



Home Office

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Rt Hon. Meg Hillier MP
Chair, Public Accounts Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

04 September 2020

Dear Chair,

RE: Hotel accommodation for asylum seekers during COVID-19 pandemic

Thank you for your letter of 29 July with further questions about the use of temporary hotel accommodation for supported asylum seekers.

I would like to assure you that the Home Office is committed to working collaboratively with communities and stakeholders to ensure that destitute asylum seekers are provided with safe, secure and suitable accommodation while their asylum claims are considered. In response to significant increased demand and the unprecedented public health emergency that has arisen from the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of hotels has provided the most suitable, scalable and available provision to meet our immediate statutory need. This temporary measure has ensured that public health has been protected and people have been kept safe through the most critical time.

Our early analysis of the rapidly evolving impacts arising from COVID-19 suggested the accommodated population was likely to grow by between 4,300 to 6,700 between March and June. As part of this planning we also recognised that as a result of the wider public health measures introduced to control the spread of the COVID-19, our accommodation providers would be seriously limited in their ability to utilise or grow their dispersal estate. Given these challenges, the Minister for Immigration, Compliance and the Courts wrote to all Local Authorities and Devolved Administrations at the end of March to advise of the likely increased demand for asylum accommodation and necessary temporary use of hotels. This letter also made clear that in order to ensure access to as wide a pool of accommodation as possible with the urgency required, the usual level of consultation and advanced agreement between providers and local authorities on any sites identified would also change.

At the end of March, we accommodated approximately 48,000 asylum seekers of which a total of 1,200 people were being accommodated in 12 hotels in 7 local authorities across

the UK. Since the commencement of lockdown however, the accommodated population has grown to approximately 58,000. As of 24 August, approximately 8,000 people were being accommodated in 80 hotels across 50 different local authority areas as detailed below:

Contract Region (Provider)	Hotels	People	Local Authorities
Scotland (Mears)	3	188	Glasgow
Northern Ireland (Mears)	1	13	Belfast
North East Yorkshire Humber (Mears)	12	1031	Bradford; Calderdale; Hull; York; Leeds; Kirklees; Newcastle upon Tyne; Rotherham; Stockton-on-Tees; Wakefield;
North West (Serco)	8	944	Liverpool; Halton; Sefton; Cheshire West and Chester; Cheshire East; Wirral; Didsbury;
Midlands East Of England (Serco)	11	1702	Birmingham; Broadland; Bromsgrove; Coventry; Derby; Leicester; Nottingham
Wales (CRH)	2	53	Cardiff
South (CRH)	43	4042	Barnet; Brent; Bristol; Camden; Croydon; Dacorum; Eastbourne; Epping Forest Hackney; Hammersmith and Fulham Harrow; Hertsmere; Hillingdon; Hounslow; Kensington and Chelsea; Lambeth; Lewisham; London; Luton; Merton; Reading; Slough; Southwark.

Our Providers are contractually responsible for sourcing suitable accommodation and undertaking the appropriate engagement with relevant stakeholders prior to the use of a property. Throughout the pandemic, the Home Office and our Providers have worked through the existing Regional Strategic Migration Partnership structures to consider, discuss and source all suitable and available locations for additional asylum accommodation at a pace that ensures that statutory duties are met. In addition, the Home Office has worked closely with Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to take account of wider competing demands for hotel use arising from Local Authority obligations toward homelessness and rough sleeping prevention, as well as all relevant advice from local health leads. These discussions have predominately led to hotels being sourced in more urban and metropolitan areas where necessary local services, relationships and other provisions are readily available.

Under existing protocols our Provider have carefully considered local concerns raised regarding use of individual hotels and have not pursued the use of some premises where appropriate. Where there is disagreement on use of an individual property this has been escalated to the Home Office to make a final decision.

Our providers work within engagement protocols agreed with each individual local authority area. Accommodation providers have, wherever possible, given advanced notice and held discussion with each relevant Local Authority where an individual hotel is proposed to be used. However, given the rate at which demand for asylum accommodation has grown, at times where Local Authority concerns were not sufficiently

evidenced, we have had to utilise some hotels at short notice to avoid leaving people destitute. Where hotels are being used, our providers liaise and collaborate with local support organisations including Public Health, NHS, Police and NGOs to ensure that premises are managed correctly; essential services are being delivered; and residents' welfare is protected and safeguarded.

We are clear that extended large-scale use of hotels for asylum accommodation is neither an appropriate nor sustainable proposition. In order to reduce the use of contingency accommodation we have been working closely with Local Authorities and Devolved Administrations to widen dispersal and assist those that are no longer eligible to 'move-on' from asylum accommodation. This has been handled through a calm, considered and phased approach. Alongside this, we are also progressing at pace a range of alternative solutions to secure the level of longer-term accommodation required.

I hope this letter addresses the questions raised by members of the Committee.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Matthew Rycroft', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Matthew Rycroft CBE