

**Written evidence submitted by John Grayson on behalf of South Yorkshire Migration and Asylum Action Group (COR0129)**

1. I am John Grayson B.A. (Cantab) a volunteer independent academic activist researcher, embedded in, and working on behalf of, SYMAAG South Yorkshire Migration and Asylum Action Group. My disseminated work with SYMAAG Over the past ten years can be found at [www.opendemocracy.net](http://www.opendemocracy.net) and [www.irr.org.uk](http://www.irr.org.uk) and in a range of articles, book chapters and conference papers. I taught housing studies at Sheffield Hallam University. I was a senior tutor at the Northern College for Adult Education from 1986 to 2007 teaching history, politics, refugee and asylum seeker courses, and anti-racist community courses.
2. SYMAAG is a politically engaged asylum rights organisation founded in 2007, with a membership majority of asylum seekers, refugees and migrant workers. SYMAAG is led by people with experience of the asylum system a majority of officers, and the executive have this experience. SYMAAG is a wholly volunteer organisation with no paid workers.

**Part One : The SYMAAG activist research project alongside residents of Urban House IAC Wakefield.**

3. Urban House IAC is owned and directly managed by Urban Housing Services LLP, part of the Citrus Group, a major property development company with headquarters in London UK. The Mears Group who were awarded the Home Office outsourced AASC (Accommodation and Asylum Support Contract) for Yorkshire and the Humber and the North East of England have subcontracted delivery of IAC accommodation in Urban House to Urban Housing Services LLP. The outsourced contract awarded to Mears is worth £1.15 bn over ten years from August 2019. Mears have other contract areas including Scotland and Northern Ireland.
4. Over the past fourteen weeks from mid-January 2020, along with my fellow researchers from SYMAAG, Manuchehr M.D. and Violet Dickenson, I

have had discussions with, face to face or (since the Covid-19 lockdown) using phone, text and WhatsApp messaging, with 55 residents of Urban House IAC in Wakefield, West Yorkshire. Both Manuchehr and Violet themselves were refugees.

5. In the period leading up to the Covid-19 outbreak in the UK we held focus group discussions in cafes in Wakefield city centre. We were not allowed any access to Urban House, so our research was based on testimonies and a mass of photographic evidence provided to us by residents describing conditions inside Urban House.
6. It is a very disturbing fact that the conditions inside Urban House as exposed in this research reflect all the serious risk factors for COVID-19 in 'detention spaces' outlined by Professor Richard Coker in Appendix One to this report.

**The major issues raised by our research alongside residents of Urban House :-**

**Many individuals and families had lived for up to four months without any money**

7. When people and families are in Section 98 accommodation (IAC's) they receive no financial support at all. In normal times the Home Office specifies three to four weeks in IAC accommodation, my research alongside people in Urban House IAC in Wakefield has discovered people spending up to four months there.
8. All of the people we spoke to in Urban House in our SYMAAG research had been means tested and found to be destitute by the Home Office and therefore qualified for NASS support. Of course, actual delivery of NASS support both accommodation and cash is dependent on people being dispersed to Section 95 accommodation and having a postal address. Something of a Catch 22 situation for residents in Urban House with no

money at all for months. They are unable to buy even the cheapest toiletries, clothes, toys for children, or food appropriate to their countries of origin.

### **Inadequate food, poor nutrition and ill health in Urban House**

9. Focus groups from February emphasised the very poor quality of food in Urban House. One respondent summed it up as 'Horrible'
10. People told us that food was totally inadequate in terms of nutrition and healthy eating.
11. People reported throughout the research and to the present that breakfast is always the same, just two slices of white bread, no toast, and a tiny portion of butter and jam. Children are never given a cereals breakfast and parents have got to ask canteen staff for milk – it is never available at the counter.
12. Parents told us that the food was very spicy and totally unsuitable for children. They complained constantly that there is no special food for children in Urban House. Two and three year olds are expected to eat highly spiced food.
13. Another major theme in the focus groups was that there was no food at all served for children or anyone else between 6.30 in the evening and 8.30 the next morning. Parents told us that when they ask for food for children they are given two tiny sandwiches for each child.
14. Everyone told us that fresh fruit is rare in Urban House, when it appears in the shape of bananas or apples there is often not enough for everyone.
15. We had regular reports and testimony that pregnant women in Urban House were not given any special foods or diets. One person with [a medical condition requiring a particular diet] told us that when he asked [food suitable for his medical condition] he was simply ignored. He was

extremely worried that this could have very serious medical consequences for himself.

16. Everyone stressed in the focus groups that the central problem in Urban House was that nobody has any money at all. The only way people told us, to get fresh healthy food for your family or even a change of clothing is to hope a charity outside will give something you can smuggle in. People are not allowed to bring food into Urban House. People told us also that they were not allowed to bring clothing from charities into the building.

17. Our correspondents in Urban House have told us very recently that the food is a little less spiced but there is no separate children's menu still. Cereals and milk are available in the evening to augment the two tiny sandwiches for children.

#### **No access to NHS primary care in Urban House**

18. Unlike similar homeless people's hostels and temporary accommodation, where people have full access to NHS primary care, in Urban House there is no access for residents to primary care. Residents have to wait months for dispersal and then register with G.P.'s. We were told of people with chronic serious conditions which went untreated although the individuals asked for primary and hospital care. Very recently this situation has been improved we were told with the nursing staff starting to offer prescription service, but it is still extremely limited.

#### **Overcrowding and dangerous impossibility of social distancing**

19. On Twitter on 16 April John Taylor, chief operating officer of Mears, had used the Mears Twitter account to respond to some criticism of conditions in the seven hotels Mears has acquired in Glasgow.

20. ***"I read that you have been receiving increased calls from service users who are concerned about sharing bed spaces. I want to give my personal guarantee that we will never ask unrelated service users to share a room."***

21. The reality of overcrowding and forced room sharing emerged in the early period of our research in late February 2020, Urban House was then fully occupied. Urban House can accommodate 310 people, single people, couples, and families with children. Strangers, unrelated single people, are forced to routinely share two and three bed small rooms.
22. At present (1 May) we estimate that there are 270 people resident in Urban House. There are no ensuite rooms in Urban House; everyone has to share bathrooms, showers and toilets. Every focus group and research encounter throughout the Covid-19 lockdown period and before has raised the issue of forced room sharing by unrelated adults in Urban House.
23. From November 2019 to January 2020 through interviews with Mears staff, NGO workers, and people resident in West Yorkshire hotels, we learnt of over 800 people, at one point who were in 'overspill' IAC hotel accommodation from Urban House across West Yorkshire and Humberside.
24. These worrying conditions inside Urban House we found continued throughout the Covid-19 period and to the present. Social distancing has also been impossible because throughout the lockdown Covid-19 period there have been children forced to remain in Urban House sharing toilets and bathrooms with adults.

### **Fifteen children currently in Urban House**

25. On Friday 1 May we asked one of our research correspondents to tell us how many children were observed at mealtimes and in public /social areas.
26. The estimate was 15 children under 18, 8 under 10 years, 3 under 5 and 5 between five and ten years old. There were four young teenagers probably 13 to 15 year olds, and three older teenagers under 18.

27.Despite SYMAAG highlighting the desperately poor conditions for children in Urban House over the last two months Mears and the Home Office refuse to move all the children out of danger into asylum housing or into emergency hotels.

**Poor hygiene and forced sharing of bathroom and toilet facilities**

28.In our focus groups from early February along with the quality of food, hygiene became the dominant issue.

29.In early March posters appeared in bathrooms in Urban House (in English) saying 'Wash your hands'. We received dated videos and photos showing soap dispensers empty throughout the shower rooms and bathrooms.

30.Through March and into April similar evidence was being sent to us.

31.A majority of the people in our focus groups in Wakefield were women. Some told us of medical conditions and previous recent surgery in their home countries which meant a need to avoid vaginal infections. These women were terrified of the toilets in Urban House, they claimed that many women in Urban House suffered vaginal infections.

32.The toilets in Urban House were only cleaned once a day with 300 residents up to Easter this year. After this because of complaints and SYMAAG reports the toilets are now cleaned twice a day. There are still over 250 residents in Urban House

33.Since February, up to the present, our research correspondents have sent us dozens of unpleasant pictures of dirty toilets, shower rooms with blocked drains, and still inadequate supplies of liquid soap.

34.Throughout the research we have been told by residents of the total lack of adequate supplies of essential toiletries for both men and women. SYMAAG has been able to get supplies of toiletries into Urban House from

charities in Sheffield especially for parents with babies or children under five.

### **Bed Bugs infestation in Urban House**

35. Our focus groups produced evidence and photos of bed bug infestation in Urban house from February 2020. The last video of a live bed bug in bedding in a room in Urban House was sent to us on Friday 24 April.

### **Health conditions that increase the COVID-19 health risks**

36. On 16 April John Taylor chief operating officer of Mears replied to people who had emailed him protesting conditions in Urban House thus:

37. ***“Vulnerable service users have already been moved out of Urban House*** and provided with accommodation where they can self-isolate. This includes people with health conditions that increase the COVID-19 health risks, ***along with families with children*** (my emphasis)”

38. From my research and knowledge of individuals still resident in Urban House. (1 May). I believe there are a number of people who have medical conditions which the UK government advises gives them an ‘increased risk of severe illness from coronavirus (COVID-19)’. These include people with diabetes, severe asthma, and kidney disease.

### **Personalised Information on Covid-19 available in Urban House**

39. On Saturday 28 March, Mears issued a statement to say that the company ‘Has ensured that all service users have translated guidance on how to respond to Covid-19 and what is required of them.’

40. On the 6 April Mears issued a policy statement on Covid-19, the section of the statement on Urban House said:

41. "We have written to all service users, in their native language as well as speaking with them regularly face to face to make them aware of the government's advice to dealing with COVID-19"
42. On 13 April we were told from inside Urban House that no one had received any written communication or face to face briefings in their own language
43. On 16 April John Taylor replied to a correspondent
44. "We have provided advice and support on COVID-19 to all our service users in writing, displaying posters, and speaking with service users. Information is provided in 12 different languages and there is interpreter support where needed."
45. On Sunday 19 April people inside, Urban House again were adamant that there was no information translated into languages spoken by people in Urban House.
46. On Friday 24 April over four weeks into the COVID-19 lockdown it was reported that posters had appeared in relevant languages. There were still no reports of anyone receiving personalised written material or 'face to face' briefings

### **Urban Housing Services LLP staff behaviour**

47. Focus groups, personal discussions, and other contacts with our research correspondents always raised many comments about alleged discriminatory, disrespectful and unprofessional behaviour by the Urban Housing Services LLP staff. We were told of an incident where a man self harmed, desperate to leave Urban House, and was put outside the front doors to sleep on a cold night was of particular concern to researchers.

### **Complainant actions**

48.I have been researching this field for ten years and it is the first time I have encountered self organised complainant actions by people in Section 98 accommodation on the scale of events from November 2019 to February 2020.

49.Many of the participants in our early research focus groups in February 2020 told us of their own experience They told us of a sit down action of over 100 residents in a West Yorkshire hotel for better food and some play facilities for the young children there.

50.(This was the same hotel which the Home Office allowed to be used by Mears, although it was known that the area was one where Far Right activity was normal and established. This is totally against the Home Office's own regulations and guidance. As a result ,the 100 or so people had to suffer a week's lock down with armed police patrolling the grounds because of threats on social media.)

51.In December 2019 there was a peaceful sit down in front of the Migrant Help office in Urban House involving around a hundred residents. In January 2020, another peaceful complainant action outside the office involved around fifty residents sitting down. Both actions were organised to plead with the Home Office to be dispersed to asylum housing. All of the people had been assessed and means tested and received letters confirming NASS support, accommodation and cash support but only if they could get out to an asylum house with a postal address.

52.People in those actions had been in hotels and Urban House for up four months. All had repeatedly complained to the Home Office through Migrant Help at Urban House about food, hygiene and the desperately long time they had to wait without any money at all.

### **Responses to complainant actions**

53.Although Migrant Help under the AASC contracts have a role in Urban House to collect complaints and pass them on to the Home Office .Their response to peaceful actions according to our research correspondents

was very negative. People told us that in the December action the police were called. They did not intervene recognising that the action was peaceful

54. We were told uniformed security staff were then drafted into the building observing residents through all mealtimes. After photos of the lack of social distancing in the canteen were sent to the Independent newspaper for an article on 28 March the use of camera phones was banned from the canteen area.

55. One of our correspondents remarked to us that the regime in Urban House was becoming more like a detention centre than an asylum hostel

56. The SYMAAG research team would like to acknowledge the courage of our many research correspondents in Urban House who became a team of very effective citizen journalists during the period of this research.

May 2020

## **APPENDIX ONE**

Relevant Extracts from:

### **REPORT ON CORONAVIRUS AND IMMIGRATION DETENTION**

Professor Richard Coker MB BS, MSc, MD, FRCP, FFPH

I have been asked by Duncan Lewis Solicitors to provide my expert opinion on the risks posed by COVID-19 to immigration detainees in the United Kingdom.....

If a detention centre has multiple visitors, short -term detainees, and numerous staff, all of whom have varying risks of infection reflecting their wider, outside exposure, then the risk of introduction increases substantially.....

To date, wherever COVID-19 has emerged, mitigation steps such as isolation of cases, quarantine of contacts, and social distancing measures have been implemented to curtail chains of transmission. Overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, poor ventilation in a detention centre would likely increase the speed with which an epidemic unfolded even if the number of cases cumulatively remained unchanged. Poor access to health care facilities, slow procedures to diagnose, isolate, and treat patients, or quarantine contacts would further reduce the time to peak incidence.

What would SYMAAG like to see the Home Office direct Urban Housing Services LLP and the Mears Group to do now?

- The immediate transfer of Urban House residents to suitable asylum housing where they can practice social distancing and have the possibility of self isolation or at the very least transfer them to emergency hotel accommodation where social distancing and self-isolation are possible.

- Shut Urban House and redesign and reopen it on the model of the IAC in Derby where people are given £5 a day in vouchers and are able to buy food and cook it for themselves and their families
- For the next six months during the time of Covid-19 give everyone in IAC Section 98 accommodation in hotels or IAC's a Section 95 cash payment of at least £37.50 a week for each individual and child. There should also be full access to NHS primary care.

## **Part Two: Mears and their AASC contract for asylum housing**

### **Background before COVID-19 period**

Asylum housing are simply homes, where people, waiting for the outcomes of their asylum claims live. People are means tested and have to prove they are destitute before being given NASS support. This means fully serviced furnished accommodation and approximately £5 per day for each person. NASS accommodation support is voluntary, around 10% of people stay with relatives or friends and simply get their £5 a day.

In 2018 in South Yorkshire with a population of 1,402,918 there were around 5000 people in asylum housing in Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham and Sheffield.

In Sheffield in 2019 with a population of 725,000 before the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a monthly average of 950 people in around 250 asylum homes. The UK total population in asylum housing was around 48,000 people.

I began visiting asylum homes at the requests of tenants and researching Mears asylum homes in September 2019 to investigate poor quality housing. I found [infestation of rats](#), housing totally unsuitable for [disabled people](#) and delays and defective responses to repairs. Which I reported in articles for the Institute of Race Relations. The poor quality of homes and the poor management of the new contracts resulted in a call from the chair of Sheffield City Council for the Mears contract for Sheffield [to be taken from them](#) and returned to the city

Before the COVID-19 period also, through a series of interviews with landlords and agents in Barnsley and Sheffield, I discovered that there was a [landlords strike](#) against the new Mears contracts which meant a reduction in money for leases and rents for landlords who had provided housing for G4S. Thus there was a drying up of any available places for people in asylum housing throughout

South Yorkshire. This was a major contributory factor in the unprecedented number of people in overspill IAC hotel accommodation in West Yorkshire and Humberside.

### **Mears asylum tenants in the COVID-19 period**

On Saturday 28 March, Mears issued a statement to say that the company

'Has ensured that all service users have translated guidance on how to respond to Covid-19 and what is required of them.'

Weeks into the Covid-19 epidemic and two days into the lock down period, on Wednesday 25 March, I rang a geographically random sample of twelve Mears tenants on Tyneside, Teesside, West Yorkshire and in Sheffield, to ask whether they had received any information about the Covid-19 health emergency.

Mears claimed in a widely circulated statement on 6 April that translated information on Covid-19 had already been sent to homes.

"Guidance for Service Users distributed (including COVID-19 Symptoms, understanding social distancing and possible lockdown),handwashing techniques which has been translated into 12 languages"

On Monday 13 April two weeks into the Lockdown Period I rang my geographically randomised sample. This time I was able to contact 10 Mears tenants in various places in South and West Yorkshire, Tyneside, and Teesside. to ask again whether they had received written material in their own language on Covid-19 from Mears. None had received material in their own language. Some said they had received Boris Johnson's letter on Monday 6 April – in English.

On Friday 24 April I was able with the assistance of another SYMAAG researcher to contact more tenants than in the previous surveys and around 25 responded. This sample was more heavily weighted towards those living in Teesside and Tyneside. Some said that in the last few days letters had arrived, but the vast majority said that they still had no information in their own language

Thus, four weeks into the COVID-19 lockdown our survey suggested that most Mears asylum tenants had received no personal translated material on Covid-19.

## **Quality of housing problematic**

From September 2019 to March 2030 I was asked to go inside 20 Mears houses in Sheffield, Rotherham, Barnsley, Leeds and Halifax to take photographs and frame joint complaints with tenants. Then after lockdown on 22 March I was sent camera phone photos from another 12 houses which people had been sent to.

In Bradford I was sent a video of the kitchen of a house which was crawling with cockroaches.

Pictures came from another Bradford house with layers of grease over kitchen surfaces and a filthy toilet and shower

## **The Right for a person to refuse a property or room in a property which is not 'Fit for purpose'**

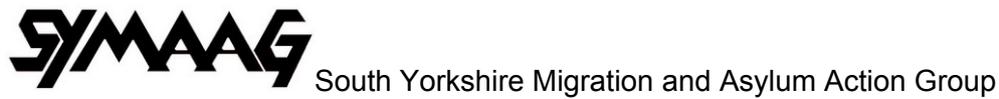
The Home Office issue a booklet which sets out the Requirements contractors Mears and Urban Housing Services LLP have to meet under the ten year £1.15 bn. Asylum Support and Accommodation Contracts.

People in asylum housing under the Labour government's 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act were not deemed to be 'tenants' and immediately lost all rights gained by tenants in council housing and private rented accommodation over the years.

The Home Office has therefore been forced to introduce some safeguards and rights for tenants in the asylum housing contracts. The most important is the right to refuse very dirty, dangerous unhealthy, pest infested accommodation. The mantra the Home Office will repeat is that NASS accommodation is "No choice" accommodation. Actually, only if it is 'Fit for Purpose'.(see Appendix Two) Mears have many contracts with local councils and when they signed their contracts in 2019, they agreed that housing on the contract would meet the 'Decent Housing' criteria used for council and social housing.

SYMAAG produced a leaflet (Appendix Two) spelling out this right to refuse in English and four other languages commonly spoken in Urban House .I gave my phone number to ring if people were being forced into slum properties. I had eight phone calls where I was able to argue with Mears housing managers or even Mears drivers that they should not leave people at the property if they refused it. An important right for tenants which Mears signed a contract to uphold has now been abandoned – Mears now regularly force people into properties again.

**APPENDIX TWO**



**To everyone staying in Urban House**

**When you are moved from Urban House**

**YOU CAN REFUSE TO ACCEPT A VERY BAD AND DIRTY HOUSE**

This is what the Home Office says to MEARS in the contract.

And MEARS MUST AGREE to this

When you are moved to your asylum housing from Urban House by MEARS

1. When you arrive at your new home if the house is very bad and very dirty

2. You CAN REFUSE to move in.

MEARS staff SHOULD NOT THREATEN YOU AND MAKE YOU GO IN TO THE HOUSE

3. MEARS must then move you to a temporary address

4. MEARS must then ask Home Office to look at the house. Only if Home Office think it is good can MEARS move you in

5. BUT YOU CAN STILL REFUSE IF YOU ARE SURE THE HOUSE IS STILL BAD

6.MEARS must then allow the HOME OFFICE to look again and they will decide

If you do not want to move into a bad and dirty house anywhere in Yorkshire and the North East and MEARS staff are threatening to 'leave you on the street'

IMMEDIATELY RING JOHN GRAYSON OF SYMAAG ANYTIME mob 07887 481355 and let me speak to the MEARS staff

**NOTE**

Definitions of 'Fit for Purpose' appear in

Asylum Accommodation and Support Schedule 2 ,Statement of Requirements pages 85-88

John Grayson 10 May 2020