

**Written evidence submitted by Positive Action for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (COR0224)**

[Note: This evidence has been redacted by the Committee. \*\*\* represents redacted text.]

**Asylum accommodation**

- 1. It would be vastly disingenuous of Mears to use the pandemic as a reason for the huge problems with housing in Yorkshire and the huge delays in providing adequate dispersal accommodation.
- 2. Inconsistent approach to serving positive cessation notices means that people are being given 7 days notice to move.
- 3. Service users continually report feeling isolated and disconnected. The lack of WiFi in properties and usual outlets to access IT (e.g. college and libraries) has exacerbated this further. SUs have to rely on using their own data or internet access through third sector services in order to have video calls with their immigration representative for example.
  - “I once spent 2 nights in the dark, washing with cold water because I had no credit to call anyone to help and I couldn’t walk anywhere because of lockdown restrictions”
  - “The lack of social interaction and the anxiety of the unknown and personal struggle has really impacted a lot on my mental health. The Home Office periodically send me messages regarding my reporting restrictions and they keep reminding me that I am liable for detention.”
  - “The girls/women I live with are nice but we do not really talk much so I find it awkward sometimes to go into the living room or kitchen. We pretty much stay to ourselves and isolate from each other. I guess essentially we all just really want to get out of her and have our own problems. But yes, I experience isolation and lack of connection and I feel lonely here.”
  - “You never know what the Home Office will do next and so you can never feel safe”
  - “Now I have wifi here but I did not have it in the other accommodations I stayed in. I definitely think it would be better to always have wifi because it is easier to talk to everyone and get help and feel less lonely.”
- 4. Poor cleanliness of accommodation continues to be an issue
- 5. Complaints to the Home Office regarding substandard quality of Mears property will be passed between members of staff and little responsibility is taken due to pressure on individual housing officers and high turnover of staff.
- 6. Inconsistency of staff at hotels and dispersal accommodation.

**Hotels & IA**

- 7. SUs have been forced to share bedrooms and bathrooms with strangers. This does not comply with social distancing guidelines and is extremely unsafe.
- *“Urban House was really big with hundreds of people and everyone was in shared rooms. I really never left my room much except for food which was really bad. There were men and women.”*
- 8. Lack of secure and private spaces for SUs to have phone calls or virtual meetings with solicitors or caseworkers
- 9. Home Office issuing PIQ forms with deadlines has caused unnecessary stress for SUs who are unaware that they can request extensions. This creates a situation where SUs are desperate for legal representation and can be exploited. There has already been an incident of a less reputable legal aid firm signing up SUs in hotels. We are aware of a case where an immigration representative from this firm has put false information on a SUs PIQ which was submitted to the Home Office. PAFRAS are in the process of complaining to the regulator of this firm.

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- 10. There have been several cases of young people in hotels who claim to be children. VCS have only been made aware of them by the hotel staff or immigration representatives. Some of these young people have been given 'age assessments' in Kent Intake Unit which have been challenged easily and all the cases in Leeds have been found to be children and are now in the care of Local Authority. These young people have been identified by chance and fortune of staff stepping above their role.
- 11. VCS have continued to fill in the gaps of service provision that should be filled by Mears. SUs in hotels have been walking long distances to attend the PAFRAS drop-in concerned about their PIQs, wanting wellbeing and holistic support (e.g. access to education), additional food and clothing.
- 12. Huge delays for collection e.g. one SU was granted s95 support in June 2020 and was not collected until October 2020 despite multiple chases to Migrant Help Escalations. The SU chose to remain sofa surfing in an overcrowded house with people they were familiar with rather than go into a hotel.
- **13. People being asked to leave hotels without asylum support termination letter/notice to quit** - SU in receipt of S4 support housed in a hotel, left the hotel for 2 days to stay with friends and when he returned his belongings had been packed for him and he was told to leave, without being given a support termination letter or notice to quit, and hence no appeal right. The SU was made destitute and forced to rely on charities and friends for support. Having referred the case to a public law solicitor, we were informed that a number of similar cases had been raised with them in recent times

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#### **Policing during lockdown**

- 16. Noticeably high police presence in areas with dispersal accommodation. SUs have described being stopped by police to ask where they are going and what they are doing and finding this very intimidating. There has been an incident of an SU being fined for breaching lockdown conditions when SU tried to explain they are in receipt on section 4 which is cashless support so they cannot pay the fine. They were served with a court summons.

#### **Reporting**

- 17. SUs have been required to report in person at the Home Office during the November 2020 lockdown and again during the current lockdown. This is at odds with the messaging to stay at home unless absolutely necessary and forces SUs to use public transport or walk long distances.

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