

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

08 April 2021

Dear Chair,

**RE: Treasury Minute response to the Committee's report on the asylum accommodation and support transformation programme**

Thank you for your letter of 2 March on the February Treasury Minute response to your report on Asylum Accommodation and Support Transformation. You asked for additional clarity on some recommendations.

In response to the Committee's comments on **recommendation 1** regarding the development of a 'Directorate Engagement Strategy', I can confirm that my letter of 2 March (enclosed) includes information on scope, implementation plans and expected outputs, as requested.

On **recommendation 2**, you asked the Department within three months to set out a clear plan for how we will quickly and safely reduce the use of hotels and ensure that asylum seekers' accommodation meets their individual needs. I would like to reassure the Committee that we are committed to reducing and ending the routine use of hotel accommodation and are taking a range of steps with providers to achieve this.

During the pandemic the Home Office has not moved people with failed asylum claims on from asylum accommodation. This, together with people continuing to enter the asylum system and other impacts of the pandemic over the last year, has necessitated greater use of contingency accommodation. To ensure sufficient accommodation capacity to fulfil our statutory obligations, we needed additional capacity swiftly so that people were not left destitute.

The Department has established Operation Oak, a programme of work to increase the number of people leaving hotels month-on-month. The programme works with

the three providers of asylum accommodation and local authorities to support the procurement of additional dispersed accommodation and to ensure that people who are no longer entitled to asylum support are moved on appropriately. This ensures that we can free up the accommodation for others. Each of the providers, Clearsprings Ready Homes, Mears and Serco, have provided plans to increase the volume of dispersed accommodation. The Department is monitoring progress against these plans, including through regular assessment of their performance. The Department is working closely with local authorities, emphasising the importance of reducing hotel use, to gain their support for the increase in property procurement and to ensure they can feed in their views on where, in their areas, our providers are looking to procure. The Department continues to engage with stakeholder groups including Strategic Migration Partnerships (SMPs) and Non-Governmental Organisations to encourage their support in this programme. The Department is also working closely with the Crown Commercial Representatives for the providers. The programme has made early progress with circa 1,300 fewer people in hotels since January 2021.

The plan is dependent on a number of variables, including intake and outflow from the system, changes to public health guidelines, property pipelines (dependent on property markets) and Local Authorities agreeing to our procurement requests. We have dynamic plans, subject to continual revision, predicated on assumptions in relation to all of the above. There is no single, static recovery plan; rather a programme of work to move us from contingency accommodation to regular dispersed accommodation that will take account of the changing supported population, the availability of suitable accommodation and the views of local authorities. I do not believe providing a snap-shot of the plans will give an accurate picture or be helpful in the scrutiny of our work. The published statistics will show our progress on dispersed accommodation.

On **recommendation 6**, you say that our response does not address the Committee's recommendation that a safeguarding assurance framework should be published and that it describes the mechanisms for safeguarding without providing transparency on standards to which all stakeholders should be able to refer. The Asylum Support Contracts Safeguarding Framework is a supplementary document to other publicly available information that I believe provides what the Committee has asked for. The framework is designed to provide a high-level overview of the responsibilities of all parties and is to be read in conjunction with the safeguarding elements of the Accommodation and Support Contracts (AASC) and the Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility Contract (AIRE). These contracts were designed with safeguarding the individual at their heart.

The information relating to the required standards is set out in the contracts, which are published on the contract finder webpages. Below is a summary of some of the main terms and requirements:

- The AIRE contract is a new national service that allows asylum seekers to contact Migrant Help 24 hours a day, 365 days a year if they need help, advice or guidance, that includes raising issues relating to safeguarding.

- Identifying the needs of service users as well as safeguarding those being supported by UKVI are common themes throughout the new contracts. Any Accommodation Provider officers with responsibility for face-to-face interactions with service users must have undertaken safeguarding training, to enable them to identify indicators of vulnerability, and implement appropriate responses.
- Providers must comply with the Home Office's policy and guidance relating to safeguarding children and vulnerable adults, including recognising the indicators of a vulnerable or at-risk person with specific needs, and responding appropriately to their needs. This will include keeping guidance and training up to date and ensuring this aligns with accepted good practice and the Home Office approach to safeguarding. This is monitored through the formal contract governance meetings.
- The contracts require improved health screening and support in registering with a GP, improved safeguarding training and awareness of staff, the provision of more adapted rooms for service users with specific needs, and the provision of face-to-face advice and support for those who need it.
- If the accommodation provider has reasonable grounds to suspect that the safety and wellbeing of service users, staff, or members of the community are at risk, they are obliged to take appropriate action including making contact with police, ambulance or local authority services or making onward referrals to the Home Office safeguarding team.
- Any allegation made by or about a service user concerning sexual or physical abuse, the safeguarding of children or vulnerable adults, neglect, harassment and/or exploitation must be reported to the Home Office, Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility Assistance Service (AIRE) and the police within 1 working day. This is a requirement monitored via the monthly and quarterly contract meetings.
- Where a referral is made to the accommodation provider for a welfare visit or further action, the accommodation provider must maintain records of all actions taken. As well as reporting incidents contemporaneously, the accommodation provider must also submit a report to the monthly governance meeting, detailing the incident, actions taken and any outcomes. We interrogate incident reports in real time as we are notified, asking for further detail where appropriate and then safeguarding and welfare issues are discussed as part of the monthly CMG.
- Where a provider is failing to deliver on any of these contract requirements remedial plans are requested, agreed and tracked through to improvement and compliance. Wider improvement to performance and the service is taken forward through continuous improvement initiatives, which is overseen by a Continuous Improvement Board of all Providers.

To reassure the Committee, I can confirm that the Safeguarding Framework will also be available online in addition to the contract documents by April 2021.

You also sought clarification on the Home Office's approach to **recommendation 3**, where you state it is not clear whether including the AASC contracts in the Department's procurement pipeline will allow enough lead-time to consider significant changes of approach. The Department has assessed plans to manage the contracts to ensure recovery and improvement from the current impacts for COVID-19. To allow for an extended design, procurement and transition to future contracts, the Department will undertake a review with a decision point in August 2022. An evaluation at this point will provide an opportunity to consider the merits of using the break clause after 7 years and whether moving to a different model for the delivery of these services is advantageous. This review point will provide four years to complete the project lifecycle, which is more time than the last project. We believe this is sufficient.

I trust this addresses the Committee's questions. We will provide further detail of the outstanding recommendations in the Treasury Minutes Progress Report that will be laid in Parliament in May 2021.

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**