

Written evidence submitted by Birmingham City Council (COR0119)

1. Headlines:

- The crisis brought about by Covid-19 has revealed the true extent of the impact, vested interest, risk and cost to local areas of being asylum dispersal areas and hosts of initial accommodation centres. For too long, these costs have been unrecognised and unrecompensed by central government – it is now clear this must be addressed going forward.
- The need to procure urgent and additional dispersal accommodation in order to relieve pressures in Initial Accommodation has forced the Home Office and its providers to expand its search beyond the voluntary dispersal areas in the country and this is welcomed. Again, it will be impossible for us to move on from this crisis without a commitment from the Home Office that they will endeavour to retain these arrangements in an effort to facilitate a more equitable distribution of asylum seekers across the country in the long term.

2. Numbers: Initial accommodation

- There are two official units of initial accommodation for asylum seekers in Birmingham and one contingency hotel, which has been in constant and near-capacity use for over 6 months with no signs of decommissioning the provision prior to Covid-19.
- The Home Office and its providers need to prioritise reducing the numbers in hotels and other Initial Accommodation units to comply with PHE guidance in a way that achieves the outcomes the guidance is in place to bring about, and be transparent about occupancy levels with partners and other stakeholders recognising the shared interest of public health.
- The Home Office has not yet shared any information regarding exit strategy and the impact on numbers, nor has it invited local stakeholders including local government to consult on this. We would ask the Home Office to do this at the earliest opportunity.
- It is sensible to expect and plan for a significant increase in new asylum applications over the coming months, as restrictions on travel across Europe begin to lift. The Home Office has shared no proactive planning around this or been able to evidence how they will deal with it.

3. Numbers: Dispersed Accommodation

- In general, we see a lack of central government department join up when it comes to recognising both the demand and emergency sourcing of accommodation. There a lack of understanding by the Home Office and other Govt depts of the system-wide pressures on areas such as Birmingham, while other parts of the country remain unaffected by many of these pressures.
- Covid-19 has forced the Home Office to increase the speed at which people are moved on from Initial Accommodation into Dispersed Accommodation and has had to look in new areas in order to do this. This approach must be retained as part of Government's exit strategy. This crisis has made visible the cost and impact of hosting asylum seekers on local authorities and the third sector, none of which is funded. It should not be that this level of crisis and public interest needed to be reached before the Home Office looked elsewhere

4. Conditions and welfare: Initial accommodation

- The Covid-19 period to date has involved a lack of asylum system-wide coordinated working to plan for incidents, despite questions being asked of Home Office and Serco from the early weeks of the pandemic in January. This has resulted in an apparent lack of preparedness and then a very reactive response as residents presented with symptoms. The reactive response was not timely; did not address the issues in an acceptable time frame.

- Extra facilities (hotels) were stood-up in London to provide isolation accommodation for symptomatic asylum seekers and this was initially presented by the Home Office as a national solution for symptomatic individuals. However, based on risk assessment these were not available for use by any service users outside London. Equivalent plans across the regions were repeatedly requested but not delivered.
- Isolation and distancing and lack of facilities in IA present a significant challenge in terms of antisocial behaviour and risk to mental health.
- We are very concerned about the lack of personal entertainment / distraction facilities in the hotels / hostels. With limited / no outdoor space it is crucial that residents have a way of passing the time, especially as all the voluntary sector provision that was in place has now withdrawn. Access to media such as WiFi / TV / news would also improve people's compliance with the measures as they would be more exposed to and aware of the scale of the crisis through the news, social networks, etc. The Home office agreed to stand up WiFi across its whole initial accommodation estate at the end of March, however it is still not in place, and they have not been able to commit to a timeline.
- Finally, we are concerned for the staff operating in Initial Accommodation units, their access to appropriate PPE and ability to handle increased occupancy levels, increased tensions (which have led to police call-outs in recent weeks) and to continually advise service users on a fast-paced situation. It is important that those staff on the front line are protected and supported by commissioners (Serco and the Home Office).

5. Conditions and Welfare: Dispersed accommodation

- The Home Office has not agreed to install WiFi or look at personal entertainment options in its dispersed accommodation estate. With physical contact now at a bare minimum, the need to be connected through phone and internet has never been more acute and service users are faced with decision on how to achieve that when support payments remain only slightly above £5 a day.
- The Home Office has agreed to look into increasing support payments to asylum seekers during the Covid crisis, and this is welcome. However, we are awaiting further information / confirmation of this decision that has not been forthcoming for two weeks.
- Once a clear plan had been agreed, the Home Office and its providers moved quickly to move people out of initial accommodation and into dispersed accommodation, which was welcomed.
- The Home Office's providers have also stood up emergency food package distribution effectively for those needing shielding and those who are vulnerable (i.e. those for whom 12 week isolation is recommended). This was also welcome.
- It should be also considered that any track and trace approach solution to lifting the lockdown will be dependent on having a smart phone which many of this client group will be without. It will also require access to mobile data, which is also likely to be an obstacle for asylum seekers. The Home Office needs to clarify who will be responsible for track and trace in these settings – both in initial accommodation and contingency settings as well as in dispersed accommodation.