neden: I am saying if we had known then what we know now, we would have got on and repainted the doors.

Q82 Mr Burrowes: The issue is based on knowing about those complaints? The question I put to you goes back to the statement made at the beginning—is it an issue about the numbers of complaints or is it an issue about the principle that this asylum seeker said that, “All we ask for is to be treated with dignity and respect”? Isn’t it plain for anyone to see that painting those doors red—I appreciate it is a historical issue, but the fact that it was attributed to those asylum seekers that they had red doors—it should not need to take a complaint, for an asylum seeker to go through a process of complaint, for a responsible company to realise that you are not treating people with dignity and respect. Is it not a lack of judgment?

Peter Neden: The facts are that there are 175 doors that are painted red.

Q83 Mr Burrowes: We have heard the facts. I am asking you whether your judgment should not just be based on the numbers that complain but that, as you said yourself, you value and you take seriously the issue of dignity and respect? That is the issue of judgment that was failing there.

Chair: Is it a yes or a no? Then we can move on.

Peter Neden: If we had known then what we know now, we would have got on and repainted the doors. But we did not know that then.

Q84 Mr Burrowes: Just taking this a bit wider, we have seen evidence from Suzanne Fletcher, as we mentioned before, drawing on this partnership group that is there. She provides evidence—and I just wanted to put this to you, whether this also is consistent with treating people with dignity and respect—of pregnant women who have been dispersed in the late stages of pregnancy, who have not had the relevant information about the availability of medical services, and moves for women with complications in pregnancy asked for by the medical profession have been ignored by the housing provider. Do you think that is treating those women with dignity and respect?

John Whitwam: It is certainly not, but I do not think that ever happens.

Q85 Mr Burrowes: You do not think it ever happens?

John Whitwam: On a number of occasions, people will have a medical request to be moved. Sometimes the asylum seekers accept that and sometimes they do not. In all cases where there is a question of judgment about the welfare of the service user, we revert to the Home Office and ask them, “Is it appropriate to move someone?”

Q86 Mr Burrowes: We are talking about women here. The service users are women, late stages of pregnancy—

John Whitwam: Yes, it is not always appropriate to move somebody in the late stages of pregnancy. I would only do so on two counts: first, because there was medical evidence that this was appropriate and, secondly, with the approval of the Home Office.

Q87 Mr Burrowes: You dispute they have ever been ignored?

John Whitwam: I dispute that they have ever been ignored.

Q88 Mr Burrowes: One final question. It has also been suggested to the Committee that there have been very inappropriate comments and gestures made to residents by employees having no regard to cultural sensitivities, and that people from different backgrounds with no common language have been expected to share rooms in shared houses, and cooking equipment is being shared with no understanding of religious practices and cultural practices. Is any of that true?

John Whitwam: I do not think it is. As for the cooking, every individual who moves into our accommodation is given their own cooking utensils, so there is no possibility of anyone sharing, except if they lose their cooking utensils. If they do they can call our service centre and we will issue them with new ones.

Mr Burrowes: Equipment. Cooking equipment.

John Whitwam: Cooking equipment, sorry.

Q89 Mr Winnick: Mr Monk, you gave the impression that you could not see any particular problem. Would it be right to say that you think this has been blown out of all proportion?

Stuart Monk: I do think a lot has been made of it, because we have not had any reported incidents at all. That is the position. We have had an exemplary record in terms of the provision of the services from the start of our contract.

Q90 Mr Winnick: Do you think that the Members of Parliament who have expressed concern, including the Minister, were clearly wrong in saying what was said in the House of Commons last week, of the practice of asylum seekers being put in houses where the doors are painted red? There is no reason to be concerned about that?

Stuart Monk: There are not more than a handful of houses in any one street. The police community officer who has been there for 13 years did not know asylum seekers were housed behind red doors. I think that some of the things that we have seen on the television need to be properly investigated. I am not challenging whether they are correct, but we have certain information that might mean that some of those reports are not correct. All we are saying is that wherever we have not received any reported incident—we have been involved in providing this accommodation with these properties with those front doors for nearly 20 years—there has not been a reported incident about this matter.

Q91 Mr Winnick: I put it to you, Mr Monk, that when the inquiries were made by *The Times* in two of the poorest areas of Middlesbrough, there were 155 houses owned by you with red front doors. When the reporter visited 66 of them, 62 were home to asylum seekers. Do you think that is just coincidence?

Stuart Monk: It is good accommodation that we are providing. The people in this community would challenge the fact. It is a criticism of people in this community, in my view, because they do not think that there has been any behaviour against—

Mr Winnick: But surely common sense dictates—

Stuart Monk: This community welcomes and feels that asylum seekers strengthen their community.

Q92 Mr Winnick: I am just wondering if you, yourself, instead of being one of the very prosperous people in the area—I think *The Sunday Times* has you with an estimated wealth of £175 million, Mr Monk—were in a position of being an asylum seeker and you were given a temporary place to live and the door was painted a certain colour that identified you as an asylum seeker, I wonder if you would take the same rather, if I may say so, complacent attitude that you are taking before this Committee?

Stuart Monk: Absolutely not.

Chair: I am sorry, we did not hear that.

Stuart Monk: Absolutely not.

Chair: Absolutely not?

Mr Winnick: You are not being complacent about the matter?

Stuart Monk: Absolutely not.

Q93 Mr Winnick: But the doors are being repainted by your company?

Stuart Monk: They are being repainted by our company.

Q94 Mr Winnick: That must surely mean that, since you otherwise would not have done so, it is because of what appeared in *The Times* newspaper, the row in the House of Commons, and the public concern in many quarters about what is happening. Otherwise, you would not be doing this, would you?

Stuart Monk: It has been made a really big issue and we obviously have to respond to that. But what we are saying is before last week it was not an issue. It has become an issue and we have responded to it as quickly as we possibly can.

Q95 Mr Winnick: It has just become an issue because of MPs and so on, I see. How much of this business is part of the overall company that you run? In other words, if I put it more clearly, this company that you own—of which you are sole owner, as I understand it—how much of that business arises from accommodation for asylum seekers that G4S have asked you to provide?

Stuart Monk: Well, 25%, 30% of my overall business activities.

Q96 Mr Winnick: Arises from this? It is quite a profitable thing for you, isn't it? It has helped to build up, should we say, your very considerable fortune?

Stuart Monk: I do not think the business that we are operating at the moment is very profitable in terms of the provision of asylum accommodation.

Mr Winnick: But you have done very well out of this contract?

Chair: Thank you, Mr Monk.

Mr Winnick: Hang on, just a reply. You have done very well—

Stuart Monk: I have not done very well out of this contract.

Q97 Mr Winnick: But you said, of this particular contract, about 25, 30% of your entire business arises from providing accommodation for asylum seekers. If you can just say yes or no?

Stuart Monk: It is not as simple as that. It is not a simple yes or no answer I am afraid.

Q98 Mr Winnick: Well, you did give the answer just a moment ago.

Stuart Monk: Okay. Are you talking about revenue or are we talking about profitability? The answer, what I am saying, is this particular contract is not very profitable at all.

Q99 Chair: Thank you. I think we must end it there.

In his evidence Mr Whitwam referred to emails: had you been informed by G4S of any of the concerns that had been expressed to them?

Stuart Monk: I have not.

Chair: So those emails read out by Mr Burrowes had never reached your—

Stuart Monk: Had never found their way to me.

Q100 Chair: You have never heard of Suzanne Fletcher before.

Stuart Monk: I have heard of Suzanne Fletcher before, yes.

Chair: She has never contacted you before?

Stuart Monk: She may well have contacted us. She has contacted us about lots of things.

Chair: But not about this?

Stuart Monk: Not about red doors as far as my records are concerned.

Chair: Not about red doors. Is your front door red, Mr Monk?

Stuart Monk: No, it isn't red.

Q101 Mr Umunna: Following on from Mr Winnick and just so I understand the business model that you use in this part of your business, you buy up cheap homes in some of the most deprived communities and you are making money out of housing some of the most vulnerable and poor people in some of the most deprived and poor places in our country. That is correct, isn't it, Mr Monk?

Stuart Monk: That is not an accurate description, no.

Q102 Mr Umunna: How is it not accurate?

Stuart Monk: We provide probably the best standard of asylum accommodation in the country by some considerable margin. We have provided an exemplary service throughout the contract. We have not breached one KPI. We have a track record second to none in this business and I have emails to prove it from the Home Office.

Mr Umunna: Mr Monk, that was not really the question.

Stuart Monk: Well, that is the answer.

Q103 Mr Umunna: What I was saying is that you buy up comparatively cheap real estate. That is correct, is it not, relative to the average house price in the United Kingdom?
[Interruption.]

Chair: Mr Monk, just wait for Mr Umunna to finish, then please feel free.

Mr Umunna: That is correct, is it not?

Stuart Monk: It depends. We will buy accommodation or property in appropriate locations. This is a sophisticated business. It is a complex business. It has to be handled professionally.

Mr Umunna: Mr Monk, I asked you—

Stuart Monk: What I am saying is we buy properties in appropriate locations and we spend an enormous—

Mr Umunna: —you buy—

Chair: Mr Umunna, sorry. Order.

Stuart Monk: I can't answer the question.

Chair: No. Please answer the question. Finish your answer.

Stuart Monk: But can I answer it?

Chair: Of course. Yes, please.

Stuart Monk: What I am saying is, we buy a property in appropriate locations and it is a sophisticated business. We know exactly how to spend the money wisely to create the type of products that are suitable for housing asylum seekers and we have—*[Interruption.]*

Chair: Mr Umunna, please let him finish. Have you finished?

Mr Umunna: It would be good if I got an answer, Chair.

Chair: Mr Umunna, it is not a first if a witness does not give us the answers that we want. Have you finished, Mr Monk?

Stuart Monk: I am trying to get the point about—

Chair: Please finish and then Mr Umunna will ask you a question.

Stuart Monk: We spend money, invest money, very wisely and we create really good accommodation for asylum seekers. The Home Office are fully aware of that. The standard of accommodation that we provide is second to none. It is by a significant margin better than anything else in the country.

Q104 Mr Umunna: Mr Monk, did you deny that you are buying property at significantly below the average price of a UK property? Do you deny that?

Stuart Monk: Well, property values in the north-east are significantly less than in other parts of the country.

Mr Umunna: So you do not deny that?

Stuart Monk: Well, it's—

Q105 Mr Umunna: Let me move on to the second part of what I have said, which is that you are buying these properties in some of the most deprived parts of this country. Middlesbrough has a degree of deprivation in parts of that community and you have properties located in those deprived communities. Do you deny that?

Stuart Monk: We have owned properties in Middlesbrough for 30 to 40 years but in the last two to three years, shall we say for the duration of this contract, 90% of our investment has been in Newcastle and Gateshead and that is not in the poorest localities; that is in the most appropriate locations in Newcastle and Gateshead in which to house asylum seekers.

Q106 Mr Umunna: It seems to me that what you have here is a business model, perfectly lawful, and you have said it is not terribly profitable but clearly is profitable, and on the face of it, to most people who read about what has been happening in this story it looks like you profit from deprivation and people's need for refuge, which to many people seems unseemly and unsavoury.

Chair: Mr Monk, would you answer that?

Stuart Monk: That is absolutely not the case. We provide an exemplary service. The accommodation that is required to house asylum seekers is not available in the marketplace. To procure it you have to know what to do; you have to know where to acquire the property.

Chair: Your final question, Mr Umunna.

Q107 Mr Chuka Umunna: G4S, there is clearly an issue with the numbers that are being housed in Middlesbrough. What I want to know from either of you is why you have a situation where the numbers housed in Middlesbrough are above the 1 in 200 threshold. Why are so many people being housed in this particular community? This is an issue that has been raised by the local MP, Andy McDonald, who is in this room. We do not seem to have an answer to this question.

John Whitwam: I can answer that question. The only way for G4S or the other two providers to get any kind of dispersed accommodation is to go to a local authority and ask them for permission to acquire property to use as an asylum seeker house. The next stage is to find landlords prepared to either buy or rent that property. Having done so, we then have to go back to the local authority and ask them to come and inspect the property to confirm it meets the regulations of the Housing Act 2004 and the additional aspects of the COMPASS contract. Only when those three things have happened can that property be used. Subsequent to that, individuals can be moved into that property and that property is inspected every month by the provider. In Middlesbrough it is Jomast—everywhere else let's say it is G4S—and by the local authority and by the Home Office. I know for example that the Home Office happened to be in Middlesbrough in November because members of my team went round with members of Jomast and got a clean bill of health.

Q108 Mr Umunna: So who is responsible for going above the 1 in 200 threshold in Middlesbrough? Are you accusing the local authority of being responsible for that? Or are you accusing the Home Office of being responsible for that? Or is there responsibility on both their parts?

John Whitwam: I am making no accusations. I am merely stating one fact if I may, which is that every property that any provider has, they have only with the permission of the local authority.

You asked a question specifically about Middlesbrough. In November, Middlesbrough did ask the Home Office and G4S to come before them. They presented their requirement for the numbers to be reduced and since that meeting on 20 November by mutual consent we have been reducing those numbers.

Mr Umunna: I still do not have an answer to the question.

Chair: Mr Monk wants to come in here.

Stuart Monk: We have an email from the Home Office. Middlesbrough Council used to be part of the North East Consortium of Local Authorities. When Middlesbrough Council was a member of that consortium the cluster limit was increased to 890. I have an email here that confirmed we should operate on the basis of that cluster limit. That was provided at the beginning of the contract.

Q109 Chair: That is very helpful. Unfortunately the Committee does not have that email.

Stuart Monk: I can pass that to you.

Chair: We cannot read it now. What would be very helpful is you have said in answer to Mr Umunna that you have numerous emails from the Home Office praising the work that you are doing and the good standards that you have reached. We would like you to send that to this Committee because the Committee may well decide on a wider inquiry to look at this issue based on what we have heard today.

Q110 James Berry: Mr Monk, I could understand your evidence if you were saying, “I own lots of property. That is my business. I choose to paint all the doors red. It is my property; I can do what I like, and some of them, but not all of them, happen to house asylum seekers”. But looking at the evidence we have it seems it is not the case that every single one of your doors is painted red. That is correct, is it not?

Stuart Monk: That’s right. Not all.

Q111 James Berry: You have access to other paint colours. What determines the colour of paint for the door?

Stuart Monk: We have not had any specific policy on painting door colours unfortunately and that is probably, with the benefit of hindsight, a mistake in that we have largely left it to the discretion of the people who were doing the refurbishment operation.

Q112 James Berry: Here where you do have a variation in door colours by your own admission and where you are handling a public contract—a major one whether or not it is profitable—dealing, as Mr Umunna says, with some of the most vulnerable people in our society, you do need to be able to answer these kinds of question against a set policy or procedure, do you not?

Stuart Monk: Exactly.

Q113 James Berry: Would you be looking to make sure that is the case in future?

Stuart Monk: I certainly would.

Q114 James Berry: With respect to G4S, am I right that your evidence is that if concerns had been raised with you about this before, if asylum seekers had called your hotline and said, “We believe we are getting targeted here because the doors to these houses are red” you would have ordered them to be repainted?

John Whitwam: I certainly would have looked into it and found the information I have now. Now I know it is 60% and in Scotland it is 52%. Would I have done something about it? Yes, I would. I did not know that until a week ago.

Q115 James Berry: The nature of your contract with Jomast is such that you can specify the door colour, can you?

John Whitwam: It is not necessary to make this contractual because Jomast and G4S are of one mind, that we need to do this. We need to make sure there is no predominating colour. Today it is just over 50% red. That is not what we want. We are doing something about it.

Q116 James Berry: So you want a variation in colours so that the average person passing in the street or someone else, a private citizen living in the road, would not necessarily know that it is an asylum seeker house.

John Whitwam: Absolutely yes, that is what I want. Of course it would be naive to think that the colour of the front door is the only identifying feature but what I have to do is make sure that I present no identifying feature.

Q117 Chair: You have given us a percentage now and you have said that is too high, 50%?

John Whitwam: 53% of the houses in Stockton—

Chair: That is too high? I am just interested in this whole colour issue.

John Whitwam: There is a predominance, isn't there?

Chair: What would not be a predominance; 10%?

John Whitwam: I would like to make sure that it would be impossible for anyone to identify any aspect of an asylum seeker by some provision we make. At the moment you could say that just over half of the front doors are red. I would like that number to be lower. We will make sure that no single colour predominates.

Q118 Chair: You therefore accept the whole premise of why we are having this hearing, that 50% is too high.

John Whitwam: I absolutely accept that.

Chair: You were not very clear in the beginning.

John Whitwam: I am so sorry. I absolutely accept that.

Q119 Chair: Yes. Thank you. Just for the purposes of equality—I asked Mr Monk—I assume your front door is not red.

John Whitwam: My front door is not red.

Chair: Yours is not, either, Mr Neden?

Peter Neden: Mine is not red.

Chair: Excellent. I just thought we would be fair to all of you.

Q120 Victoria Atkins: Mr Monk, I want to understand a little more about when you were made aware of this issue. I do not want to put words into your mouth. Have you seen any emails from Suzanne Fletcher or other people notifying you of this issue?

Stuart Monk: On red doors from Suzanne Fletcher?

Victoria Atkins: Yes.

Stuart Monk: No, we haven't. Not as far as I am aware.

Q121 Victoria Atkins: All right, let's examine that. How many employees do you have?

Stuart Monk: In total, in this business, this asylum business? We employ over 200 people but in the asylum business we probably have about 40 employees.

Q122 Victoria Atkins: Forty employees. I don't need to know about your other businesses. How many email accounts do you have in the business, that part of the business?

Stuart Monk: Sorry, I don't know the answer to that question.

Q123 Victoria Atkins: All right. You have 40 employees. So would it be a fair guess to say there are approximately 40 email accounts in the business if we assume everyone has their own email account?

Stuart Monk: Yes, I would think so.

Q124 Victoria Atkins: Have you asked the 40 employees to check their email accounts about whether or not they have any records of being told about these red doors?

Stuart Monk: I have asked my son, who runs this business, who is predominantly responsible for this side of the business. He has confirmed to me that we have not had any; this issue has never been raised by an asylum seeker.

Q125 Victoria Atkins: All right. It is quite a big statement to say that so I am just trying to work out the grounds upon which you can say that. Has your son asked the 40 employees whether they have any email records or other records?

Stuart Monk: So far as I am aware all I can answer is—

Victoria Atkins: No—

Stuart Monk: So far as I am aware, I am not aware of this matter on red doors being raised by anybody and I cannot go beyond that.

Q126 Victoria Atkins: Has your son asked the employees?

Stuart Monk: I don't think so—well, I am assuming he has done; sorry that is not correct.

Victoria Atkins: Let's not assume. You are in the middle of the media storm, aren't you?

Stuart Monk: I am, yes.

Q127 Victoria Atkins: Yes. Andrew Norfolk has done a lot of work in *The Times* about this. You were the front page of one of the largest newspapers in the country and now you have been summoned to the Home Affairs Committee to give evidence about this. Did you not think to check whether anyone of your employees had received an email about this?

Stuart Monk: I have asked if we had any—I predominantly focused on whether we had received any incidents from asylum seekers. That is where my focus has been—had there been any reported incidents from asylum seekers. I have not focused on whether any other individual has raised it. So in that regard my total focus has been on asylum seekers—have they raised any issues.

Q128 Victoria Atkins: Mr Monk, from your evidence you cannot help us with whether or not there have been any reported incidents because you do not know whether any of the 40 employees, which, let's face it, is not a huge number of employees, have received an email or received any reports via email.

Stuart Monk: We have a duty to log reported incidents so we will have been able to review any reported incident. There is a key performance indicator to log reported incidents and respond to them and action them. They would have to be forwarded to G4S. The same goes for G4S. That is a key performance indicator. If we breach and do not act on a reported incident, that is a key performance indicator—

Q129 Victoria Atkins: My point, Mr Monk, is that you have not checked and you are not aware of your son checking with your 40 employees to see whether one report or other has fallen through the accepted —

Stuart Monk: We will have checked to see. Because we will have had to log incidents, we will have a record of all incidents. We have checked whether there have been any incidents.

Q130 Chair: In answer to what Ms Atkins says, when you go back to Middlesbrough or Newcastle, wherever you are based, could you make that check?

Stuart Monk: Indeed I will.

Q131 Chair: Could you write to the Committee by Friday?

Stuart Monk: Exactly.

Chair: I have already asked you to send us the email saying that you are very, very good at what you are doing, which is what you have said, but send us an account of all the complaints that have been received as a result of what Victoria Atkins has said. Ask your son to do the trawl.

Stuart Monk: Of complaints regarding red doors?

Chair: Any complaints. Just send them all.

Victoria Atkins: To that part of your business.

Stuart Monk: All the complaints?

Chair: Yes, all.

Stuart Monk: A summary of complaints?

Chair: No. Just send us the complaints. We are very happy to read through them ourselves.

Victoria Atkins: You are making it sound as if there are quite a few.

Stuart Monk: Yes, there will be a lot. There will be an enormous number.

Chair: Really? Gosh. How many?

Stuart Monk: I don't know how many but there will be a lot.

Chair: Perhaps you will go and have a check and then send them to us.

Stuart Monk: I will do. We will send you all the complaints.

Chair: Yes, send us all the complaints. We would be very happy to read them.

Stuart Monk: All right. That's fine.

Q132 Stuart C. McDonald: Mr Whitwam, I think you said G4S spoke to the police in light of the complaints about red doors. This was back in 2012. Mr Monk, you have obviously said you have had lots of correspondence with the Home Office, lots of glowing reports, and you are going to send us some of these emails. What efforts do either G4S or your company, Mr Monk, make to speak to asylum seekers living in the accommodation or their representatives?

Stuart Monk: Do you want me to answer that one?

Stuart C. McDonald: One at a time, yes.

Stuart Monk: We have to inspect. We are carrying out periodic checks. Once a month we do a check, we have to monitor and go through that process. So with every property we are inspecting on a 28-day cycle.

Q133 Stuart C. McDonald: Are you speaking to people and asking them what their experiences are?

Stuart Monk: If asylum seekers are there, obviously. I think we send advance notification that we are going to inspect so obviously they may not choose to be in. But that is the process. There is a formal process that we are going through and clearly we are in touch with asylum seekers every day.

Q134 Stuart C. McDonald: G4S?

John Whitwam: A similar story. When an individual or family is moved into dispersed accommodation they are moved in by a welfare officer, and that welfare officer makes sure that they do a number of things. They make sure the individual or the family understands how to live in that house; explaining how the cooker, the heater, the washing machine work. They also have an obligation to signpost the welfare services because we do not provide them ourselves. They will make sure that the individual or the family knows where to go to get a doctor, a post office—a post office is relevant because that is where they get their money to feed themselves—and a school, if that is relevant. Thereafter the individual, the asylum seeker, has two telephone numbers. The telephone number of the service centre or the contact centre: that is the one I mentioned that has 2,500 calls per month on average and I am happy to break down what sort of calls they are.

Stuart C. McDonald: That would be very useful.

John Whitwam: A great deal of them are about accommodation standards. Thereafter, exactly as Mr Monk has said, there is an inspection every month. On top of that there are irregular but frequent Home Office inspections of all our properties. So there is a considerable amount of scrutiny.

To give some detail about why people would ring in, against a number of criteria we have to make sure that every house is kept to a certain standard. If there were to be a blocked drain, the heating not working, an electricity blackout, I would have two hours to get to that property and make good. For less serious events like broken windows or something like that I might have 24 hours or up to 28 days to replace something that was not working.

Q135 Stuart C. McDonald: What I am getting at is this. Rather than waiting for asylum seekers to come to you, one suggestion that was made to you by Suzanne Fletcher, back in 2012 I think, was that you set up a sort of forum to actively encourage people to come forward rather than giving some of them a phone number.

John Whitwam: We do not give some of them a phone number. We give all of them a phone number.

Q136 Stuart C. McDonald: That is something I think Suzanne Fletcher would also potentially dispute. But why did you not establish that forum when that was suggested, even though it was recognised apparently by G4S as being a good idea?

John Whitwam: There are already a number of fora.

I want to come back to you on the fact that people might not have that telephone number. Every individual who is moved into a property is given a welcome pack in one of eight languages. In addition they are given the telephone number of the welfare officer who moves them in. So I think it is highly unlikely that people would not have that telephone number. In addition there is an inspection at least once a month. So if, for example, there was something going wrong, be it a welfare issue or an accommodation-standards issue, that could be raised by the individual living in the house; it could be raised by somebody who once a month comes round to inspect the house; and it could be raised by the local authority inspecting the house.

Q137 Stuart C. McDonald: Do you think that is an adequate level of engagement?

John Whitwam: I do think it is an adequate level of engagement. Yes. 25,000 telephone calls, all of which were responded to.

Q138 Stuart C. McDonald: When I speak to people who work with asylum seekers or directly with asylum seekers they would say that red doors is really just the tip of the iceberg in terms of performance under the COMPASS contract. They would point to inappropriate allocation of housing. They would point to inappropriate shared rooms. They would point to lack of privacy or property that is unsuitable or unsafe. Do you recognise these complaints at all?

John Whitwam: I do not feel underscrutinised against those things by the Home Office. The Home Office checks against some pretty regular checks and, even if they had not, I ensure that everybody is moved into a property that is safe and sound.

Q139 Stuart C. McDonald: We may have to see if the Home Office is doing its checks correctly. Do you not recognise these complaints, which are made by very reputable organisations acting on behalf of asylum seekers?

John Whitwam: I know they take place. We regularly meet with charities, including one happening today with the North East Migration Partnership where a number of charities will be represented.

Q140 Chair: Thank you. We will come on to that in a future inquiry.
For clarification: the number you give people is an 0800 number is it not?

John Whitwam: It is a Freephone. Exactly. Yes.

Chair: It is a Freephone; so they do not pay for it?

John Whitwam: That is correct.

Chair: It is a Freephone number?

John Whitwam: It is a Freephone number.

Q141 Chair: The asylum seeker I spoke to this morning says it is an 0800 number and it costs £1 to use it.

John Whitwam: Okay. I will look into that. I don't think—

Q142 Chair: You don't know? You have just told us you had 25,000 calls so that is £25,000.

John Whitwam: I think it is a Freephone number; that there is no cost to ring that. If I am wrong, I am going to get back to you straight away.

Q143 Chair: If you are wrong you have made a lot of money; £25,000.

John Whitwam: Yes. I certainly have not made any money out of it—

Chair: Could you find out?

John Whitwam: —because I do not run the telephone but I will make sure—

Q144 Chair: No, you don't run the telephones but if you are coming before a Select Committee of Parliament you must know, with all the great briefings I am sure you have received, that one of the question that is going to be asked by members of this Committee is how do people make complaints and if they have to pay to make their complaint it becomes very serious. Could you come back to me tomorrow on that?

John Whitwam: I will.

Q145 Nusrat Ghani: Mr Monk, I want to clarify some points. You said that some of the items that have been picked up by the press might not be accurate. You have said some interesting things today: that doors were painted red over a period of 20 years.

Stuart Monk: Yes.

Q146 Nusrat Ghani: So that is just the colour they were painted. It was not a deliberate act; they were just painted red over a period—

Stuart Monk: We kind of had a policy 20 years ago; there were colours that we adopted.

Nusrat Ghani: Over 20 years?

Stuart Monk: Yes, because it is not an uncommon practice to paint properties, for property companies, local authorities—

Q147 Nusrat Ghani: You buy paint in job lots.

Stuart Monk: It is not about a job lot. It is about kind of giving some consistent approach.

Q148 Nusrat Ghani: All right. You also mentioned earlier on that the police community officer was in place for 13 years and she had not brought to your attention any complaints that any of the tenants would have had. You said 13 years.

Stuart Monk: That is the information I have. Yes.

Q149 Nusrat Ghani: So that helped to explain why you were not aware of these complaints because there was nothing that had been forwarded to you; nothing that the police community officer had raised with your or your team. The police had not raised anything.

Stuart Monk: The community police officers, the community inspector, they have not had any issues raised with them at all.

Q150 Nusrat Ghani: I am trying to be as helpful as I can to you. I can sort of understand why you could end up painting doors red over a 20-year period; I can sort of understand why these tenants would not raise something with the police; but my worry is that if they are already feeling a bit vulnerable—as you said to Ms Atkins, you have a variety of complaints that come through—and if they have already complained on a number of issues this could be the reason why they raised their concerns with the press instead of raising them with you. They probably thought it was going to fall on deaf ears; that they were already pretty powerless in the situation and they did not want to possibly jeopardise where they were living or the fact that you might not react positively to them complaining. Do you think that could be the case?

Stuart Monk: No, I don't. I think the press have gone out and knocked on a lot of doors to try to find—they are trying to create a story so they have knocked on a lot of doors.

Q151 Nusrat Ghani: To find these incidents?

Stuart Monk: Yes. As we are painting doors I understand that some people don't want us to repaint the doors. But there we are.

Q152 Nusrat Ghani: So there are also people who do not want their doors changed from the colour red?

Stuart Monk: Yes.

Nusrat Ghani: They want to stay with the colour red now?

Stuart Monk: Some asylum seekers want to stay with the same colour door. Red, yes.

Q153 Nusrat Ghani: So they are speaking to the people who are out painting the doors now.

Stuart Monk: No. We are going round. We are adopting a strategy of going round. We have six or seven people and obviously it does not take a lot to paint a door particularly so there is a process going on. Obviously we have to undercoat them and then go back.

Chair: Thank you. We do not need to know about the process.

Q154 Nusrat Ghani: When they were repainting doors or just upgrading doors or, if they were run down, painting them red again, did anyone ever say to them, “Don’t paint them red” or, “Please don’t paint them red again”? Was that ever discussed?

Stuart Monk: Not as far as I am aware. Normally—

Nusrat Ghani: Even though they are raising it now, saying, “Don’t change the colour” some of them are saying, “Keep them red”? No one previously said, “Don’t repaint them—

Stuart Monk: We provide a very high standard of accommodation and we have not really had any complaints about—

Chair: Yes, you have said that.

Q155 Nusrat Ghani: I will move on. Now you are repainting the doors a multitude of colours, which is good. What else have you learnt from this? What else can you do to make sure that you do not have to have an email address to have a credible complaint, for you to take action, or have to phone an 0800 number? What more are you going to do to make sure that any tenant who is feeling threatened has their concern followed through swiftly and compassionately?

Stuart Monk: We are going to take a very proactive review of everything that we have been doing and how we have been doing it. We do think that we are the market leaders in the provision of this service—

Q156 Nusrat Ghani: But not the market leader in dealing with complaints. How are you going to be the market leader in dealing with complaints?

Stuart Monk: There is the process that we have to follow but I think we have to take a more proactive approach. As you say, with the benefit of hindsight we have been very silly.

Q157 Chair: Thank you very much. We are nearly at the end, you will be pleased to know. When you see your son—I don’t know whether that is tonight or tomorrow—please ask him about the case of Ahmed Zubair, who I spoke to this morning, who painted his door white because he did not want it red and who was then told by a member of your firm to repaint it red, because that is something that stands out in my mind when you said nobody wanted them painted. Here is someone who was so upset with the way he was being treated that he painted his door again.

Stuart Monk: We will investigate that and come back to you.

Q158 Chair: Would you do that? As for you, Mr Whitwam, I have looked it up: you did not make the calls free, Ofcom made the calls free from 1 July last year. There was legislation.

John Whitwam: Thank you.

Q159 Chair: No, thank Ofcom. Prior to that, of course, you must have made some money on the number of complaints when asylum seekers rang prior to 1 July or somebody made a lot of money out of them, such as Mr Zubair who rang. So could you let us know how many complaints you have received in each year from the year that you have had this contract with the Home Office? I am sure you have all that information because you are a big company and you will be able to do that.

John Whitwam: Yes.

Chair: Mr Umunna has a final question and then I will sum up.

Q160 Mr Umunna: Before this story broke and *The Times* published the article it was the case that Middlesbrough had the UK's highest concentration of asylum seekers. Can I ask Mr Whitwam and Mr Neden, did one or both of you have any conversation with any Government Minister in relation to that particular issue? Was it ever raised with you by a Minister?

Peter Neden: Certainly not with me but we have certainly spoken with officials about access to properties in different areas because we always have to get permission from the local authority to place asylum seekers.

Mr Umunna: Mr Whitwam?

John Whitwam: Minister no, but Home Office person yes. So for example in the November meeting I and my opposite number from the operations part of UKVI went up to—

Q161 Mr Umunna: No concern was directly raised with you by a Minister in relation to the high concentration of asylum seekers in Middlesbrough?

John Whitwam: That is correct.

Q162 Chair: In conclusion I think the Committee will want to look at this whole area again. We have wanted to do this for a while but this issue has raised enormous numbers of issues of concern. Mr McDonald in particular has been pressing the Committee to do this.

Can I ask how many of your clients, the asylum seekers, are currently in hotels?

John Whitwam: 322.

Q163 Chair: These presumably are of a lower star. What kind of star hotels are they?

John Whitwam: They are typically 2-star or 3-star hotels.

Q164 Chair: The Syrian asylum seekers who are coming in: are you telling this Committee that there may well be a crisis in finding accommodation? You outlined a process where you had to keep going back to the local authority, getting licences. Obviously this Committee wants to make sure people are housed if they have a right to be housed. Do you foresee a crisis in accommodation of this kind?

Peter Neden: When we took on this contract we were providing accommodation for 9,000 asylum seekers. We are currently housing 17,000 asylum seekers so we have gone from 9,000 to 17,000.

Q165 Chair: In how many years?

Peter Neden: Since 2012, when we started; so about three years.

Q166 Chair: In three years you have gone up from 9,000 to 17,000?

Peter Neden: It has doubled, roughly, and that is at a time when there is a shortage of housing, which is well publicised, so it is getting difficult to provide housing and that is why we are working with the Home Office to find ways to deal with those challenges.

Q167 Chair: Are you going to find it difficult to honour your commitment, bearing in mind there has been such an increase in asylum seekers and such a shortage of affordable housing to put them in?

Peter Neden: It is getting difficult and that is why we are in discussions with the Home Office about what we can do to deal with those challenges.

Q168 Chair: Mr Monk, you are a very successful businessman. You are obviously very good at the work that you do because you have inherited your family firm and you have developed it. It is now pre-eminent in the north of England. You have told this Committee that 30% of the income, the profits presumably—is it the income?—

Stuart Monk: I would have to look at the exact figures but revenue maybe.

Chair: —comes from this area of work. So it does provide you with an important part of your business. That is right, isn't it?

Stuart Monk: It is an important part of our business; a very important part of our business.

Q169 Chair: Therefore you need to seek to make sure that in fulfilling a contract, even as a sub-contractor, because taxpayers' money is being paid, that you do so to the best of your ability.

Stuart Monk: Exactly.

Q170 Chair: I have to say I found your evidence today unsatisfactory because you blamed Ministers, *The Times*, G4S, Home Office officials and I think in one of your answers the people of Middlesbrough. You talked about the people who live in the local area.

Stuart Monk: I didn't blame them at all. I said that they felt that they were being criticised as a result of the fact that people are allegedly behaving in an antisocial way towards asylum seekers. I don't think they recognise that. That was the feedback from the community police officer, that residents were not happy with that.

Chair: The Committee needs to be convinced that this contract is being conducted properly and to help us we would like that information about the complaints that you have received sent to us as soon as possible. We would like you to go back and speak to your

officials to ensure that we have all the information that is available because you used the phrase that you were not aware several times in the evidence that you gave to this Committee on behalf of your company. We would like you to go and do a check with other officials of your company to make sure that this was not in their knowledge.

Mr Neden, Mr Whitwam, we are disappointed that yet again G4S has come before the Home Affairs Select Committee. I think that you do need to look very carefully at the way in which your contracts are being conducted, not just because of the fine that you were given for electronic tagging where you paid back the Ministry of Justice over £100 million, but the information today about the Medway Training Centre and indeed what we have heard today about the contract in Middlesbrough. If you, Mr Whitwam, find 50% to be unacceptable as a predominant colour, you will understand why Ministers and Members of Parliament feel the same. Therefore I think you need to look very carefully at the way in which you do these things because Governments have no alternative but to go to G4S, Serco and the very big companies to deliver these huge contracts but I think since you have told this Committee you are not making any money out of this contract there is a responsibility for those who deal with public money to make sure that it is spent in the most appropriate way and that the people you are housing are treated, in Mr Burrowes's words, as humanely as possible.

No doubt you will reflect on that in the many internal meetings that you will have following this hearing but I want to thank you, Mr Monk, Mr Neden and Mr Whitwam, for coming in at short notice. This Committee will continue to be interested in this subject. If there is any further information you wish to give us, please let us have it. Thank you very much.