

Written Evidence submitted by the Office of Anne McLaughlin MP, Glasgow North East
(COR0183)

About Our Office

This submission has been written by staff in the constituency office of Anne McLaughlin MP who manage cases involving asylum seekers and other visa and immigration enquiries in the constituency of Glasgow North East. At the time of writing, the constituency has 45 open cases on visa and immigration. We have encountered several problems during Covid-19 that we think could have been managed differently and have been easily prevented. Some of these problems continue however they could easily be resolved.

Summary

The points raised are in relation to people seeking asylum

- Relates to the Mears Group handling of moving an asylum seeker resident in our constituency including
 1. Notice period
 2. Social distancing
 3. PPE
 4. Communication
 5. Mental health

- Communication by Visas and Immigration
 1. To our Constituency Office
 2. To Other People/Organisations
 3. To Public

Written Evidence

How the Home Office and its major contractors are working together to ensure the safe and effective operation of contracted services is maintained, particularly where these services affect vulnerable people.

1. Relates to a specific series of incidents experienced by a constituent and his friend and related to our office by employees of the Mears Group, a major contractor with the Home Office.

Notice Period

2. On 26 April 2020 the constituent was awoken by two Mears Group employees and informed he had 30 minutes to collect his belongings before he would be moved into dispersed accommodation.

Social Distancing

3. Social distancing was not adhered to by the Mears employees who visited him that day and made it impossible for the constituent and his friend to maintain social distancing rules. The Mears employees were asked to allow for 2 metres distance between themselves and the constituent on numerous occasions but he was not afforded this by the Mears employees.

PPE

4. No PPE was worn by the Mears employees who visited the accommodation.

Communication

5. The constituent is extremely vulnerable and has serious mental health issues. Both the Mears Group and the Home Office are aware of these issues. Yet he was still expected to move with only thirty minutes notice. Our office had been in contact with Mears regarding this situation and the surrounding issues. The response received by our office from [a staff member] of the Mears Group on 19.05.2020 stated that they had tried to visit our constituent at his address the day before to explain the move to him but he was not home. Our constituent denies this. However, even if they had attempted to explain this the day before, this is insufficient time to reasonably expect that someone should be moved from the home in which they were living when they had known poor mental health. The Mears Group employees would not answer reasonable questions that our constituent asked such as about where he was moving to. Our constituent did not have the ability or option to seek this information from another source including the Home Office. The Mears Group employees also scared our constituent with the threat that they would be reporting to the Home Office that he had previously absconded. This again, appears to be information that the Mears group hold on my constituent that is incorrect. Our office is still in the process of trying to resolve this.

Mental Health

6. From working with numerous asylum seekers in our constituency we know that many of them, particularly those feeling war in their home country, are terrified of figures of authority. This must also be known to employees of the Mears Group through their work with asylum seekers. Frightening people with poor mental health

and threatening to report them to ‘the authorities’ is not an acceptable way of treating people. The direct result of this encounter for our constituent from the way he was treated by the Mears Group that day was that he ‘went missing’ the following day and after several hours was found hunched up on the wet grass, terrified and crying, having been sitting in the pouring rain the entire time – a period of up to 5 hours. He was scared that the employees from the Mears Group would return and send him to a detention centre. It does not seem that any consideration was taken to understand how vulnerable our constituent was and what the impact of this service change would be on him personally and his mental health.

We Recommend

7. If there had been pre-existing and agreed measures implemented when it was decided that a move needed to take place, this would allow more time to process the move and importantly for the move to be properly explained to the asylum seeker. It would allow for their mental health to be taken into consideration, for their support network to be given appropriate time to effectively support them and in cases such as our constituent where there is a mental health team supporting them, the opportunity for them to communicate with the asylum seeker and make sure there was continued care if the person was moved to an area outwith the existing care team’s responsibility.

The effectiveness of Home Office communications to its partners, responders and the wider public about its preparations.

8. It’s understandable that there would be changes to the normal communications during Covid-19. Early on in lockdown, it was common to receive emails saying that certain parts of Visas and Immigration would not be operating for the foreseeable future. The weekly phone call from Visas and Immigration to our office for queries we have about constituents’ cases has continued as normal, after the initial set up stage to allow Visas and Immigration staff to work from home. There have been some areas of concern however in the other ways in which Visas and Immigration have been communicating.

Communications with MPs/Constituency Offices

9. It has become clear that parts of Visas and Immigration have started to operate again in areas where they had initially suspended work. However, we have not been informed about these changes in our constituency office. We only stumble upon this information, usually when we ask about a case and the information becomes apparent. We handle many visa and immigration cases in our constituency so we have seen this happen several times. Many other government departments have

issued regular updates when they are resuming activities that had previously been suspended during Covid-19 so it should also be possible for the Home Office to do this.

Communications with Other People/Organisations

10. We have seen an upsurge of referrals from solicitors to our constituency office because Visas and Immigration are not replying to the solicitors' normal enquiries. This includes solicitors not even receiving an automated reply explaining that some work is suspended during Covid-19.

Public Information

11. The daily public email updates from the Gov.UK website rarely have information relating to visas and immigration compared to other departments. When there is an update, it tends only to be in relation to people who have visas already and whether they can have these extended during the pandemic. Possible delays to asylum seekers' cases due to Covid-19 or the resumption of previously suspended work does not feature in these Gov.UK daily updates.

We Recommend

12. Overall there has been a failure by Visas and Immigration to keep people seeking asylum and those who support them, informed of changes to the work being undertaken during Covid-19. People seeking asylum are amongst the most vulnerable people in the UK and they need to be better supported. Email updates should be given to asylum seekers, MPs, solicitors and other organisations with known connections to asylum seekers to keep them informed of changes to Visas and Immigration working arrangements. This would also free up Visas and Immigration staff from extra enquiries from offices such as our own who need to turn to them for this information. The Gov.UK website and emails should be updated regularly with changes to the working arrangements of Visas and Immigration during Covid-19 too.

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