

Written evidence submitted by Asylum Seeker Housing (ASH) Project (COR0184)

1. Following our colleagues at Scottish Refugee Council (SRC), the ASH Project would like to take the opportunity to comment on Mears' Supplementary Written Evidence [COR0181] to the Home Affairs Select Committee.
2. Specifically, we address references to ASH at paragraph 3 on p. 1 (our emphasis in bold):

*"Mears informed **ASH**, the Scottish Refugee Council and the Red Cross, inviting them to provide advice on the arrangements. **ASH** and the SRC have visited the hotel accommodation."*

3. The ASH Project was first informed of the hotel moves on 27th March 2020, when [staff member] (Mears) telephoned Sheila Arthur (ASH Project Director). [Mears staff member] called Sheila Arthur a second time concerning hotel accommodation on 2nd April 2020. Over the course of these two phone calls, [Mears staff member] advised that:
 - Hotel moves would take place "very soon".
 - Families being moved would be given good notice of the moves.
 - Taxis would be used to transport service users individually.
 - Mears had liaised with the Strategic Migration Partnership on the hotel moves.
 - Some hotels had been deemed unsuitable and some had refused to take asylum seekers.
4. Sheila Arthur understood these calls to be informative only. We understand now that moves to the hotel had taken place just prior or concurrent with [Mears staff member's] communication. We believe that Mears' phrasing "inviting [ASH, SRC & BRC] to provide advice on the arrangements" is suggestive of extensive consultation with third-sector organizations, where said groups would have the opportunity to provide recommendations and see these implemented. For clarity: ASH was not invited to provide any advice on the hotel arrangements prior to or during these moves. Significantly, we understand from the Asylum Health Bridging Team that they were not informed of the decision to move service users into the hotels and no vulnerability assessments were undertaken.
5. The next update on the hotels from Mears came via bulk email sent by [second staff member] (Mears) on 8th April 2020, subject heading "AASC Update". Though a list of recipients was not available, the email was not specifically addressed to ASH and contains general information about the AASC contract as whole. We understand it to have been sent to all major stakeholders and third sector partners. Within this, there is a section on 'Hotels', which states that "All Service Users have been moved into other appropriate accommodation"¹ and gives updates on operational issues, such as the provision of food and toiletries. Again, this was informative and there was no request for input or advice from recipients.

¹Though ASH was later informed by [Mears staff member] that the last move-ins to the hotels took place on the 17th April 2020.

6. Subsequently, ASH requested to visit the hotels on the 17th April 2020. Mears agreed to our request and arranged for the 30th April 2020 at [two hotels]². [Two staff] attended and were given a tour of the hotels by [second Mears staff member], who provided information about the hotels generally and more specifically about the service provision at the hotels visited. Feedback from ASH on this visit was not requested by Mears either during or after the visits. Suggestions made by [second Mears staff member] during the visit could unfortunately not be followed up afterwards. For example, [second Mears staff member], advised during the visit that any Section 95 or Section 4 supported service users now accommodated in hotels must have been moved in 'by accident'.³ He advised that ASH should bring any such service users to his attention and they would be moved back into self-contained flats. Following this advice, ASH emailed [second Mears staff member] directly to request that three S95/S4 supported service users be moved to self-contained flats. At the time of writing, these three service users have still not been moved.
7. We hope that the above evidence provides clarity to HASC on ASH's communication with Mears prior to and at the start of their hotel accommodation of asylum seekers during the Covid-19 pandemic. We'd like to take this opportunity to raise some highly significant and relevant concerns about the living conditions face by asylum seekers in the hotels at this current moment:
 - Many have reported to us being unable to access primary medical care at all for a range of significant health problems, including physical injuries and coronavirus symptoms. Those with significant mental health problems do not receive the care and support they need. We understand that vulnerability assessments were not carried out on those being moved into the hotels. This can have grave consequences. Friends of the asylum seeker who died in MacClay's advised us that he had been detained in Libya and that his accommodation at the hotel was causing him to have flashbacks.
 - Food provision to the hotels is still complained about on a daily basis. This has been the case since the hotel provision began, with no change despite Mears assuring us that improvements have been made and comments taken on board. There are ongoing organized refusals of the food, with many others simply not eating because they find the food to be inedible. We have been sent video of pieces of wire in food. Ourselves and our colleagues at the No Evictions Network have received reports of plastic or nylon fibres in the food.

² In hindsight we would have requested a visit to the [third hotel], since we have received so many complaints about this particular hotel. However, since outreach with those in the hotels was difficult and not facilitated by Mears, much of April and early May was spent establishing contact and a picture of the situation in the hotels.

³ Indeed, correspondence from Mears CEO John Taylor to MP Alison Thewliss on 7th May 2020 makes no mention of S95/S4 supported service users and implies that only those in IA accommodation were moved into hotels.

Multiple service users have reported losing significant amounts of weight.
[Report of individual case]

- Service Users still have no Home Office cash support and therefore no way of buying food, toiletries or indeed anything else. Given that provision is so inadequate, this is causing service users to feel trapped, distressed and is severely impacting their physical and mental health.
 - We have fielded multiple reports of verbal abuse and harassment from staff members, including to service users who are physically and mentally unwell and instances of training CCTV cameras on doors to service users' rooms.
 - Social distancing remains next to impossible, with communal eating areas and/or bathrooms being the only option in some of the hotels. Service users (particularly those with underlying health conditions) have reported being frightened to leave their rooms and skipping meals for fear of coronavirus transmission.
8. Many of those who are accommodated in the hotels are extremely fearful of speaking out or complaining, because of the impact they believe this may have on their asylum claims. This fear can be so powerful that service users ask us not to complain to Mears or request relocations from Migrant Help, let alone take up these concerns with legal representatives or journalists. This makes supporting and helping people in this scenario extremely difficult. We understand this fear to be significantly increased by the constant invocation of the 'Home Office' by Mears and Hotel staff. We have received multiple reports from those supported under that S95/S4 who were moved from flats that they were given half an hour to pack and told that they were being moved 'on orders from the Home Office'. Similarly, those who have tried to raise complaints and issues directly with Mears and hotel staff have been told that nothing can be done, because all decisions are made by the Home Office.
9. The Home Office has subcontracted asylum accommodation provision to private provider such as Mears precisely so it doesn't have to undertake such operational work. By allowing its staff and subcontractors to cite 'the Home Office' as behind all decisions, Mears is cultivating substantial fear amongst those vulnerable people it is contracted to care and provide for. A significant side effect of this is that Mears then reduces challenge and criticism of its operations, as claims cannot be substantiated by those who have been made to feel too frightened to speak out. We hope the HASC can appreciate the extremely difficult position third-sector and community organizations such as ASH are then put into. We know there are severe problems that need to be addressed but we cannot directly raise these, because the wishes and well-being of the service user must be paramount.

[COR0184]

10. We hope this supplementary written evidence from the ASH Project is useful for and informative to the Home Affairs Select Committee.

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