

Written evidence from Hull City Council

Summary of Hull City Council submission to Public Accounts Committee inquiry into the Asylum Accommodation and Support Transformation Programme (AASST), 22/09/2020.

Hull has been a dispersal area for people seeking asylum since 2000. This submission by Hull City Council focusses on the ongoing issues relating to asylum dispersal in Hull since the awarding of the new asylum contracts AASC and AIRE, which commenced from September 2019. The submission provides a brief historical context to asylum dispersal in Hull, the awarding of the new AASC and AIRE contracts and the impacts of the new contracts in Hull. Specific issues include immediate use of hotels as contingency accommodation, without prior notification or engagement with the local authority, and Hull City Council responses to this; impacts of Covid-19 and pressures on an already struggling asylum system and impacts on Hull and the Local Authority; further hotel use by asylum providers in Hull and further impacts on Hull, given the Covid-19 pandemic; updates around increases in asylum numbers in the city and proposed increases in procurement by asylum providers and Local Authority concerns around this; attention from external far right groups around hotel use as asylum accommodation in the city; the impacts of restarting of positive and negative cessations around asylum decisions; the impacts on local authority resources in managing and dealing with asylum issues, and concluding views of Hull City Council around the current delivery of asylum contracts in Hull, regionally and nationally.

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1. Background

Historically, G4S had been contracted by the Home Office since 2012 under the COMPASS (Commercial and Operating Managers Procuring Asylum Support) framework to provide accommodation for dispersed asylum seekers. In Hull and other areas, G4S subcontracted much of this provision to Target Housing, a Registered Provider of social housing. There were wide ranging concerns that the G4S contract value meant that it was not financially viable to meet their obligations effectively and that services were impacted negatively as a result. The contract with G4S ended in August 2019.

The AASC (Asylum Accommodation & Support Contract) replaced the COMPASS contracts, outlining the accommodation standards, transport and support service requirements to ensure that

vulnerable asylum seekers supported by the Home Office are given access to adequate support, whilst also detailing duties for the provider to develop partnership working with local authorities and other partners, with the contracts being offered for 10 years, from 01 September 2019.

Mears Group, a nationwide company working in housing management was awarded 3 out of 10 portions of the ASSC contract (North East-Yorkshire - Humber; Scotland; Northern Ireland), with contracts worth £1.1billion.

Mears Group, like G4S previously, has continued to use Target Housing as a subcontractor to support asylum accommodation provision in Hull. Mears is contracted to provide accommodation for asylum seekers on Section 98, Section 95 and Section 4 support of the Immigration and Nationality Act 1999.

A decision was made by the Home Office to manage issue reporting separately from accommodation provision and the charity Migrant Help won a £100 million contract to run a new Home Office system called Advice Issue Reporting and Eligibility (AIRE) services.

The implementation of the new contracts appears to have coincided with a rise in asylum applications made in the UK, with some applications linked to Brexit and a perception that people may find it harder to settle in the UK in the future.

The increase resulted in Mears deciding to use hotels as contingency asylum accommodation, with a hotel in Hull (Royal Station Hotel) being used by Mears from 23/09/2019 – 26/03/2020, along with hotels in East Riding, and West Yorkshire; **without prior consultation** with local authorities including Hull, with 100-130 people placed in the Hull hotel at any one time, and without any planning for health screening and healthcare being in place.

This was of significant concern for local authorities across the Yorkshire and Humberside area, including Hull and, in November 2019, Hull City Council's Chief Executive was signatory to a joint letter with Hull CCG and ERYC to the Home Office outlining very serious concerns about the management of asylum dispersal by Mears, and the use of hotels as asylum accommodation.

The letter stated that the local authority would pause all refugee resettlement activity with effect from the 10th December 2019 and that this would remain the position until the Home Office fulfilled the certain conditions, including: ceasing use of hotels, funding and development of health services for asylum seekers in hotels, improving data sharing about asylum seekers to enable LA's to meet their statutory responsibilities and consideration of impact of all Home Office programmes including LA resettlement activity and not just private contractors and asylum contracts, with a strategic assessment of asylum impact and a more equitable distribution of asylum seekers nationally.

On 26/03/2020 Mears group ceased use of the Royal Station Hotel (Hull) as asylum accommodation (it is believed this was due to the hotel being re-purposed as key worker accommodation to support the Covid 19 pandemic). However, Mears Group has continued to use several hotels in the Yorkshire area as contingency accommodation to accommodate asylum seekers.

The management of the asylum accommodation and support contracts in our region, including hotel use, has continued to cause significant concern; and Yorkshire and Humber LA's, including Hull, have met on a weekly basis since September 2019 to try and mitigate these concerns, with meetings

ongoing. Meetings are attended every 2 weeks by Mears Group and the Home Office. In addition, Migration Yorkshire take forward LA concerns at a weekly Strategic Migration Partnership meeting with senior Home Office leads.

2. Impact of Covid 19 and Pressures on Asylum Accommodation.

Based on PHE advice in relation to the Covid 19 pandemic, the Home Office decided to pause asylum decisions and cessations of support, as part of measures to limit the impacts of the virus. This has meant asylum seekers have not moved on from their asylum accommodation. Clandestine arrivals to the UK have continued despite the pandemic, and have to be accommodated by asylum accommodation providers including Mears Group, and there have also been additional pressures on the asylum system due to 'shielding'.

This has resulted in a lack of available bed spaces within the asylum system, and led to increased hotel use as asylum accommodation across the UK, including Yorkshire and Humber and NE, on top of hotel use which was already occurring in many areas, with **8 hotels being used in Yorkshire and 3 in North East.**

On 01/07/2020 the Home Office contacted Hull City Council to state there was extreme pressure on available bed spaces in the asylum system and Mears Group would be re-commencing use of the Royal Station Hotel in Hull, with the intention being to procure the entire hotel (190 single bed spaces), with occupation starting from the beginning of August 2020.

Hull City Council expressed strong concerns at this via several meetings, telephone calls and contacts by the Chief Executive and senior managers; and Hull's three MPs and the Leader of Hull City Council wrote to Minister Kevin Foster on 09/07/2020 concerning the proposed hotel use. Concerns included: the fact that 190 people was the largest single placement in NEYH, potential impacts on Covid-19 transmission in the city (as the hotel is situated within the train station and transport interchange), the impacts of the need for on-going assessment, control and management of the situation in relation to the Covid Local Outbreak Management Plan, possible impacts on community cohesion with the placement of this number of single people in the city centre at a time of rising unemployment and local levels of poverty, pressures on health, CCG and LA, which are already feeling the impact of Covid-19 pandemic, and lack of support for asylum seekers by Mears Group. A request was made for the process to be halted until further robust risk assessment and management and support arrangements could be made.

As a consequence of the lack of a response to these concerns, and indications that Mears would proceed in spite of LA concerns and requests that they do not proceed, although at a lower number of 130 asylum seekers, Hull City Council felt it was in the best interests of the city and the asylum seekers who would be accommodated in the hotel, to begin planning to deal with the hotel situation, strategically and operationally with key internal and external partners.

The concern in relation to the proposed hotel use in Hull was further heightened by the production of a video by Nigel Farage, identifying several hotels being used by Mears Group and describing the asylum seekers being accommodated at the hotels as 'illegal immigrants being accommodated in luxury spa hotels'. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5XKksiSgac>

Planning by Hull City Council, both strategic and operational, has continued to try and deal with issues and concerns in relation to the use of the hotel as initial asylum accommodation, including requiring Mears to provide adequate risk assessments for the hotel use in relation to Covid-19,

health provision and testing/screening for Covid-19 and other health issues, planning to deal with any potential outbreaks at the hotel; and to deal with any media coverage, incidents in or around the hotel, including in relation to Brexit, Black Lives Matter Protests and Far Right protests. Hull City Council senior managers have asked Mears Group to attend and engage with the operational meetings and Mears are doing this.

This has impacted heavily on Hull City Council and agencies in the city, including Health, Humberside Police, Environmental Health, Public Health, and senior LA managers, at a time when such agencies and services are already heavily overstretched due to the impact of Covid-19, with attendance at both operational and strategic meetings taking place weekly to try and ensure there are no serious issues at the hotel. There have also been impacts on the VCS and NGO sector in Hull, who have also responded to support asylum seekers accommodated in the hotel.

In addition, there has been focus on the Hull hotel and the asylum seekers accommodated there from the far right groups, culminating in a protest and counter protest taking place in the city on **29th August 2020**, directly outside the hotel, around the use of the hotel to accommodate asylum seekers, with impacts on local policing as they were required to police the protests.

Dispersed accommodation:

In addition to using the Royal Hotel Hull as contingency accommodation, Mears have continued to accommodate asylum seekers in properties in Hull, in what is termed 'dispersed accommodation'.

Since the start of the contract, Mears has made requests to procure additional dispersed accommodation and it has been stressed that these must be made in consultation with the Local Authority. Due to concerns over the number of additional asylum seekers accommodated in the city for the first period of hotel use, permission was only given to Mears to procure replacement properties.

On 27/03/2020, Minister Chris Philp wrote to Local Authorities to advise that procurement would be required across the regions to ensure the supply of asylum accommodation, and **'that the usual procedure of not permitting accommodation providers to procure without local authority agreement was being paused**, allowing Providers to identify any suitable properties as appropriate.' The Home Office stated it remained committed to working with Local Authorities and NGOs and Mears stated it would try and work with local authorities around this.

An additional impact on asylum accommodation has arisen due to the fact that during the Covid-19 pandemic, asylum 'move ons' (positive – negative decisions) were paused by the Home Office and have not been taking place since March 2020 and this is affecting Mears' need for accommodation, as asylum seekers are not moving through the asylum system and leaving accommodation, but Mears are still being required to accommodate new asylum seekers.

In addition, the Home Office agreed that destitute refused asylum seekers could claim section 4 support and be placed in asylum accommodation, to try and safeguard public health and destitute asylum seekers health.

This has been welcomed by the local authority as it supports the delivery of the Covid-19 related Public Health safeguarding, but it has also led to an increase in the need for accommodation in which to place people on section 4 support, many of whom were previously surviving, without recourse to Home Office support or public funds, by sofa surfing and working unofficially, but have

lost their sofa surfing accommodation and income through closures of takeaways, car washes etc. due to Covid-19 pressures, and there have been continued pressures on the asylum estate, including in Hull.

The **National Audit Office completed an investigation into how effectively the contractual delivery and management arrangements are operating in relation to the asylum dispersal programmes.** Hull, amongst other local authorities in our region, provided evidence to inform this research.

3. Key concerns

As a result of this pressure on the asylum system, Mears has sought to increase the number of Hull **dispersed accommodation bed spaces by 27%**; (made up of an increase in HMO's for single asylum seekers by 25% and family properties for asylum seeking families by 1.9%).

The use of a **hotel in Hull as contingency accommodation represents an increased in bed spaces of 21%.**

The **combined increase in asylum seeker bed spaces for both hotel use and proposed dispersed accommodation represent a 48% increase in the number of asylum seekers bed spaces.**

Hull City Council feels this is a significant increase for a city of Hull's size and has concerns around the impact on local services, particularly Health.

Indications are that Mears want to move to a largely HMO portfolio for single people, so Hull may face further HMO procurement requests (HMO's feature in Hull City Council's Director of Public Health's Covid 19 outbreak management plan as being of concern). Some of the proposed dispersed accommodation HMO's in Hull have been identified by KHCC Private Housing team as being in Article 4 areas, and Hull City Council is having to resource significant engagement with Mears Group around the requests to procure HMO's. In addition, the Home Office has restarted positive cessations of asylum support and accommodation and these commenced from 11/08/2020. Efforts were made by the Home Office to engage in pre-planning around this with Yorkshire and Humber LA's, including Hull, and Hull City Council has welcomed this engagement, despite the need for Hull City Council to resource attendance at several Covid-19 Exit Planning Task and Finish groups, to support the Home Office around planning for the restart of cessations, in the Hull area.

After initial issues with stale and incomplete data around asylum seekers affected being supplied by the Home Office, this has proceeded relatively smoothly and Hull City Council considers that the engagement with the Positive Cessations team has been effective.

Hull City Council feels there has been a very different approach by the Home Office to the restarting of negative cessations: on 15/09/2020, the Home Office wrote to lead regional Chief Executives advising them that the Home Office would commence issuing negative asylum decisions and cessations from that day with 21 days' notice for asylum seekers before they must leave their asylum accommodation. This is of strong concern to Hull City Council, given the lack of consultation, pre-planning or prior engagement with local authorities and particularly local and regional Public Health around this issue, and possible impacts for local authority Children and Families Services, which may be required to 'step in' and support vulnerable or destitute families with negative decisions, and concerns for the health of the refused asylum seekers and for Public Health in the city, particularly in view of the number of Covid-19 cases increasing across the UK and the need to safeguard the health of all.

Hull City Council has concerns that refused asylum seekers may try and remain out of contact and out of sight with services, particularly health services, fearing detention and return to their home countries, and this could have impacts their health and on the effectiveness of Covid-19 track and trace systems.

Hull City Council feels that the Government's decision to embark on restarting negative decision making and cessations of asylum support without regard for the direction of the Covid-19 pandemic (cases increasing and restrictions increasing) and without full engagement with local authorities before implementing such as decision, is irresponsible at any time, but particularly during a pandemic, with no engagement or consultation with local or regional Public Health around possible impacts for the city and, as such, Hull City Council feels the decision represents a shifting of the responsibility of caring for this cohort of asylum seekers onto local authorities, whilst facilitating the freeing up of bed spaces within the asylum estate for new arrivals, with resultant impacts on LA budgets, and resources.

In addition, VCS services are limited due to Covid-19 impacts and what VCS services are available are currently responding to hotel use and supporting asylum seekers in the Hull hotel, and may not be able to respond to the needs of destitute asylum seekers with negative decisions, and access to appropriate legal support is limited (OISC registered immigration advice providers) due to the impacts of the pandemic.

The Home Office **National Change Mechanism**, to readjust asylum dispersal levels more equitably across the UK, is currently on hold by the Home Office due to the Covid-19 pandemic, so it appears that, currently, there is no long term effective strategy to ensure that the accommodation of people whilst their asylum claim is determined, is balanced and equitable.

4. Conclusion

Hull City Council has concerns about the model of the ASSC and AIRE contracts and the separation of the reporting function for reporting issues around properties and repairs between two separate agencies – Migrant Help and the accommodation provider. There have been continued reported issues in terms of accessing assistance and reporting repairs via Migrant Help and it is Hull City Council's view that this has impacted on the delivery of services to asylum seekers accommodated in dispersed accommodation, including asylum seekers in Hull waiting over 2 weeks for section 4 applications and support to be granted and financial support provided. It may be that a more localised and connected model of support could offer benefits.

With COMPASS contracts, the incoming provider, G4S for the Yorkshire and Humber region, was not ready or prepared in time for the intended start of the contract and Yorkshire and Humber local authorities, who were the outgoing providers as YHPSG, were asked to extend their contracts to enable the new provider, G4S, to have more time to prepare for contract delivery. It was hoped that the lessons from this situation would be learned and that providers under the AASC would have adequate awareness and understanding of the need for preparation to deliver such a contract and sufficient time be allocated within the Home Office contract award process to providers to enable them to prepare for delivery adequately. Having had direct experience of asylum accommodation delivery for over 10 years, Hull City Council is of the opinion that timescales for the award and preparation for the delivery of the ASSC contract were insufficient for a provider with little previous experience of asylum accommodation delivery.

There are continued concerns re-the delivery of asylum contracts and the Home Office and Mears Group proposed actions re-hotel use and procurement of HMO's as asylum accommodation, which will increase asylum numbers in the city. Processes in place appear to be inadequate and largely unmanaged, there are also significant knock on consequences to the public purse as locally operating public services are forced to step in to support people dispersed to hotel accommodation.

Hull City Council is of the view that much of this role of performance management of the asylum accommodation contracts is falling on to local authorities, both in terms of hotel use and contingency accommodation, and the need for local authorities to respond to and monitor the issues surrounding this type of use. The Council has the same concerns regarding the provision of dispersed accommodation; where there are issues around current Mears housing stock and proposed procurement. It is felt that local authority resources are needed to inspect and assess the quality of the accommodation.

Trends - Hull City Council feels that, in terms of trends, there has been a focus towards increased use of HMO's by Mears and there are concerns that reducing costs may be a driver for this, given that HMO's are generally cheaper to operate rather than smaller properties.

As a result of concerns around impacts of hotel use as asylum accommodation on the city, Hull City Council has not accepted any further cases under Home Office refugee resettlement programmes since December 2019,

Since the start of the AASC, Hull City Council and other local authorities have been informed by the Home Office and Mears that the use of hotels (as unofficial Initial Accommodation) would continue, unless local authorities, including Hull City Council, would agree to increased asylum procurement and increases in asylum numbers. Hull City Council regards this as an attempt to force local authorities, who are already committing a great deal to existing asylum and refugee provision, to accept increased impacts on services, the voluntary sector and the local community and, as such, local authorities that are welcoming to refugees and asylum seekers are being overstretched with consequences for the wellbeing of the local community and on the resources and capacity of the local authority.

Hull City Council has concerns around the lack of systems in place to monitor risks within the contract, particularly around the delivery of safeguarding and health and welfare functions in respect of the asylum seekers being accommodated both in hotels and in dispersed accommodation.

In relation to the delivery of the ASSC and AIRE contracts and hotel use, since September 2019, local authorities have had to resource attendance at more than 50 major meetings and provide consequent local authority support. The Home Office have made requests at those meetings for local authorities to assist them in updating them around issues relating to contract delivery, including safeguarding risks, concerns re-service provision and issues relating to property procurement and property standards. It is important to highlight that Yorkshire and Humber local authorities, including Hull City Council, are still experiencing the effects of austerity and the consequent cuts to local authority funding and services (Hull City Council has reduced its workforce from 13,802 to 4,800 since 2008) and, as such, Hull City Council is not in the position to be able to provide significant support to enable a commercial contract to function. The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic have resulted in further very substantial impacts on local authority resources and funding.

Hull City Council has been a welcoming, willing and enthusiastic supporter of Home Office – UNHCR refugee resettlement programmes in the city for the last 15 years, as well as supporting the provision of asylum accommodation in the city from 2000 – 2012 under direct Home Office

contracts. Since 2012, it has had to deal with the impact of moves to provide asylum accommodation via private providers. In view of this level of experience of support and care for both asylum seekers and refugees, there is concern at the lack of holistic thinking and planning from the Home Office concerning the impact of the provision of commercial asylum contracts on local communities and of the failure to consider the entirety of their various different programmes on specific communities.

It is not appropriate for the Government to continue to expect the most deprived parts of the UK to continue to face the greatest impacts of asylum policy and provision. There needs to be some additional resourcing to Health and local authorities in order to facilitate their engagement and provision of services around the asylum contracts, particularly as the National Change Plan, which aims to re-balance the distribution of asylum placements, is on hold and seems unlikely to come to fruition in the short to medium term. Hull is willing to receive and welcome asylum seekers, having a strong commitment to humanitarian issues, but feels there must be improved engagement, consultation and delivery of the asylum contracts and resourcing of LA's areas which provide places of sanctuary for those seeking safety and stability.

The Home Office has invited LAs to take part in the UK Resettlement Programme which is funded and will operate similarly to the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (Syrian Resettlement Programme), but combines Gateway Resettlement Programme, Vulnerable Persons Programme and Vulnerable Children's Relocation Scheme into one programme, and Hull City Council views commitment to the programme positively. However, Hull City Council feels the time has come for the consideration of LA commitments to resettlement, when the Government is making decisions around levels of asylum placement in LA areas, to ensure that impacts on services and LAs are balanced and able to provide the optimum service to vulnerable asylum seekers and refugees and host populations alike.

Hull is a self-declared City Of Sanctuary with a long and significant history in terms of offering safety and sanctuary to asylum seekers and refugees, and Hull City Council continues to view resettlement and offering sanctuary to those in need positively but feels there must be balance, co-operation, consultation, meaningful engagement, equitability and fairness in the decision making around the placement of asylum seekers in our city, along with a commitment to providing financial resources to local authorities and health services to assist them in engaging with the Home Office and providers of asylum contracts and in providing health services to asylum seekers placed in our area.

End

October 2020

