

Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Asylum accommodation](#), HC 1758

Wednesday 21 November 2018

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 21 November 2018.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Yvette Cooper (Chair); Sir Christopher Chope; Stephen Doughty; Kate Green; Tim Loughton; Stuart C. McDonald; Alex Norris; John Woodcock.

Questions 32–161

Witnesses

I: Rt hon Caroline Nokes MP, Minister of State for Immigration, Paul Morrison, Director, Resettlement, Asylum Support and Integration, and Sean Palmer, Acting Director, Immigration and Protection, SRO, Asylum Accommodation and Support Transformation, Home Office.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rt hon Caroline Nokes MP, Paul Morrison and Sean Palmer.

Q32 Chair: I welcome everyone to the Home Affairs Select Committee evidence session on asylum accommodation. I welcome the Minister. We are grateful for your time today. Could I ask your colleagues to introduce themselves, please?

Paul Morrison: I am Paul Morrison. I am the Director of Resettlement Asylum Support and Integration in the Home Office with responsibility for the Resettlement Programme for Asylum Support but also for the programmes for unaccompanied minors in the United Kingdom.

Sean Palmer: I am Sean Palmer. I am the senior responsible owner, SRO, for the Asylum Accommodation and Support Transformation project. I am also the Acting Director of Immigration and Protection, which looks after asylum casework and other case working.

Q33 Chair: Thank you very much and we are grateful for your time today. Today is the 80th anniversary of the historic Kindertransport debate in Parliament, which committed the United Kingdom to taking 10,000 child refugees from across Europe in advance of the Second World War. We wanted to ask you a couple of questions on the Government support for child and teen refugees today. Can you tell us how many child refugees the UK has now taken under the Dubs Scheme?

Caroline Nokes: Under the Dubs Scheme I think the stat that I still have to give you is 220 so far. I was about to say that I think you might have heard me say this last week but I am not sure that I did. I am conscious that we still have a great deal more to do with regard to Dubs. During the summer I spoke to UNHCR out in Greece about the need to make sure that the best interest tests were conducted as quickly and efficiently as possible.

You will be aware that back in January we had the Sandhurst Treaty and changed the eligibility date to facilitate the transfer of more children, but I think it is an important consideration and certainly I am conscious that we had offers of accommodation for 480 children. We are committed to meeting that number but there is more to do. There is no part of the arrangements for transferring children that I am not prepared to look at to make sure that we can reach that target.

Q34 Chair: But this does feel dreadfully low given the commitment that was made and given, the fact that in Greece alone, according to the Greek Government's figures, there are over 2,000 unaccompanied child refugees and asylum seekers who are on waiting lists for proper shelter, not even in any kind of proper accommodation. For us simply to be taking 220 over the last two years does feel shamefully low.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Caroline Nokes: I think you are right that it feels low. Certainly when I was in Greece the thing that struck me was that it is not just children who are in shelters but ones who are not and ones who are—I would describe it—inappropriately accommodated in hotels. I made the point to UNHCR while I was there about the best interest tests, which I think are taking a long time. It is absolutely right that they should be done rigorously and thoroughly. I would prefer them to also have an element of speed because what I am very conscious of is that young people who may well be eligible might, during the course of the length of time it takes to conduct those best interest tests, pass through the threshold and turn 18.

Q35 **Chair:** They may also just give up on getting any support and end up falling into the arms of trafficker gangs or those who might exploit them as well. They are hugely vulnerable.

Caroline Nokes: I think there is a real problem with young people who are registering with the Greek authorities and then being lost to the system. I am very painfully conscious that this is young people who need safeguarding and are not at present.

Q36 **Chair:** Are you looking at providing funding to speed up those best interest assessments?

Caroline Nokes: I believe—and I do not have the figure with me—that as part of the Sandhurst Treaty we provided additional funds. Certainly it is absolutely imperative that we continue to work with partners. If that requires more funding, then obviously that is something that we have to look at in the round and in conjunction with other pressures.

Q37 **Chair:** Don't you need to get on with this though? Looking at funding in the round and alongside other pressures, it feels like this is glacial at a time when there are thousands of children who need help and we do not even seem to be able to help the additional 260 children who places exist for.

Caroline Nokes: That was one of the reasons back in January we changed the eligibility date because we were conscious that that would have the potential to expand numbers. However, I think it is a point that I am painfully aware of that we have a significant number that we still need to make sure are properly referred and then placed with local authorities.

Q38 **Chair:** When are you going to be able to fill all of the places that you have?

Caroline Nokes: I cannot give you a date for that.

Q39 **Chair:** Is it "ever"?

Caroline Nokes: Certainly we are determined to meet the 480 target but I cannot put a date on it.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q40 **Chair:** It feels just glacial in terms of progress. Can you tell us how many child refugees, both with family and unaccompanied child refugees, you have taken from the Middle East and North Africa?

Caroline Nokes: As part of the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme, we have so far taken 800 or so under the VCRS scheme and many will have been children. Under VPRS we have to date taken in excess of 12,000 and roughly half of them have been children.

Q41 **Chair:** The VCRS is the one from the Middle East and North Africa; is that right?

Caroline Nokes: Yes. That is correct. Isn't it, Paul?

Q42 **Chair:** Of those 800 how many are children?

Paul Morrison: In the schemes you are describing, Ms Cooper, there are 12,000, as the Minister said, and that is from the Syrian conflict and that is the VPRS, so they are from the Middle East and North Africa. VCRS is not limited to the Middle East and North Africa although there may well be many children who come from that. Once those commitments are complete, we would anticipate in excess of 10,000 children will have come through those schemes.

Q43 **Chair:** The additional one that was the additional 3,000 commitment on top of the 20,000 that currently has 8,000 people, of whom how many are children?

Paul Morrison: That is 800 people. Generally speaking, with resettlement schemes, about 50% of those will be children because they are in family groups, probably marginally more, so in excess of 400 of those 800.

Q44 **Chair:** How many of them are unaccompanied child refugees?

Paul Morrison: A relatively small number of those are—a handful—and that reflects the conversations that we have with UNHCR about when it is in the best interests of the child and generally the advice they give us remains that unaccompanied minors are best kept in the region where there is the prospect of family reunion but that said there are circumstances and there are a small number of unaccompanied minors who have arrived through that scheme.

I should also say perhaps that the 220 figure that the Minister quoted was the last stat that we have available that we are confident in. I would not want to suggest to the Committee that arrivals have not continued since then. That progress on the Dubs in particular continues.

Q45 **Chair:** On the Dubs Scheme, do you plan to meet with Alf Dubs and some of the NGOs involved in this to discuss what more should be done to make sure that those places are filled?

Caroline Nokes: Last week I did have a meeting with Alf Dubs scheduled. Unfortunately, the event that we were both at prior to that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

overran and I was unable to meet him afterwards because I had another commitment I had to go to. However, I said to Lord Dubs that day that I was very happy to meet with him, and indeed NGOs, following that.

Q46 **Chair:** Given that in 1938 Britain did take 10,000 children in a matter of months, Alf Dubs and Safe Passage are calling on you to take 10,000 child refugees over the next 10 years and to make that commitment. Are you able to make that commitment?

Caroline Nokes: I am very conscious that as VPRS comes to the end of 2020 and its 20,000 target that we have a considerable role to play in the world in resettlement. VPRS has set us out very much as a world leader. We are not yet in a position to put a number on what our resettlement proposals will be going forward. However, we will continue to work with organisations like UNHCR to make sure that we maintain our position as a world leader. It would be very regrettable to go backwards.

Q47 **Chair:** When do you think you will be able to?

Caroline Nokes: As I said, VPRS comes to a close in 2020 when we will have met the 20,000 target. I am conscious that we are coming to the end of 2018. I would expect over the course of the next 12 months we will have finalised what our proposals for resettlement will be going forwards.

Q48 **Chair:** I am going to turn to the asylum accommodation, which we are grateful for you coming to give evidence on. The Inspector's report that was published yesterday you have had since 9 July and it is damning. Why was it only published yesterday?

Caroline Nokes: I think first I would like to apologise that it was only published yesterday. However, I am very conscious and I did listen to the evidence given by Mark Thompson last week when this Committee made it very clear that they wanted the report as soon as possible, so we did provide it ahead of today's hearing. We have to consider all recommendations that are in reports very carefully. You will be aware that there were nine recommendations included, each one the Home Office has accepted. We have put together an action plan going forward that contains 27 different points but we are determined to act upon that report and make sure that as the current contract comes to a close and the new contract comes into being in September of next year we have a very robust strategy for making sure that we address all of the issues raised.

Q49 **Chair:** Can we have a copy of the action plan?

Caroline Nokes: Yes, absolutely.

Q50 **Chair:** Was it done by 1 October?

Caroline Nokes: Yes.

Q51 **Chair:** In terms of the properties and the quite appalling reports of leaks,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

damp, dirty properties and so on, your response yesterday—the Home Office response—was to say, “The small sample of 69 properties, including a number signposted by NGOs, does not necessarily give an objective view of the asylum accommodation estate”. Do you think that the Independent Inspectorate is not objective?

Caroline Nokes: Absolutely not and I think they play an important role to us. We have reached out both to the Independent Inspectorate and to various NGOs asking them to identify the properties that they particularly included in the report and that was something that I would urge NGOs to do on a rolling basis. It is important to us that we know where there are problems so that we can make sure that there is adequate monitoring and that the providers act quickly to remedy some of the failings that we have seen.

Q52 **Chair:** But the evidence from your own contract compliance officers, not just from the inspections that the Inspectorate specifically did, is damning with 43% of the properties being inspected not being fit for purpose or requiring urgent action. That is of the 8,300 properties that they identified, 3,500 of them not fit for purpose. That is appalling, isn't it?

Caroline Nokes: I think it is important that we look at the number of properties and the fact that these are high usage properties with, in some cases, very high turnover. It is important. Written into the new contracts going forward there is a requirement for them to have planned maintenance programmes, because we all understand when looking after properties, to take action earlier in a planned way is better than waiting for problems to occur and for people to report them and then acting in retrospect.

I do not, in any way, regard it as acceptable that people should be in substandard properties but we have standards that we communicate very clearly to our service providers and are determined, going forward, that the reporting lines under the new AIRE contract are much clearer for service users so that we can make sure that some problems are rectified.

Q53 **Chair:** Are those 3,500 properties now fit for purpose?

Caroline Nokes: There will be a range of issues with properties that will have caused them to have been flagged up as requiring improvement.

Q54 **Chair:** Yes, but these were the ones that were said, “Not fit for purpose or requiring urgent action”. This was the damning stuff. There are real serious problems with them. We have accounts of rat infestations as well as damp in properties that children are being looked after in. This is serious. You must accept that this is damning and this is a serious indictment of the state of asylum accommodation.

Caroline Nokes: I absolutely accept that it is completely unacceptable for anybody to be living with vermin and damp. What matters to my mind is that they are rectified, people have the reporting lines so they can let



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the service providers or the compliance teams or, last case scenario, the Home Office act upon them. It is important to us that we have good channels of communications both with service providers, and indeed service users, to make sure that we can act on problems when they occur.

Q55 Chair: Okay, but are you confident that all of those 3,500 properties that were not fit for purpose have now been acted upon and are now either fit for purpose or families have been moved out of them and are no longer being housed in that accommodation?

Caroline Nokes: I am going to ask Paul to comment specifically on that. One of the concerns that I have is that when issues are identified either by the Inspector or by NGOs is that they are not necessarily flagged up to the Home Office and identified fast enough so that we can act upon them. I look at the photographs with horror because it is not acceptable. However, we have to be able to identify those properties and the service providers they are in the portfolios of so that we can make sure that problems are rectified.

Q56 Chair: But you put in place the systems and we warned you in our Select Committee report about this and about the fact that the Home Office did not have proper systems in place, did not have proper data information in place, did not have proper systems to follow up and the Home Office told us, "It is all okay. We are on it. It is being sorted" and it clearly was not.

Caroline Nokes: I am going to ask Paul to talk about the current systems. What I would like to reflect upon is the future AIRE contract is bringing into place a new system that will enable us to audit complaints and defects much more easily as the Chief Inspector recommended to us.

Paul Morrison: I think it is important to understand what the phrase "not fit for purpose" means. The kind of things that we are talking about here, and these are things that will have an urgent response, with seven days, are things like taps needing new washers. There will be broken glazing, cracked panes needing a replacement. They will be about windows being a bit sticky. All of those are not things that would necessarily mean that the property is not fit for purpose in the sense of being uninhabitable. They are things that will get a seven-day turnaround. That is the 43%. The kind of things, Madam Chair, you are talking around where it would genuinely put people at risk, where their health is at risk, those would be regarded as an immediate action and we would, within two hours, be looking to move people out if there was a genuine threat to their health. That is the information that the Chief Inspector is sharing with you.

Just to give you a sense, 24 hours, which we would turn around, would be where there is a hole or a weakened floor or exposed electrical wiring is a much smaller percentage than the one that was quoted in the report.

Q57 Chair: Okay. We are well beyond seven days since this Inspector's report



HOUSE OF COMMONS

was finished and since those inspectors had now completed that work so are those 3,500 properties now fit for purpose? Do you have any way of checking?

Paul Morrison: Yes, I do. All of that will be bound by the contract. This is a contract that has a very strict regime of key performance indicators around that. These are the contractual requirements that we place on service providers. They will need to have gone out and corrected those errors.

Q58 **Chair:** That is a different question, isn't it? I understand you have contractual things you say because you keep saying that and you said that in your response to our report, "Oh well, the contract requires this and the contract requires that". However, the work that we did in our investigation and inquiry, the work that the Inspector did and the Inspector's inquiry all found that the contractual standards are simply not being met. It is meaningless to simply say, "The contract requires this". It is not happening. What is your assurance that those contractual standards have now been met?

Paul Morrison: I am not sure I accept the premise that they are not being met in the sense that what the contract requires is every month, at least, every property is inspected by the service provider. Then every time a new person moves into the property they recheck it again to make sure it is consistent with all the standards. In addition, 25% of the properties are inspected by Home Office staff to make sure that they are compliant. What we have done—learning the lessons and listening to what the Committee has said and also what the Chief Inspector has said—is to expand that so we are not just looking at properties. We are also auditing the processes within the service provider so that we can reassure ourselves that when they are escalating problems, when they are saying that they are fixing them, we are auditing that, not just the properties.

Q59 **Chair:** Sadly that is just not what the Inspector found though. The Inspectorate says that, "The inspection regime was one of spot checks, which were neither intelligence led nor backed up with reinspections". So the independent report is saying, "The Home Office is not doing any reinspections, is not following this up and therefore cannot say with any confidence whether or not these repairs are being done or whether or not these properties are fit for purpose".

Paul Morrison: I think the Committee will note that we have accepted the recommendations about the improvement of the inspection regime. Some of the things that the Inspector is reporting there we have investigated and the consequence of, for example, not recording effectively, so there have been intelligence-led inspections but we did not adequately record the fact that they were. We have certainly taken steps to make sure that that is addressed. We have added to the training of our inspections teams so that they have industry standard capabilities to do that. We have improved the recording regime that they operate so we



HOUSE OF COMMONS

have a much more granular approach to that and these are a direct response both to the reports of this Committee and also the Independent Chief Inspector.

Q60 **Chair:** How many pregnant women are in asylum accommodation now?

Paul Morrison: I do not have that information.

Q61 **Chair:** Does that mean you do not have it in front of you at the moment or you just do not have it, full stop?

Paul Morrison: I do not have that granular information from the service providers precisely around the number of pregnant women.

Q62 **Chair:** Isn't that the kind of thing that you ought to have?

Paul Morrison: Part of what we need to do is make sure that the service providers are abiding by what they need to do to ensure that pregnant women are provided with what they need to be provided for in the accommodation. That is the approach we have but I do not have that granular information.

Q63 **Chair:** But how can you have any system in place or how can you reassure us that you have any system in place to make sure that pregnant women or mothers with young children are getting the right kind of support and accommodation if you do not even know how many there are?

Paul Morrison: The key thing is what do we want for the vulnerable people you are talking around? The checks that we make are the conversations that we have with service providers around what they do for people with particular vulnerabilities. I have lots of examples of what a service provider would do in circumstances where they need to take steps to relocate someone and that reassures me that they are taking the appropriate measures.

Q64 **Chair:** Why does that reassure you that they are taking the appropriate measures? You have examples of what they would do, what they should do, but the Inspectorate has found they are not doing them. Look at this case study from the Inspector's report with seven mothers with children under two years old, issues with the property included lack of cleaning in the communal areas, broken equipment, window bars, blocked drains and infestation of rodents, damp and mould. This is mums with kids under two. These are families who are a very long way from home. Who knows what traumas they have been through along the way? Minister, weren't you shocked when you saw this?

Caroline Nokes: Of course. It is always shocking to see anybody living with vermin infestation, with damp and with blocked drains. I would urge the Independent Chief Inspector and the NGOs to let us know what properties they are so that we can clamp down on the service providers who are not meeting our standards. But having visited asylum accommodation, having looked at the charts that you have displayed in



HOUSE OF COMMONS

all of them showing the inspection regime, confirming that they have been inspected every month and that there have been reinspections and that work has been done, both the service providers and our monitoring can give us reasonable confidence that the standards are being met and the issues are being addressed. Where there are dreadful examples then we would urge people to make contact through the channels that they have direct to the Home Office.

Q65 **Chair:** You had this report on 9 July. Have you or anybody else in the Home Office asked the Inspectorate where this property is?

Paul Morrison: We have and we do not have all of those details yet. They have not been shared with us.

Q66 **Chair:** 9 July was a long time ago. You still do not have the details of where this property is and whether it has been improved or not?

Paul Morrison: They have not provided those details of where those properties are.

Q67 **Chair:** When did you ask them?

Paul Morrison: I do not know the exact dates when we asked them but we have asked for that information and I think there has been some discomfort with sharing some of that information given it was shared in confidence by some of the NGOs.

Q68 **Chair:** Seriously. What, the NGOs did not want to tell you where a substandard property was that mums with kids under two were in?

Paul Morrison: I would share with the Committee that that is what has been reported to me. We are very keen to know where they are, we want to know where they are and I would reiterate publicly that we are very keen to know exactly what properties we are talking about.

Q69 **Chair:** You do know how utterly lame this sounds, don't you?

Paul Morrison: I would just reiterate we have asked. We genuinely have asked for where those properties are and we would definitely like to have more—

Q70 **Chair:** Seriously, do you want us to ask for you?

Paul Morrison: That would be extremely helpful.

Q71 **Chair:** This afternoon we will ask what property this is and we would be grateful if somebody could go and visit and make sure that we do not still have seven mothers with children under two years old, months after this report was done, still living in this terrible rodent-infested accommodation.

Paul Morrison: Thank you.

Q72 **Chair:** I would have thought the Minister could have maybe done that.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Caroline Nokes: We have asked for it and one of the challenges is that if information is not shared with us then it is very difficult for us to find the information if they will not give it to us.

Q73 **Chair:** This is your contract. This is your responsibility.

Caroline Nokes: That is information that has been provided anonymously by NGOs and we cannot—telepathy is not my first skill.

Q74 **Chair:** You run the contracts. You draw up the contracts and—

Caroline Nokes: We have asked for it.

Chair: Okay. Let us see how long it takes to get this information.

Q75 **John Woodcock:** You said, Mr Morrison, you cannot give an exact time when you asked for it. Presumably it was in July.

Paul Morrison: We have an ongoing relationship with the Independent Chief Inspector through the entire inspection process—

Q76 **John Woodcock:** Sorry. That is not an answer. Was it within—

Paul Morrison: Mr Woodcock, I will answer that question by saying I do not know the precise dates my colleagues would have had that engagement.

Q77 **John Woodcock:** But sometimes, forgive me, when we have civil servants in front of us and they say they do not know the precise date, it may be a case of not being able to say precisely what day it was. What I am trying to establish was, given you have had the report since July, did you at least ask in July, so within a month of it, or are we talking about potentially asking this month?

Paul Morrison: No. This is a process that we have an ongoing engagement with the Independent Chief Inspector throughout the entire duration of the investigation being conducted and then through the early report findings and we have consistently in our engagement been saying we would like that information passed to us so that we can take steps.

Q78 **John Woodcock:** All right. Minister, you were clear you are not telepathic, and indeed you are not, but that presents a picture of NGOs not sharing information, which may be critically important, and it is a serious charge to make that you have not received this. But if we go back to the NGOs and find the request has only been made quite recently that will reflect, I would say, poorly on the Department and poorly on the way that you are presenting that. I just want to be clear that you have given those organisations ample time to give you the information and have not received it.

Paul Morrison: The conversations we have been having are directly with the Independent Chief Inspector and the request to them to provide the information.

Q79 **John Woodcock:** They have not provided it in a reasonable time,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Minister?

Paul Morrison: I think there was one property that they provided details of where they had particular immediate concerns that we investigated. The other ones not.

Q80 **John Woodcock:** Minister?

Caroline Nokes: I cannot add anything to what Mr Morrison has said.

Q81 **John Woodcock:** How long, Minister, have you been aware of the dilapidated state of the properties that were being inspected?

Caroline Nokes: We have had the report since July and, as I confirmed earlier, the action plan that has been put in place was done by 1 October. We have accepted all of the recommendations. I cannot give you a precise date for when I saw the report and considered it but I would have assumed it would have been some time over the summer recess.

Q82 **John Woodcock:** Mr Morrison said that he does not accept that the definition he has been given of properties not fit for purpose. Do you not accept that either?

Caroline Nokes: There are wide range of reasons why a property might have a defect that is flagged up in an inspection. They can be, as Mr Morrison said, a whole range of defects. At one end of the spectrum you have the case that the Chair has identified, which, of course, is entirely unacceptable, but there will be other issues that are far less serious and that can be around the state of décor. It can be around—

Q83 **John Woodcock:** No, indeed, but the Inspectorate has clearly said that 43% were not fit for purpose and Mr Morrison said he did not accept that the 43% were not fit for purpose.

Paul Morrison: Can I just say I did not say that, Mr Woodcock? What I was describing was that the 43% that are described as not fit for purpose, according to the wording that we use, includes a whole range of issues. What I was trying to share with the Committee to put it in context was that that includes taps requiring new washers, doors that are sticking, broken window panes. That is what is in that 43% that he is quoting because those are our figures that he is quoting of our compliance officers. I am not disputing the phrase “not fit for purpose”. I am just explaining what is within that.

Q84 **John Woodcock:** But 43% of properties—if you do accept they are not fit for purpose—that is clearly contractors who are not meeting their basic obligations under the contract. What have you done to either remove the contracts from those suppliers or to fine the suppliers?

Paul Morrison: The issue there is we have identified that there are these issues of taps needing new washers. If the provider does not within seven days address that defect then they would potentially, under the terms of the contract, be liable for penalties under the key performance indicators.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q85 **John Woodcock:** Have there been any penalties that have been—

Paul Morrison: There have been through the lifetime of the contract. I cannot share with the Committee the details of those because they are commercially sensitive but, yes, it is the way that it operates.

Q86 **John Woodcock:** We know that 43% were not fit for purpose. The report is quite clear that there were spot checks that were not followed up on.

Paul Morrison: What has been identified here is that there are 43% of cases where it has been identified that the service provider had to do things like replace a cracked window pane or replace a washer in a tap that they had to do within seven days. If we then get evidence that they are not doing that within seven days, then the KPI regime is—

Q87 **John Woodcock:** How do you get that evidence?

Paul Morrison: One of the things, Mr Woodcock, I was saying is that I think the ICI is right to identify that our recording systems and our making sure that we have robust tools to allow the kind of reinspection is certainly one of the things we accept in the report that we are addressing.

Q88 **John Woodcock:** You did not check that they had done it?

Paul Morrison: We will routinely check 25% of them in a year. You are correct that I cannot absolutely say that the issues around all of that 43% were absolutely done. That is the spot check arrangements that the Independent Inspector is describing and, as you described, we are keen to make sure that that is even more robust than it is.

Q89 **John Woodcock:** Minister, this approach is just totally unacceptable from the centre, isn't it?

Caroline Nokes: We have accepted and are acting upon the recommendation that the Inspector made.

Q90 **John Woodcock:** You have but the Inspector also makes very clear in his introduction that he felt that his report was highly unwelcome when it first came in its draft. Even though you repeatedly say the words that you are accepting the recommendations, in fact you are still giving an overly optimistic account of what is happening.

Caroline Nokes: I do not think we have given an overly optimistic account of what is happening. I have said that I have been shocked by some of the contents of the report that the Inspector made nine recommendations and we accepted all of those in full. There was not partial acceptance. I am very conscious that we have to do better.

Q91 **John Woodcock:** The contractors failed clearly but you also failed for not having a robust enough regime to check to improve standards.

Caroline Nokes: As Mr Morrison has said, there are reporting channels so that service users can escalate complaints direct to the Home Office.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

When the new contract comes in I am very conscious that we are bringing in the national issue reporting contract, which will be one single free-phone number for service users to be able to escalate complaints direct to the Home Office. It is all part of an enhanced picture because when you receive a report like this you know that you have to do better going forward.

- Q92 **Stephen Doughty:** Minister, it is all very well for you to say that you are shocked by this and for officials seemingly to take the same approach but I am afraid that the findings in this report from the Chief Inspector quite frankly make me very angry. It is two years ago. I met with your predecessors and I met with Tyson Hepple, Mr Palmer's predecessor. I met with him on a number of occasions to raise very serious concerns about the standards in Clearsprings properties in Cardiff and we are not talking about just the red bands incident. We are talking about disgusting accommodation that was being provided, people being crammed into rooms, damp, broken, inappropriate—all sorts of allegations, repeated allegations. I was told at the time, repeatedly, these were being looked at, no contracts would be let before these issues were addressed and yet the contract was relet to Clearsprings. You see in the report here on page 48, "672 inspections from 2016 to 2018 over half not fit for purpose, 103 of them uninhabitable and 22 unsafe". Given that the Department knew this was happening two years ago why have you continued to work with these contractors?

Caroline Nokes: The contracts were in place and, as you know, the new contract will take over from 2019.

- Q93 **Stephen Doughty:** That is not what I asked. Why did you let contracts to organisations that you knew were providing unsafe and inappropriate accommodation over two years ago and they have continued to profit at the taxpayers' expense during that period? Why did you let those contracts?

Caroline Nokes: We have requirements where properties are unsafe that contractors would have to move residents out within a specified timescale, which I think is two hours.

- Q94 **Stephen Doughty:** But the requirements are not being met, Minister. Why did you let those contracts again? Why did you let them again?

Caroline Nokes: It was an extension of the contract to enable us to engage in a lengthy consultation process both with local authorities and with NGOs to make sure that the new contract going forward would be an improvement on the current composition.

- Q95 **Stephen Doughty:** It clearly is not. Mr Palmer, were you made aware of these concerns when you came into your new position by your predecessors?

Sean Palmer: I suppose I probably should explain the different roles I have had and the different roles of different predecessors. I used to be



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the Deputy Director Responsible for Asylum Support and was in that post from January 2016.

Q96 **Stephen Doughty:** You worked with Mr Hepple while he was in post.

Sean Palmer: Yes.

Q97 **Stephen Doughty:** So you were aware of these concerns over two years ago.

Sean Palmer: Yes.

Q98 **Stephen Doughty:** You were and yet you let the contracts again and you advised Ministers to do that.

Sean Palmer: It was not a case of letting contracts again. It was a contract period, the original contract—

Q99 **Stephen Doughty:** I am not interested in the semantics. You allowed this to carry on in the full knowledge of the poor performance and the risks that they are putting vulnerable individuals at.

Sean Palmer: I do not necessarily accept the poor performance point. The point of—

Q100 **Stephen Doughty:** It is here in the report.

Sean Palmer: If I could just explain. The point of the contract is that there should be regular inspections. Those inspections will undoubtedly find problems with properties and there are very specific timescales where the providers have to repair and it is whether those repairs are done within the timescale set out in the contract, of whether the contract is working or not working.

Q101 **Stephen Doughty:** It is completely unacceptable. You have fully known the situation involving these companies and you have continued to work with them. Can I just draw your attention to the Companies House accounts for Clearsprings? In the last year where accounts are available the company paid their directors £1.2 million emoluments for qualifying services, made a substantial profit of hundreds of thousands of pounds and the highest paid director received a payment, individually, of £872,927. For each of the last three years that this has been going on, these shocking performances, they have been paying themselves millions of pounds. Do you think that is acceptable, Minister, for these companies to be profiteering on the backs of vulnerable people with your taxpayers' money?

Caroline Nokes: To be frank, Mr Doughty, I do not think anybody having a salary of that level is appropriate, whatever business they are in.

Q102 **Stephen Doughty:** Why are you employing them?

Caroline Nokes: We have a contact with them. We are not employing them. They are our contractors.



Q103 **Stephen Doughty:** Why did you contract them?

Caroline Nokes: We have a statutory duty to provide accommodation for asylum seekers and we have to have a mechanism in place that goes through appropriate procurement channels and we have to engage with companies who have the ability to provide those services.

Q104 **Stephen Doughty:** While they milk you for every penny.

Caroline Nokes: We have a statutory duty to provide those services to asylum seekers and therefore we are obliged to go through a proper procurement process and contract with companies who have the capability to do it.

Stephen Doughty: You knew, you carried on paying them and they have continued to deliver this level of service. It is quite frankly shocking.

Q105 **Stuart C. McDonald:** Thank you for coming to give evidence this afternoon. You will have seen the evidence session yesterday and it is fair to say that there are concerns among local authorities about the next asylum contract. Could I first of all ask, is participation in a dispersal scheme absolutely clearly voluntary? There is no question now of local authorities being compelled to take part as dispersal authorities?

Caroline Nokes: It is voluntary and there have been some interesting conversations that I have had with individual local authorities and with local government associations collectively about how we can increase dispersal. I am absolutely convinced that increasing the number of local authorities who are taking part is the right way forward. However, there is a quote that is used by the LGA that they feel it is being done unto them and they want to work in partnership with them, and I absolutely agree with that. I am conscious that maybe one of the witnesses you had yesterday suggested mandating. To me, that would feel like I was doing it unto them. I would much rather work in co-operation and partnership with local government and try to increase the number of dispersal authorities that way rather than mandate.

Q106 **Stuart C. McDonald:** Sure. I think everyone would prefer that approach, absolutely. To be clear, in your letter to the Committee I think you spoke of the mandating power under the 1999 Act as essentially being ineffective now. Can we basically say that the prospect of mandating local authorities is off the table pretty much?

Caroline Nokes: I think I gave a fairly hefty steer on 10 October in Westminster Hall that I do not regard mandating as desirable. I am conscious, however, I will continue to come under pressure from some local authorities, and indeed mayors, that I should be mandating. I do not feel comfortable about doing that, which means that we have to continue to work with the LGA and others to try to increase the number of dispersals.

Q107 **Stuart C. McDonald:** But legally speaking, are you saying that that power in the 1999 Act could still be used?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Caroline Nokes: I think there are some complexities because in 1999 the Committee will be very conscious that many of the properties were local authority owned and it is a very different picture now. The power still exists but I am not wholly convinced that it would be appropriate to use it.

Q108 **Stuart C. McDonald:** Okay. As I understand it, and as we heard yesterday, I think there are 32 authorities who have volunteered to become dispersal authorities but have not yet had any asylum seekers placed with them. What is the reason for that?

Caroline Nokes: I think the key word there is “yet” and it is important that when seeking to disperse asylum seekers among different local authorities that we work first with the authority, with NGOs, with voluntary organisations in the community to make sure that support services and networks are there. We always welcome offers of further dispersal authorities coming forward but it is right that we make sure that the facilities and services are in place before they are included.

Q109 **Stuart C. McDonald:** Have any of those 32 authorities tried to withdraw from the scheme or indicated that they do not want to be considered as dispersal authorities?

Caroline Nokes: Just a clarification on numbers—and I am sure Mr Morrison will correct me if I get this wrong—we have had 150 authorities in total come forward offering to take part and we currently have 129 participating. The figures are different to the 32 that was quoted yesterday. I am not aware of any who have come forward and then not had asylum seekers placed with them and then asked to withdraw.

Q110 **Stuart C. McDonald:** Is that your understanding, Mr Morrison?

Paul Morrison: That is correct.

Q111 **Stuart C. McDonald:** If we are to encourage more local authorities to come on board and if we are to keep the local authorities that are doing this now, their key asks are around direct funding but also I think—probably more crucially for them—establishing what you called, Minister, a partnership. I think a first ask from them—and almost a red line in carrying on their participation—would be if you would let them see the contracts that have been negotiated and sit down and have their advice on how they want those contracts improved and how they can become part of those contracts. Are you willing to do that?

Caroline Nokes: I think there are a number of points that need to be taken into account. First and foremost, there are confidentiality reasons why the whole contract cannot be shared. I met the LGA—I am going to say last week; it may have been the week before last—when we discussed this specific point. I am very keen that we abide by the law and observe confidentiality where required but also that we should look to areas where we can share information that we should do. The statement of requirements for the new contract was shared with strategic migration



HOUSE OF COMMONS

partnerships and local authorities. I undertook that I would also be happy to share that with Members of Parliament and that is now in the House of Commons library.

When it comes to the contract, we do have to abide by the commercial sensitivities of it but I think it is important to go as far as we can in sharing information with local government. I am not going to use a trite phrase, I was to reset the relationship, but over the last 10 months or so I have worked hard to engage with local authorities both individually and collectively on a range of issues to do with asylum dispersal, resettlement, unaccompanied asylum seeking children because I am conscious that local government is an important partner—it plays a huge role in this—and we have to work with them collectively and I am determined to do so.

- Q112 **Stuart C. McDonald:** Will you explore ways to try to make as much of the contract available to them and to discuss it with them? I accept there may be parts of the contract that are commercially sensitive and could not be shared but surely there must be a way to get the key elements of the contract before the local authorities and have their input into it.

Caroline Nokes: That was something that I agreed with LGA reps when I met them and I think it was last week but it may have been the week before.

- Q113 **Stuart C. McDonald:** Local authorities contract with central government all the time and are involved in contractual relationships and they are able to respect and abide by commercial sensitivities themselves. If you are keen to pursue a genuine partnership, why not discuss with them the possibility that they are contractually part of this arrangement and do have effective oversight and partnership in this dispersal regime?

Caroline Nokes: The range of LGA reps that I met the other week were very keen to emphasise exactly that point; they contract with central government the whole time. I am really keen that we share with them as much as we possibly can. They have made the ask that they be equal partners and we are currently exploring ways we can achieve that.

- Q114 **Stuart C. McDonald:** How do we achieve that? What does partnership look like in Home Office's eyes? I think people yesterday recognised that in recent correspondence there had been a shift in mood and a recognition of what they were seeking to do but it is now about the concrete steps to make that happen. They are looking for involvement in standards and oversight. They are looking for some sort of participation and control over the pace of dispersal and where accommodation is procured. Is that the sort of thing that you are willing to discuss with them?

Caroline Nokes: Absolutely and I think they have provided some positive input, and I am going to use just one example. When it comes to inspection of properties, there are a number of areas where Home Office inspections happen hand in hand with local authorities. I think that is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

important. Certainly, when it comes to conversations that I have had with them around dispersal and clustering they have some good, valid, strong opinions about not just looking at dispersal on a regional or a local authority level but taking it down to ward level and helping the Home Office and indeed providers. The providers play an important role in this and part of the future contract is making sure that providers and local authorities are working much more closely together.

I think there are some good examples on pilots of data-sharing as well and we all know that sharing of data can be tricky but when it is in the best interests of the individual asylum seeker where local authority, the providers and the Home Office work better at sharing data within the law then it is important that we do that.

- Q115 **Stuart C. McDonald:** Finally, and following on from earlier exchanges about accommodation standards, to me that almost seems like an open and shut case for getting local authorities involved in the role of inspection. You will have heard yesterday that they are willing to do that if the funding is there. Again, is that something you are willing to sit down and talk to them about?

Caroline Nokes: We already have some pilot areas where we are doing that.

- Q116 **Tim Loughton:** Minister, can I just follow up on Mr McDonald's points? I remember some years ago when the Prime Minister was the Home Secretary and it was near the beginning of the Syrian refugee crisis and we had, as MPs, all been completely saturated with constituents saying, "I have a room in my house, we would like to take somebody". The Home Secretary, quite rightly, said, "Well, the trouble is that is not terribly practical". However, there were lots of local groups, mostly based on faith groups or whatever, who did have the support mechanisms, grouping together to be able to offer some accommodation that was not just a room, a house or whatever, but all the support that those people desperately needed to go ahead with putting them here.

Is the system sufficiently flexible? It is not just about dispersing them equally among the local authorities. It is no good taking a family from inner city Damascus and putting them on Bodmin Moor. That just will not work. It is about finding whether our support mechanisms of other asylum-seeking families or unaccompanied from a similar background, similar language and so on who inevitably will cluster and will not be spread throughout the country. Does the system, as it works now, enable local authorities not to host those families but be able to contribute to the support mechanisms of a neighbouring or another authority where it is more appropriate for those families to be housed even if it is geographically not within that local authority?

Caroline Nokes: From the outset when you look at the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme and some of our community sponsorship schemes I would describe them as absolutely the gold



HOUSE OF COMMONS

standard. You are right to highlight that it is often faith groups but frequently faith groups working hand in hand with local authorities who have absolutely pulled together the accommodation, often through the local authority, but then the support networks are often charities or community sponsorship schemes that have been set up. Certainly back in the summer we gave an additional £1 million to support community sponsorship, but it is small scale and I understand and appreciate that it is small scale.

I think you made an interesting point that I am going to have to pass to officials because I do not know the answer to this. You are right to point out that there will be some parts of the country, some local authorities, where it is not necessarily appropriate because they lack the service—extreme rurality—and so on where it might be harder to take part in formal dispersal schemes. I am not aware, yet, of any situation where local authorities can share responsibilities perhaps with the neighbours, perhaps with ones further afield on this.

Paul Morrison: Picking that up, Minister, with the Syrian scheme that you are describing we do sometimes have engagement with people before they travel and understand who they are and where they come from and indeed ask them if their preference is to be in a more rural or more urban area. With that and also with the dispersal scheme though the key core thing that we have to do is make sure that there is appropriate accommodation, it is suitable to their needs, it is adapted and so on, so that would always be the primary driver of it.

Mr Loughton, one thing I would observe is that right across the country—and sometimes this is not noted—community sponsorship is focused on resettled families but the dispersed communities are very much supported by the communities around them. Many of the service providers have very active volunteer officers who go out and work with people like City of Sanctuary. There are mechanisms that have grown up that allow those civil society groups to support the dispersed asylum seekers and it is completely open for local government to work in the way that you described across boundary if they are to support one local authority at a time.

Q117 **Tim Loughton:** Okay, but I am not talking about community sponsorship schemes. I am talking about the local authority schemes and you are contracting with the local authorities. From what you say, and from my understanding, there is not a flexible mechanism whereby my local authority—say in Sussex—if it deemed that it was not appropriate for the nature of some of the families to be placed within a part of our country that they could go next door to an urban authority to say, “We will provide some funding and supporting mechanism, we will do the contract with the Government but geographically we will not host that family”. That makes a lot more sense to me.

There is a second issue here as well, which I think is what is slowing up this process—and Kate Green and I saw it when we were in Jordan



HOUSE OF COMMONS

recently in the refugee camps and I saw it with UNICEF last year in Athens—where there is a lack of capacity of social workers at home doing the welfare assessments of where it is appropriate for those children to come over, which is why the family rehabilitation and other schemes are so slow because they are so hard pressed for indigenous kids—as we know, social workers over here, let alone ones coming—and need more specialist research before they can be placed. Also places like Greece do not have a social services child protection structure like ours and so we could second some of our experts to go over there to help speed up the whole process as well. I have mentioned this to the Home Office before. We have reported back from our trips on this. Nothing happens and that is what is delaying many of these programmes.

Paul Morrison: We have had people in Greece working on the ground working with NGOs and with the Greek authorities. Ultimately these are southern countries.

Q118 **Tim Loughton:** Not social workers. You have had one official from the Home Office.

Paul Morrison: These are southern countries and we often make the offer, Mr Loughton. I accept the point you are making and social work capacity both overseas and here is a key capacity issue that we are very attune to when we are talking to local government. Just to build on the question you are asking, I was responsible for establishing the Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement Programme. One of the things that I want to do—taking Mr McDonald's point—as we develop this going forward, is to ask ourselves whether some of those principles about how we design the systems, how we understand the types of people going through the systems as we move towards the new contract, whether we can import some of those approaches. The Minister mentioned in her letter different typologies of cases. We are very much open to those conversations with local government in partnership to work out how we can address precisely some of the issues that you are describing.

Q119 **Tim Loughton:** We are five years into the Syrian scheme, so being open to conversations about that seems rather late in the day.

Paul Morrison: I think, Mr Loughton, I gave a misrepresentation there. What I am saying is that as we move towards the new contract in 2019 we have a period where we can think about how we want to do that and learning the lessons of the last five years, both about how dispersal has worked, how the unaccompanied minor scheme has worked, how the resettlement programmes have worked where we have five years now of experience working with local government, of capacity being built up. I think there are some real opportunities for those conversations to be a meaningful partnership that local authority wants.

Q120 **Kate Green:** Authorities that already take a substantial number of asylum seekers, Yorkshire and Humber and a number of authorities in Greater Manchester, have publicly stated that they would consider



withdrawing from their participation in dispersal if their concerns are not met in the new contracts. What do you understand to be the reasons why they have these concerns? What are the factors underlying their warnings?

Caroline Nokes: I think there are a range of factors. Some have revolved around clustering. I think when you look at particularly the north-west much of the capacity has gone to Greater Manchester and there have been pressures around the numbers specifically there. I think there have been pressures around community cohesion. There is quite often a question about specific funding and we have just talked a little bit about the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme, which comes hand in hand with additional funding, but in those cases what we do know is that through our work with the UNHCR it is people with specific vulnerabilities that we are seeking to resettle here and there are additional challenges—particularly perhaps around disabilities—and the cost to local authorities for adapting properties. Of course with the contracts the costs fall upon the providers so there is a distinct difference. Certainly I think some of the work that we have done with the Controlling Migration Fund with embedding local authority asylum support liaison officers has been of assistance.

I think what matters to me is that we continue the engagement with local government, we continue to work with them to understand the particular pressures. It is one of the questions that I always ask because you will find some local authorities say, “Well, actually we do not want LASLOs, it does not work for us, but we have a specific need in a different sphere” and I am always keen to understand what the pressures are. Certainly that is a question that I proposed to the devolved Administrations as well because it is only by the Home Office engaging thoroughly with local government that we will understand what the challenges are that they are facing and hopefully persuade them not to withdraw.

When it comes to Greater Manchester, I am very conscious that the mayor is keen that we mandate other parts of the country to take more. We have undertaken to look at the percentages already because I am conscious that the north-west has a very significant number of the dispersal at 24% and so it does matter that we look at that and we continue to work harder to make sure that we can widen dispersal areas.

Q121 **Kate Green:** The concerns that were raised with us yesterday by the local authorities represented, particularly in relation to funding, did not suggest to me that it was minor add-ons that they were concerned about. They talked about ESOL, which I think we would all agree is core to integration. They talked about education. They talked about pressure on their health service in their local area and in terms of being able to bring more authorities to the table in high cost housing areas and they talked about the cost of funding of housing. What are you doing to address those very deep-rooted funding concerns because they go beyond asylum liaison officers and money through the community integration projects?



They go to the core of being able to look after people in the community.

Caroline Nokes: I think that they are valid concerns. The point on ESOL—and this may or may not be welcomed by the Committee—but of course we focus our funding and availability of ESOL teaching for those who have achieved refugee status, not those who are still in the asylum system, and we think it is right that it goes to those who have demonstrated their need for international protection.

With regard to specific concerns about education and health, I hope I have been quite clear to the LGA that these are areas that we want to understand and understand whether the Home Office can have a role in supporting them or they are cases that the Home Office could have a role in making to other government departments that if you were to look at specific areas of the country where there were high pressures, particularly on health services. We appreciate that many asylum-seeking and resettled families might have significant numbers of children, larger families, and the pressure that puts on schools.

Q122 **Kate Green:** Have those discussions begun between the Home Office and other Departments? You must be aware, as we are, of the cost pressures in relation to health or education services.

Paul Morrison: I have a regular official group with other government departments. I think the question we are asking back to local government, which is what we did when we established the Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement Programme, was can we be more precise to quantify what cost the asylum dispersal system costs over and above what they get already from those central government departments. The consistent thing the Minister and I have said at official level and the Minister has said in talking to politicians is, "We need that information". We are very happy, as we demonstrated with the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme, to go and have those conversations with Treasury and with other government departments. At this moment, some of the information we have is at quite a general level. I heard Councillor Lawrence yesterday talking about schools that have been kept open because of asylum seekers being there.

The commitment that I have made certainly to my counterpart officer level is, "Just let us get in a room and let us sort out and let us understand what those pressures are on services" and then we can have the same conversation we were able to have about Syria, about understanding what we need to do.

Q123 **Kate Green:** Yesterday Councillor Simmonds told us that one issue that might deter more authorities from coming into the participation and dispersal schemes was the local housing allowance. Is that something that has been raised with you?

Caroline Nokes: I certainly heard Councillor Simmonds make that comment yesterday. It is not something that has been directly raised with me by local government to date.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q124 **Kate Green:** Does it concern you? Were you concerned at what he said yesterday?

Caroline Nokes: I am very conscious that there are different parts of the country that have significantly higher costs of housing and there are additional pressures because of that. Of course it concerns me because we want as many areas as possible to feel able to take part in dispersal but I do not know if either of—

Q125 **Kate Green:** Just on that point, would you accept that the local housing allowance therefore might be a deterrent to maximising the participation of local authorities up and down the country?

Sean Palmer: I can possibly help. The way the current contracts and indeed the new contracts will work is that we pay a rate to the provider and we ask them to find the property and provide the support services within that. For the new contract we have asked them to bid their prices and that will be evaluated. We want them to get the right price-point so that they can find housing in a range of local authority areas at the standards that we require. It is a price-point point. It is not necessarily about the local housing allowance rate. It is about the rate that our bidders and our providers in the future will bid at and that will be the cost of the contract.

Q126 **Kate Green:** How are you going to control that? There would be an incentive, wouldn't there, for them to bid at a higher price to be able to access housing in a very wide range of local authority areas and some would be very high costs areas potentially?

Sean Palmer: That is the competitive pressure within the marketplace that we are doing through the procurement.

Q127 **Kate Green:** What mechanism will be there be for scrutiny of that or are we reliant entirely on the Home Office making a judgment of how well that competitive pressure has delivered value for money for the taxpayer?

Sean Palmer: We will be evaluating all of the bids that come in through the procurement and be awarding on the most economically advantageous tender.

Q128 **Kate Green:** Do you have a financial envelope for these contracts that you are working within?

Sean Palmer: No, the price is going to be set by the market. We will evaluate all bids on quality and on price and we will come up with the most economically advantageous tender. We will also be going through a number of clearance processes and assurance processes within the Home Office and—this is a Government major project portfolio project—therefore also with Cabinet Office and with Treasury, that will evaluate whether I have done my job properly and we are getting economically advantageous value for money bids.



Q129 Alex Norris: Yesterday we had representatives from London, Wolverhampton, Glasgow and Greater Manchester but we heard a very similar story, one that I can certainly relate to in my community—because my community is not so dissimilar to theirs—of a proud history of providing shelter to those who need it, of a willingness and a commitment, despite very difficult current challenges within their communities, to continue to do so but a fear that their relationship with Government was not good enough and that it might mean in the future they might not be able to.

Minister, you spoke of a desire to reset the relationship. One of the things they did expressly say was that their confidence in their relationship with you was good and that that was one of the things that gave them cause for optimism but they wanted to know what concrete things were going to change. Looking as we enter the last phase of this new contract and then onwards, in that short period of time what is going to change in your relationship and the way in which you engage with local government?

Caroline Nokes: That makes me happy because I have worked quite hard at meeting with local government representatives, not just collectively but when individual councils have approached me. To me it is really important that I continue to do that. Certainly through the consultation that we did for the new contracts, there was a massive range of engagement with local government. That cannot stop, because if we are going to deliver the contracts effectively with the providers—and written into the contract is a requirement for the provider to continue to liaise closely with their local authorities in which they are delivering it—I am determined we keep the pressure up on that. Whether it is through official-level meetings or political meetings where as the Minister I meet leaders of local authorities, I think we absolutely have to do that.

We have to set the tone that when they come with concerns we act upon them, because I think that in many instances they will be the best advocates to other local authorities to take part in dispersal. Those who have been reluctant to take part to date might be able to say that both official-level meetings are happening—I think they are on a quarterly basis.

Sean Palmer: Yes, Minister. Practically, Mr Norris, there will be a continued task group that the Minister will sit on, which is chaired by Councillor Simmonds, who you saw yesterday. I will then replicate that jointly chaired with the Local Government Association and all their devolved counterparts. Between now and the new contract we will have a series of meetings overseeing a range of more detailed working level exactly in the areas that we have described, about how people are dispersed, how the clustering works and the conversations I was just having with Ms Green around some of the cost issues. Those are the practical steps that we are taking from here.

Q130 Alex Norris: That is helpful. I asked the panellists what they would like to see from you in a concrete sense. Roger Lawrence said the letter that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

you wrote, Minister, to Councillor David Simmonds on 19 November, making that into reality. Picking some of those bits from that letter, Mr Morrison, it may have been what you have just referred to. You reference on the second page joint partnership boards. Who goes to them and what geography do they cover?

Paul Morrison: That is part of the transition arrangements to the new contracts. The joint partnership boards will have a range of interested parties. We are asking strategic migration partnerships to help us identify the right people from local authorities and also from the health sector and from the police to come and be members of those boards. The membership will vary depending on region but again we will be driven by what the strategic migration partnership advises us.

Q131 **Alex Norris:** They will be regionally based for the transition between now to the new contracts?

Paul Morrison: Yes.

Q132 **Alex Norris:** What about after the new contract? Does the need for them go away then?

Sean Palmer: The specific need for those boards as set up to help us with the transition will go away. Part of the arrangement in live running is what Mr Morrison was talking about at a national level. We are exploring how we would replicate something that filters down from the national level to the regional level for ongoing business.

Q133 **Alex Norris:** I would suggest from the conversation we heard that it would not be just a short term for this next phase but it would be something they were wanting.

Mr Morrison, also on that second page there is the national-level committee with the Local Government Association. Is that the one to which you refer?

Paul Morrison: That is the one I was referring to, yes.

Alex Norris: When does that start to meet?

Paul Morrison: The first meeting is going to be before Christmas. In addition, my senior colleagues and I will be travelling around the country to get some of the regional discussions going with all of the areas that were represented yesterday as well as some of the other key areas that we are dealing with.

Q134 **Alex Norris:** That is helpful. Moving a little bit further down, what I recall from my time in local government, whether it is working with national Government or working with local partners, we would always talk about the strong partnership working. Nobody ever talks about weak partnership working, do they? It is strong partnership working. The key thing that we would get to, when we would work out whether or not we did have a partnership or whether we were going to work together occasionally, would be the data, whether or not we were willing to share



HOUSE OF COMMONS

data with each other. What data will you be sharing through these boards?

Paul Morrison: As the Minister said in her letter, we want to share as much data as we can that is both proportionate to what we get the data for and consistent with data protection laws.

Q135 **Alex Norris:** As opposed to what you currently share, will you be sharing more data than you currently share now?

Paul Morrison: That is certainly our aspiration.

Q136 **Alex Norris:** With regards to things you will not share—you might not be able to tell us specifically what it is—give me a sense of context to that.

Paul Morrison: When you are dealing with very sensitive issues and you are dealing with individuals who may have particular issues, you do not necessarily want those to be broadcast on a broad basis. You want to think about protecting the privacy of individuals. The key thing for us—and we have already started doing this partly in response to this Committee's report and ICI report as well—is an ability to identify some of the vulnerabilities and the needs that people have and making sure that that information is then passed to local authorities and other service providers so that, as far as we can, we are sharing what they need in order to be able to provide an effective service.

Q137 **Alex Norris:** Finally from me, there was a clear sense, as I say, for resetting a different relationship and for things to feel different. Fundamental to that will have to be the new contract. There was anxiety expressed that this new contract will be 10 years—I think there was a break at seven years—and that it was essentially a rollover. Are you able, Minister, to say very clearly today that this is not a rollover of previous arrangements? We know we have not been able to see the contracts themselves, but what we see when they are let are very different things and that therefore you will be confident and we can be confident will have very different outcomes?

Caroline Nokes: Yes. I think there are a number of areas in which the new contracts are going to be different. First and foremost is the advice issue reporting and eligibility aspect, which is now going to be a national overarching contract that gives service users the ability to interact directly with the Home Office through one single free-phone number if there are ongoing problems. Obviously in the first instance we always want individuals to contact their service provider and get things resolved on the ground, but I think that ability to escalate in a very straightforward way is very good news. I cannot do this without flicking open a folder and reading off chapters of the contract but Mr Palmer might want to do that.

Alex Norris: If you could pass us the contract or pass them to local government, they will gladly read it for themselves.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sean Palmer: The statement of requirements that we have already shared is, on a page-count basis, more than 50% of the contracts. Having read all 29 schedules of it, it is by far the most interesting. The rest of it is, I am afraid to say, quite boring boilerplate-type stuff that will not be terribly interesting unless you are particularly geeky. Most of the interest for local government will be in those statement requirements and I think it does say some things that address their concerns.

One of the things, Chair, I think you summed up yesterday was that local authorities wanted actual practical engagement in where providers will ask for accommodation and where people will be located. That is in paragraph 1.6 of the statement of requirements, very clearly there. The duties between the provider and the local authority are clearly set out.

As you raised the 10-year contract with a break at seven point, I think that is relevant. It helps providers invest in the properties and look to work with a supply chain that is more enduring. Therefore, we could expect providers to work more with institutional investors rather than short-term investment, short-term landlords, which means that people will be investing for the long term in quality accommodation, will be looking for a longer-term partnership and therefore can interact with local government on development plans and so forth. I think the 10-year contract should be seen as a positive in that sustainability and long-term partnership that we will be seeking to get between us, the local authorities and the provider.

Q138 **Sir Christopher Chope:** Can I ask for a bit of context? What proportion of those who are in this asylum accommodation eventually end up being allowed to remain in the United Kingdom, either as refugees or with humanitarian protection or with discretionary leave to remain?

Caroline Nokes: I fear I am going to give you an answer that does not answer the question, because I am going to give you some statistics from the general asylum applications as opposed to those who are specifically within the asylum accommodation. We know that at the first instance in the region of 30% of people are granted asylum on first consideration.

Q139 **Sir Christopher Chope:** Some of those would already have been in asylum accommodation?

Caroline Nokes: Yes, absolutely. Then at the first tier tribunal, of those who do appeal an initial refusal I think it is 45% are then granted. Some of them will have been in asylum accommodation. It is worth mentioning that of course there are significant numbers of people seeking asylum who are living outside of this accommodation elsewhere in the community and who are not receiving this support.

Q140 **Sir Christopher Chope:** Thank you. For those who go into asylum accommodation and are then ultimately able to stay in the United Kingdom legally, for how long do they stay in that asylum accommodation?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Caroline Nokes: Sean does have an average figure.

Sean Palmer: It depends on how fast the asylum decision-making system is working. As this Committee has heard before, the service standard for straightforward claims is to be dealt with within six months. If people are granted and their claim is straightforward, they will be in and out of the system within six months. If we refuse them and they go on to appeal, on average I think HMCTS is taking about 14 weeks to hear a first tier tribunal appeal. If they are granted at that stage, then they will be out in six months plus the 14 weeks. Obviously, and the Committee has heard evidence on this before, there are a number of claims that are non-straightforward and they take many more months to resolve. People will be in the system for the length of time it takes to resolve the claim.

Q141 **Sir Christopher Chope:** My concern is that 40% or 50% of those in asylum accommodation are eventually going to be able to stay in the United Kingdom. We know from the Casey report how important it is that when they are able to stay they should be able to be easily integrated. What I cannot understand is why the Government are still resisting the suggestion that people who are asylum seekers, whose cases are yet to be resolved, should not be able to go out and get work and be able to take pride in the contribution that they can make to this country instead of being in a sort of limbo dependency, which annoys everybody, not least the taxpayer, because we hear that much of the accommodation is below par and the taxpayer is paying handsomely for that when many of these asylum seekers would prefer to be able to go out and work and do their own thing. The only reason they are forced into asylum accommodation is because the Government refuse to allow them to be able to fend for themselves and earn something.

Caroline Nokes: As you may be aware, the policy aims to protect the resident labour market. Those who are granted refugee status have immediate access to work but it is the Government's view that we need to distinguish between refugees and those seeking to work here and that a claim for asylum should not be seen as a route into the general economic migration route.

Q142 **Sir Christopher Chope:** I know that is the Government's view. What I am trying to ask you, Minister, is whether you are prepared to look at it again, because there is an enormous amount of money to be saved going down a different route. There is also an enormous amount of satisfaction to be given to vulnerable people, enabling them to be able to look after their own future and wellbeing. There is a win-win available. Why are the Government refusing to engage on this?

Caroline Nokes: I do not think the Government are refusing to engage. The Right Honourable Member for Meriden had a very interesting debate in Westminster Hall on this a couple of weeks ago in which we were discussing the right to work for asylum seekers. If somebody has claimed asylum and through no fault of their own their claim has not been



HOUSE OF COMMONS

decided within 12 months, they have a right to work in jobs on the Shortage Occupation List.

Ms Spelman made a fabulous case around this issue where she emphasised that jobs on the Shortage Occupation List included ballerinas. I cannot remember what other example she used. I did tell her that she made the case very well. I have read the information from the Lift the Ban campaign. Both the Home Secretary and I have indicated that we are looking very closely at this but I think there is a need for us to be conscious that a significant number of people who claim asylum will not be granted and will not be eligible for international protection. If they have integrated into the labour market, it might be significantly harder in due course, when their claim is refused, for me to encourage them down the route of a voluntary return.

Q143 Sir Christopher Chope: Can I ask you, Minister, to look at the report that I did for the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on this same issue, and in that report recommended that asylum seekers should be able to work while their cases were being considered? Apart from anything else, bearing in mind the reservation you have just articulated, that would give an additional incentive for the Government to get on and resolve these asylum claims more quickly. If it took too long, the chances might be that the person who was working and was eventually going to be subject to deportation might get a bit too comfortable, but if you dealt with the cases a bit more quickly, that would not arise.

Caroline Nokes: I might indulge in some little light semantics that deportation is reserved for foreign national offenders and it is removal for those who have no right to be here. I am very happy to look at the report. I am slightly saddened that you were not in the Westminster Hall debate, Mr Chope. I think we could have definitely benefited from your views then.

Q144 Chair: Can I briefly take you back to some of the answers that you gave at the beginning, particularly in light of the further information that we have been given in the course of the afternoon? First of all, Mr Morrison, you talked about how in fact a lot of the not-fit-for-purpose properties were simply needing repairs that then took place quickly. Can you confirm that on the Inspector's assessment in fact 12% of the properties that they looked at were uninhabitable or unsafe? They were not simply needing some repairs like a washer but were actually uninhabitable.

Paul Morrison: Yes, Chair. We were talking about the 43%, which is the questions you were asking me, which were the urgent cases. That was what I was talking about that you are associating with. My understanding is that of the figures we are talking about, there were 9% in the emergency categories, which as I described it are those that needed 24-hour turnaround to fix them, and that you were looking at a much smaller percentage, less than 1%—this is my understanding of the figures and I trust they are linked to those that the Inspector was



HOUSE OF COMMONS

referring to—which would be the two hours. That is the gas leaks, the structural instability, the flooding and the fire damage and so on.

Q145 **Chair:** On page 48, figure 4, it says “uninhabitable”. Uninhabitable, 529 cases out of 4,678. Unsafe, a further 32,561 cases that are uninhabitable or unsafe. This is not 1%, this is over 10% of the properties, the very substantial number of properties, being inspected are uninhabitable. I am really worried about your complacency on this.

Paul Morrison: I apologise if I have given the impression of complacency. I was trying to articulate an answer to a question specifically about the 43%. There are two categories you are referring to in the 10%: emergency and immediate. The emergency absolutely needs a response and resolution in 24 hours because of the risks that you are describing. If there is an absolute and immediate risk to someone, their health, which is the smaller percentage that I am talking about, that is where we need the response within two hours. That is a relocation of individuals within two hours. To break it down, those are the figures I am referring to.

Q146 **Chair:** They are using different classifications for different regions. The categorisation here is “uninhabitable”. I am going to ask you to go away and look at that again and come back to us.

Do you also confirm that all the things that you have said about being confident that all of these things are followed up, you are not doing reinspections properly? The Inspector also said, “Home Office management told inspectors that rather than reinspections, they were moving towards more ‘desk-based reviews’ of how efficiently providers made repairs following inspections. They felt that this would save time and was a ‘smarter’ way of working.” I am sure it does save time not going back to visit any of these properties again, but how can you possibly be confident, if you are just sat at your desk, whether these repairs have been done and whether these properties are now habitable rather than continuing to be uninhabitable?

Paul Morrison: Thank you, Chair, I am glad I have the opportunity to expand on that. That is where I was referring to Mr Woodcock’s questions and saying that we need to listen to the Inspector about increasing the robustness of the regime. Part of that is about making sure we do the reinspections.

Also, that desk space, to be clear what that is about, is where I am saying that in addition to us checking the properties themselves, we also need to make sure that the processes that the service providers are delivering to escalate issues, to make sure their internal processes are effective, are also being audited. I think the reinspection point is well made and we are taking steps to address that and make sure that we have the tools to ensure that we are following up on the visits.

Q147 **Chair:** I want to give you the opportunity to reconsider your answers, both Mr Morrison and the Minister, to the questions by both me and John



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Woodcock from earlier in the light of further information that I have been given this afternoon, when we asked you when you had asked for the information about these case studies. John Woodcock asked you about this and asked you whether you had done so in the last month. You said, "No, no, it is a process". Can you tell us when did you ask for the information on these case studies and on the appalling cases that they had looked at?

Paul Morrison: To repeat again what I said to Mr Woodcock, it is not something that we have just asked for in the last month. We have an ongoing series of engagements with the ICI. When they raised issues around the visits that they made to the properties, we were asking them for information about which the properties were.

It was not me who had the conversation; it is my colleagues who have been doing the engagement with the process. What I would like to undertake to do to the Committee is I will write to you and explain the engagements that we had as an operation with the ICI through the process and when it was that the questions were asked. What I was saying is I cannot answer that question because it was not me who was doing the asking, it was my colleagues who were doing the direct engagement with the Inspector.

Q148 **Chair:** Minister, do you have anything to add to when the Home Office asked for this information?

Caroline Nokes: No. As I indicated earlier, Mr Morrison assured me that we had asked for the information but I do not have the date.

Q149 **Chair:** We have been in contact with the Inspector's office this afternoon. It told us that the Home Office asked for this information on Monday evening.

John Woodcock: Good grief. Shocking.

Paul Morrison: We have consistently through the process asked in the engagement that we have had and the findings that were presented to us. As I say, I will write to the Committee with the exact details of the engagements that we have had with the Inspector's team.

Q150 **Chair:** There is a very big difference between Monday evening, effectively the night before you published the Inspector's report and only then at that point finally thinking, "Maybe we should ask about these cases and whether they have been resolved", and having done so throughout a process.

Paul Morrison: Just to be clear to the Committee, that is not my understanding of the discussions that have been ongoing with the Independent Chief Inspector, which is why I had said that to the Committee. If, however, I have inadvertently misled the Committee, I will write and apologise. However, I do not, as I sit here, believe that that is the case.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q151 **Chair:** Do you also want to reconsider your answer to the question about whether the Home Office in fact knows the location of these cases?

Paul Morrison: As I mentioned, I think there was one case that I am very well aware of where there were immediate concerns that the Inspector raised with us. I am aware of that particular property. The understanding that I have been given, which is what I was basing my responses to the Committee on, was that there were a number of the others where we were less clear about which property and where the exact locations of them were.

Q152 **Chair:** I was asking you specifically about the one with the mothers and children.

Paul Morrison: Yes, and I believe that may well be. Let me absolutely write in detail to the Committee precisely on that. As I said to Mr Woodcock in response to his questions, there was one property where I know the Chief Inspector had particular concerns that were raised with us. I would just make it clear that that is the—

Q153 **Chair:** In the response that you gave us, you said, “There was some discomfort from the NGOs in sharing the information with the Home Office”. Minister, you said, “Telepathy is not my first skill”.

Paul Morrison: What I am saying is my understanding of what the— there were concerns about sharing information with us around exactly where these locations were. I have not had a communication with the NGOs through this. It is a direct communication with the Independent Chief Inspector and his team.

Q154 **Chair:** My office has been in touch with the Inspector’s office and been told that the Home Office does indeed have the information and has been given the information about each of these cases, including the one involving the seven mothers and children. In fact, the Inspector is also happy to provide this information to the Minister and to the senior officials again if they have somehow lost this information. To be honest, Minister, you did not need telepathy; all you needed was a telephone in order to be able to ring up and find this information.

Caroline Nokes: I would be very pleased to receive it.

Q155 **Chair:** Might you not have wanted to make that call yourself rather than leaving it for us to do in this public way?

Caroline Nokes: I think that is a conversation I need to have with my officials.

Q156 **John Woodcock:** Mr Morrison, first of all you tried to avoid answering the question at all. Then you were very clear with me that this was not a last-minute thing. You are talking about maybe inadvertently misleading the Committee. I put it to you that actually you did your best not to answer that question truthfully, and that is a very serious thing, Mr Morrison.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Paul Morrison: I would absolutely reject that and, if I have done so, I apologise wholeheartedly to the Committee.

Q157 **John Woodcock:** You have been caught, that is what happened. You have been caught.

Paul Morrison: I would say no. I gave information on the basis of my best understanding that I had received. If I have misunderstood the advice that I received, I apologise to the Committee.

Q158 **Chair:** The trouble is that this is a pattern. This is not the first time that Home Office Ministers and officials have sat before this Committee and given us the wrong information, and given us information, that has been very easy for us to check, that was simply wrong. We have had inquiries, we had the Alex Allan review, we have had the review around various other aspects of immigration system, around the Windrush system, around the DNA, and repeatedly we are being given incorrect information and Parliament is being given incorrect information. Ministers and officials are sitting there in front of us giving us incorrect information.

The reason this matters on something that is as important as this is because we have been able to find out very quickly not only that you were able to get this information but you were also able to follow up and find out whether mothers with small children were still in uninhabitable or unacceptable accommodation or not, and none of you have done so.

Paul Morrison: Chair, just because Mr Woodcock has said that I have deliberately misled the Committee—

John Woodcock: No, I put that to you. It is pretty clear.

Paul Morrison: I would reject that on the basis that I have in front of me my briefing, which is what I am referring to, which I have received in good faith, Mr Woodcock, which refers to the examples that were in the HAC report and I have details here that say, for example, "Property in South Yorkshire. Rats. No details of property provided. Kitchen full of mice. No evidence of address provided." One individual said, "Knowledge of rats triggered" and so on. That is what I am referring back to. The advice I have given the Committee is based on the information I have in front of me.

Q159 **John Woodcock:** What I am suggesting that you may have misled us on—and there is a big question mark as to whether that was deliberate or not—is that I very clearly asked you whether this was—I was trying to get to the idea of whether this was the kind of thing that civil servants do at the very last minute to cover themselves, to make sure that the night before a report is released they make sure that they have done the necessary. "Have we asked for that information? Yes." I was trying to establish whether this was a last-minute thing or whether it was done within a reasonable timescale when you got the case in July. You very clearly tried to lead us into the suggestion that of course this would have been asked for in a reasonable time. I put it to you, "Was it this month?"



HOUSE OF COMMONS

You said no.

Paul Morrison: No, what I was trying to say, Mr Woodcock, is that we have ongoing conversations throughout the entire routine inspection, where my colleagues will sit down with the inspection team and talk to them about what their findings are and ask them questions. My understanding is that through that process those questions were asked. I am not talking about a formal request; I am talking about an ongoing conversation.

I have undertaken to the Committee to provide precise details of those engagements that my colleagues have had. I want to absolutely categorically reject the implication that I have deliberately misled the Committee, because I have not. I have explained in the report precisely why I said the things that I did on the basis of the information that I had. I would repeat that I have not deliberately misled the Committee. If I have, Madam Chair, in that case I will apologise to the Committee because that was not my intent at all.

Q160 **Stephen Doughty:** There is a culture of complacency at the Home Office. A number of us have sat on the other side of that table and have prepared for Committee hearings in previous roles. Minister, you are not appearing to ask the questions and interrogate the briefings you are getting, because this is obviously not the first time that you have come and given us things that have had to be subsequently clarified afterwards or clarified. Officials are clearly not interrogating those who are providing them with the briefings. Mr Palmer, you appeared completely unaware of the concerns that I had raised almost two years ago about Clearsprings and the accommodation concerns. It appears to be at every single level, and this is not the first time that this has happened, that there seems to be a complete culture of chaos and complacency at the Home Office.

Minister, what are you going to do about this, because clearly you are not happy sitting there with the briefing you have received? It is very clear about that. Do you not feel embarrassed that you are sitting before us, and this is not the first time this has happened, and you do not have the right information in front of you?

Caroline Nokes: If Mr Morrison has given incorrect information, I apologise. I was quite clear that I had asked officials whether we knew where these properties were and the answer had come back no. I cannot comment about when that information was asked for because I simply do not know, but I think your analysis of my expression is probably bang on.

Q161 **Stephen Doughty:** Thank you. Can I ask one very quick question on a completely separate matter? Is money resolution for the Family Reunion Bill likely to be forthcoming?

Caroline Nokes: I had a meeting with Angus MacNeil last night, but you will know as well as he does that the money resolution is not in my hands, it is in the hands of the usual channel. I am conscious that both



HOUSE OF COMMONS

he and Afzal Khan have recently written to the Leader of the House on that subject.

Stephen Doughty: While we are on the subject of corrections, I should correct. I gave the salaries and the directors' fees. They are actually higher. I gave the figure for 2017, it is 2018. In 2018 the directors of Clearsprings received £1.345 million in emoluments and one director was paid £913,686, just short of £1 million, for delivering the substandard properties that we see in this report.

Chair: I think we are in a very serious situation because this is a repeated problem for us in terms of being given wrong information and the Home Office, frankly, at the most senior level, not seeming to know what on earth is going on. I think we need a letter to this Committee by lunchtime tomorrow from you, Minister, and from the Permanent Secretary explaining what on earth has gone wrong again in this case.

We also need to know what you and the Home Office are going to do to make sure that there is proper follow-up, that when you get cases of mothers and children in substandard or unacceptable accommodation somebody is following up and doing something about it. We are simply left to conclude that you have far too many vulnerable asylum seekers across the country in poor, substandard and frankly sometimes uninhabitable accommodation. Frankly, what you are doing is immoral. It is deeply, deeply unfair.

We look forward to getting this further information from you and thank you for your time this afternoon.