

(COR0229)

Written evidence submitted by Tees Valley of Sanctuary (COR0229)

[Note: This evidence has been redacted by the Committee. Text in square brackets has been inserted where text has been redacted.]

TEES VALLEY OF SANCTUARY covers the areas of Darlington, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Redcar and Cleveland, and Stockton on Tees. It is part of a national network building a culture of hospitality and welcome. We support and link with a wide range of projects supporting refugees and asylum seekers.

RESPONSES IN THE PANDEMIC TO INSTITUTIONAL ACCOMMODATION FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS.

[hotel] [town]

The evidence below is based on information from the voluntary sector in [town], during the restrictions of the pandemic, and we are submitting because of deep concerns as to how this accommodation is able to operate during the pandemic.

[hotel location] It is used by Mears to house women and some children in initial accommodation, with 3 meals a day and basic toiletries provided.

It would be fine for visitors wishing to stay a few nights, in normal times, but it is currently used by those living there for well over a month in some cases.

The size of rooms vary, and double rooms can be such as they have bunk beds. There are bathrooms shared by around 10 women, no communal areas, just 2 small rooms where meals are served and a small reception foyer. There is a car park with a few picnic tables outside. This means that during the pandemic there is virtually nowhere for the women to meet with each other or anyone else if they are to keep to rules about social distancing.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

First of all we want to acknowledge the very supportive and helpful site managers and regional management from Mears, for their work at the [hotel]in [town].

ORIENTATION

Women arrive at this hotel, often from long distances, and sometimes during the night. They are tired, very stressed, know nobody, and don't know where they are.

Whilst there is nationally based information manual from the housing provider, they need more site based orientation as soon as possible. In addition to oral information and a noticeboard in the foyer they need to have the local information, in their own language if possible, in a format that they can have in their own rooms to study in their own time, and

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refer to. Knowing who to ask for what help would save a lot of extra stress and upset for all concerned, as well as understanding how the hotel operates.

Induction from such as the Strategic Migration Partnership should come soon after that.

CHILDREN

Whilst it is not advisable that children are ever housed in a hotel, we would strongly advocate that children are never placed in a hotel with no communal areas, and nowhere outside to play or exercise.

Those on section 98 are not able to be enrolled in a school. Whilst the rules about this are based on children only being in initial accommodation for a short time, in reality children can be in a hotel for months at a time. There is absolutely nothing to support them or activities for them to do, or anywhere to go. The damage to the child's health and mental health could be very detrimental in the longer term.

If there is no hotel for women in the region that does not have better facilities for children, the family should be placed in another region.

COMMUNICATIONS and ACCESS TO WIFI

Many of those who have arrived on a channel crossing have had their phone confiscated and not returned. A phone is crucial to them, they have no money to buy one with, and their only hope of having one is for one to be donated by the voluntary sector.

The wait for a phone to be returned is far too long, even with help from people skilled in advocating. The committee may wish to ask how long it takes for a phone to be returned.

Adequate working wifi is crucial for those arriving in the hotel to save residents using precious data on a phone for accessing information and statutory bodies such as Migrant Help. Also for being in contact with family and friends to let them know where they are.

It is needed for using such as google translate. It is the only way that ways of learning English is accessed.

During the pandemic children need access for "home schooling" if they are eligible for enrolling at a school. Those children not eligible to be enrolled at a school need to be able to access educational sources, and need some sort of entertainment. Access to Covid 19 advice is crucial.

Because there is very little face to face contact for interviews and support there is even more reliance on using wifi to access, as well as access to support networks.

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In <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/2171/documents/20132/default/> paras 56 – 62 it is spelt out what is needed and why. WIFI provision needs to be adequate to meet those recommendations.

FINANCES.

Women arriving at the hotel generally have no money. There will be a few on section 95 or 4, but most are on section 98. This means that they have nothing at all to be able to buy any over the counter medicines, clothing, toiletries other than the very basic one's provided, or data for a phone. Or, indeed, a phone.

To live in initial accommodation where 3 meals a day and basic toiletries are provided is one thing, but to live with cash at all, or means of getting any is terrible for weeks or even months on end.

Money must be made available, and for instance if backdated, a sum could be given on arrival and the backdated money be returned to whoever provided it.

During the pandemic all the Asylum Drop Ins locally are closed, so not available for them to go to pick up such as clothing, toys, or even somewhere to sit and have a cup of tea and biscuit free of charge.

TO SUM UP WE RECOMMEND THAT:

1. There is written orientation information, in relevant language, that can be given to new residents on arrival
2. Children should never be in a hotel with no communal area and outdoor playspace
3. Confiscated phones should be returned as soon as possible
4. Wifi in hotels must be adequate for the needs of the residents
5. At least some cash must be available to all residents, from arrival.

February 2021