

**Written evidence submitted by Hackney Council (COR0250)****Contingency Asylum Accommodation**

1. Further to the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration beginning a welcome inspection of the use of hotels and barracks as contingency asylum accommodation, I am writing to share with you, and the members of your committee, our concerns about the Government's failure to act properly to deal with those seeking asylum in the United Kingdom.
2. As a local authority we have a long and continuing commitment to campaign to bring an end to the Government's damaging 'hostile environment' policies. These policies have been ineffective and malicious and it is very clear now that they have almost certainly had no real impact on the number of 'voluntary' deportations, the original stated aim, but instead have made the lives of those directly and indirectly impacted by this approach unsafe, undignified, and unacceptable.
3. In its wake it has also destroyed the lives and wellbeing of people who have lived here for decades, and who rightly felt that they could call the UK their home. As part of our commitment against the hostile environment we are proud that we were the first local authority in the UK to pass a comprehensive Windrush Generation motion, pledging to oppose the criminalisation of Windrush families, celebrating annual Windrush Day, pressing central Government for a public enquiry into that scandal, and calling for an end to the hostile environment immigration policies.
4. We would have hoped that the Home Office would have responded much sooner to the Wendy Williams Windrush Lessons Learned Review. The report concluded that the Home Office had demonstrated 'institutional ignorance and thoughtlessness' towards the issue of race, and the Equality and Human Rights Commission found that the Home Office broke the law and did not comply with section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 (the Public Sector Equality Duty).
5. The Home Office and the government now need to publicly demonstrate that, in responding to the recommendations from the Lessons Learned Review, they have considered the impact of those policies for members of the Windrush generation. They must also demonstrate a willingness to challenge and change poor attitudes towards those who have come here to seek asylum.
6. The very people who we should be ensuring we are providing a safe haven from the circumstances that they are fleeing, are, in a pandemic, being let down and are needlessly suffering as a result.

**Poor Communication and Coordination**

7. In July 2020, and after a very limited consultation with the local area in advance, a contingency hotel was set up in Hackney with 250 beds. Whilst we have experienced some productive relationships with hotel staff, there remain significant coordination issues that we would like to see considered and improved at a

national level as well as better consideration of the wellbeing and needs of people seeking asylum in the UK.

8. Since its opening, hotel staff appear overwhelmed and unable to manage the high level of needs that asylum seekers in the hotel are presenting with. As a result of the lack of consultation and communication this has been heightened due to their limited knowledge of the local area and an inability to signpost to other services. Had inductions been completed with the Council and relevant partners ahead of time, this might have been mitigated.
9. Our services have also been pressured as we have had to re-allocate resources to account for increased child age assessments and liaising with the voluntary and community sector to provide much needed, but unanticipated, community based support.
10. We also question why individuals that required an age assessment were placed in contingency hotels at all, not given the benefit of the doubt to be accommodated as minors, and therefore unaccompanied while awaiting the outcome of the age assessment.
11. The Home Office have now also put a contingency hotel on standby next to an existing contingency hotel in Shoreditch. We were not consulted on this decision and if mobilised, this could almost certainly create capacity issues for local services which operate in the area.
12. We have also found that there has been very limited reporting available, particularly in relation to length of stay, turnover, and needs. This information is essential to be able to plan for service provision and signposting, from all sectors, as well as knowledge of resident safeguarding and health needs.
13. We also find the lack of medium-long term planning by the Home Office to be incredibly challenging when we are planning our own care and support response.
14. The Home Office have confirmed that contingency hotels will be in place until at least the end of March and likely till the summer. The lack of clarity around this means that vital care which requires more medium-long term planning, such as mental health, is very difficult to deliver.

#### **Failure to Meet Needs**

15. As a minimum we would have expected that once placed in the accommodation, that the residents would have had some of their basic needs met. Shockingly however, we have been informed that this is simply not the case.
16. We are very concerned that there have been complaints about lack of access to simple amenities such as food, warm clothes and toiletries.
17. Care4Calais have been working with local faith groups and the accommodation manager to provide clothing distribution to support some of this need, but planning

in advance with the local community sector is required in order to provide effective, holistic, and timely support.

18. In relation to food, the accommodation provider has informed us that culturally appropriate food is not possible to provide due to a diverse population with varying requirements. We reject this. Despite the very difficult and challenging circumstances surrounding the current pandemic, Hackney Council have worked with Food Network partners across the borough to enable a sustainable, diverse, and equitable food offer for people in Hackney who have been impacted by the pandemic, particularly through food insecurity. This has specifically focused on building the capacity of culturally specific food offers across all wards in the borough, and enabling food deliveries to be made.
19. It is absolutely possible to meet culturally diverse needs, and it is vital to do so. Not just in relation to basic rights, but just as importantly from a health and wellbeing perspective.
20. We ask the committee to consider a range of options in order to meet these needs, for instance commissioning local organisations in hotel locations to provide this offer.
21. In addition, delays in being able to access the small amount of money that individuals are entitled to has meant that individuals could not purchase over the counter medication when needed.
22. To illustrate in a stark way how basic needs are clearly not being met, I attach a photo of the toiletries that the residents have been provided with. As many asylum seekers have been in the contingency hotels for a number of months and continue to be placed there, the products displayed in the below image are utterly unsuitable for their needs. To us this reflects an institutional failure to provide people with basic respect and dignity, and acknowledge people's humanity.
23. It has now also become apparent that many asylum seekers have had their mobile devices confiscated upon arrival to the UK, and are now having to rely on hotel receptions and sharing devices amongst residents who managed to keep them, to access crucial information and services online.
24. It seems that there has been absolutely no consideration of how asylum seekers with no device will be able to access services that have predominantly moved online as a result of the pandemic.
25. Finally, and entirely unacceptably, some sites do not have wifi or device access for school aged children to access remote education during the periods of lockdown. Children who we know have often struggled to access education before the pandemic are now finding that they are locked out completely.
26. Access to education brings with it a sense of structure and is essential to successful integration into a new life. So this lack of access will be adding unnecessary and additional disruption to already disrupted lives.

## **Health and Safety Concerns**

27. We have worked very closely with our colleagues in the Hackney and City Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG), and we know that the CCG will be responding with more detail on their concerns in relation to health, however we are aware that the health needs of the asylum seekers appear to have been very much underestimated by the Home Office, especially mental health needs due to trauma.
28. Local services which were already incredibly stretched during Covid-19 have had to provide help, and this huge need is not funded beyond an initial health screen. Dental care for asylum seekers is a significant concern and not included when the residents are helped with GP applications. Hotel staff vary in their ability or capacity to facilitate GP registration and it remains an unclear pathway as to who is responsible for doing this.
29. We have also been informed by our public health colleagues that there is no formal Covid-19 testing offer for contingency hotels. In addition there appears to be a lack of risk assessment of the appropriateness of accommodation for individual needs. For instance, physical disability is not taken into account when assessing if the room and facilities are suitable.
30. The process for identifying potential pre-dispersal asylum accommodation and for testing suitability of specific sites has not been made clear to the Local Authority. The last proposed site identified by the Accommodation Provider for the Local Authority to offer comment on, was wholly unsuitable and did not meet health and safety standards for borough temporary accommodation in the area.
31. All this has unfortunately, and inevitably, led to multiple outbreaks in the hotel and there is a serious concern that more cases are going unreported because hotel staff have not had sufficient training.

## **Conclusion**

32. Hackney has a long history of accepting and supporting refugees. We are proud that our borough is one that so many people feel they can call home, and that so many residents recognise is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together. At a time of crisis, we once again welcome the opportunity to help people who desperately need our support.
33. Our concern is not that contingency accommodation has opened in Hackney, but that had the Home Office initially consulted properly and effectively, worked with the Council and our partners when they opened the accommodation, and provided that accommodation with sufficient support and resources, we are confident that some of the issues that we have shared with you would have been successfully mitigated.
34. Whilst we recognise the additional challenges posed by Covid-19, we would draw your attention to the response in Hackney to providing emergency accommodation for rough sleepers in the borough. This has involved joint working between the

Council and health partners, and has taken a similar approach in using hotel based accommodation. As a team, we then used that fixed location as a platform to bring together the wider services and expertise required to support rough sleepers' needs.

35. The hotels housing asylum seekers in the borough were intended as a short term measure. As the pandemic continues the Home Office needs to recognise the impact cramped conditions and limited facilities have on those living there, invest further in the level of support needed, and explore appropriate move-on accommodation that is more suited to longer term stays.
36. The pandemic has tested the resilience of all our public services and made clear the importance of a people first approach. The Home Office's approach to housing asylum seekers has not been to put people first and it has exposed a woeful underinvestment in helping a cohort of people who are truly vulnerable and in need of our help. Sadly, it is the asylum seekers themselves who end up bearing the burden of this and we are now again seeing the impact on individuals of that failure.
37. I would of course be very happy to arrange a meeting to discuss the contents of this letter further, so please do not hesitate to let us know if we can provide any further detail.

Yours sincerely,

Cllr. Carole Williams

**Cabinet Member for Employment, Skills and Human Resources**

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