

Written evidence submitted by John Grayson (COR0187)

A Short submission to the Home Affairs Select Committee re the management of the COVID-19 out break at Urban House IAC by The Mears Group and Urban Housing Services LLP outsourced contractors to the Home Office for delivery of the AASC asylum housing contracts.

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 and 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

In recent months I have submitted evidence for the Home Affairs Select Committee short inquiry into Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 (Inquiry into institutional accommodation)

All the evidence in this submission is based on personal testimonies, information, photos and videos sent to me from residents. I have collected data as a researcher from around 100 residents at Urban House I have visited Urban House residents and talked with them (often through interpreters) outside Urban House on many occasions from January 2020. Since 9 July I have made two such visits and talked with residents by the gates outside the centre. Quarantine restrictions allow residents only in the grounds and buildings at present. I have also since 9 July had Zoom meetings with people dispersed from Urban House after the outbreak.

Background and lead up to the COVID-19 outbreak of 9 July 2020

1. Even before the lock down period beginning on the 22 March there were strong indications that inadequate measures were being taken by the management of Urban House in the face of the growing COVID-19 pandemic. Testimonies from residents, accompanied by photos and video material showed there was often no soap available in bathrooms and shower rooms ,toilets were often not cleaned. Toiletries were severely rationed, and residents had to visit the reception area to request soap or shampoo. This regime continued throughout the lock down period. Residents were forced to share rooms with

strangers two or three to a room. Food was of very poor quality and adult spicy food was given to toddlers of 3 years – there was no children’s menu. Special diets for coeliac conditions, diabetics, and pregnant women were not available. No food was served from 6.30 p.m.to 9 am the next day. After pressure from residents milk and cereals were made available in the evening.

2. NHS staff working in the Health Integration Team refuse to refer people to GP primary care or consultants. People are told that they have to wait and register with a GP when they are dispersed. This despite the fact that almost all the people in Urban House were assessed and accepted as eligible for NASS support and therefore had the right to access NHS services. This kind of health management might be appropriate for the three to four weeks the Home Office advises for stays in Urban House, but since March people have been in Urban House who have been there five months. And of course, no one receives any money at all there.

The lock down period

3. After 22 March, no new people were moved into Urban House. Two days before lockdown some at risk people were moved from safe hotels where they could isolate and have ensuite facilities into Urban House to face no social distancing and shared facilities.

4. There were a whole range of people and families with health conditions which Public Health England had defined as making them much more likely to catch COVID-19 who were forced to stay in Urban House under lockdown. These conditions included a history of recent strokes, asthma, diabetes, vaginal infections, kidney disease, epilepsy, elephantiasis and heart disease. Acute depression was very common and there was one serious case of self-harm. Two pregnant women were there throughout lockdown and around 15 children.

5. And of course, Urban House residents were almost exclusively BAME families and single people. On 7 May the ONS said that Black British people were twice as likely to die from Covid-19 as white people. Other ethnic minority people had an increased risk of between 30 and 80 percent. The vast majority of people in the asylum system and asylum accommodation in houses, hotels or Urban House are in these categories.

6. All my research alongside people in asylum accommodation has been carried out in the Mears contract area of Yorkshire and the north-east of England. On 15 May the *Guardian* reported that there were important regional differences in transmission rates of Covid-19, with transmission rates in the north-east and Yorkshire twice those in London.

Legal challenges

7. Human rights lawyers have been engaged in actions to get people out of Urban House and into safer asylum housing. This has had some success with families with children being dispersed and also single men and women who were at risk there for health reasons.

8. The management regime remained almost the same as before. Reception and security Staff and canteen were given masks and gloves. No residents had access to masks gloves or hand sanitiser throughout the lock down. The first masks and hand sanitiser arrived for residents on Friday 10 July, the day after the outbreak was discovered.

Social distancing

9. Social distancing measures were impossible with shared rooms, shared toilets, and bathrooms. The canteen area never had adequate social distancing. The Independent newspaper published pictures of this management failure on 28 March and 3 May. I was told that the security staff (who organised social distancing) started work at 10 am and breakfast started serving at 9 am. "Social distancing is a joke" seemed to be the general view.

The absence of Migrant Help staff

10. At lock down Migrant Help, the provider of the AIRE contract closed its office in Urban House. Migrant Help effectively were 'the Home Office' for assessment of NASS claims, for everyday inquiries about dispersal and crucially for complaints about the running of Urban House, a crucial link in the official contract complaints procedure. The Requirements for the AASC contracts state:

11. '1.2.7.4 With particular reference to complaints, the Provider (Mears/Urban Housing) shall:

- notify the AIRE Provider (Migrant Help) of any complaint where the Provider is informed of a complaint directly by Service Users, on the same day on which the Provider is made aware of the complaint, in accordance with the requirements set out in Annex H of this Schedule 2;
- inform the Service User and AIRE Provider of the outcome of the action in response to the complaint, and any subsequent action to be taken ...'

12. Yet on numerous occasions when residents took complainant actions for instance a petition signed by 90 per cent of rooms in Urban House protesting food and bad conditions the reception staff simply refused to accept it and gave it back to the organisers.

The outbreak of COVID-19 Thursday 9 July

13. On Friday morning the 10 July it was announced that there had been a case of COVID-19 on the previous evening and the people concerned had been sent to isolation.

14. Announced is perhaps the wrong word. I was told by residents that a rumour spread on that morning about the outbreak on and people rushed to the reception area. Reception staff closed the centre's main doors and said 'You are in quarantine – nobody leaves the buildings' reception staff refused to answer questions.

15. Later hand sanitiser, gloves and masks were delivered. People were told "You will all be leaving at 6 p.m. today" as was usual in dispersals from Urban House a list was drawn up and staff went to people's rooms to tell them they were going and to get ready. There seemed to be little logic to the people selected. Families went but families with vulnerable children stayed. The two pregnant women went. Fit single people went and some very vulnerable single people with asthma, diabetes and kidney disease were to stay for a further two weeks.

A chaotic and dangerous 'dispersal'

16. Residents told me that they expected to be taken to hotels as an emergency measure, but Mears transported people to asylum housing in various parts of Yorkshire and the North east in all parts of their contract area.

17. With colleagues and with information from residents who left Urban House we tracked people moved to Newcastle and South Shields homes. Other people we understood had been moved to Rotherham, Sheffield, and Leeds.

18. The move was chaotic, and people were moved to properties that had not been cleaned, with fridges mouldy and unhygienic, properties with no furniture. Nobody was given cash as is normal to help until NASS support money starts. One Mears transport vehicle went to two uncleaned unprepared properties before dropping passengers at a third uncleaned property at 2.30 am on Saturday morning

19. A vulnerable woman was moved to a very dirty uncleaned shared house with two other women and they had to share the house with an existing tenant.

No testing

20. Mears had stated in earlier HASC hearings on 7 May that they were developing plans for testing people in Urban House. Nobody had been tested before the eighty four people left. Thus, possibly infected people were sent to a wide range of local authority areas. It became clear that local authorities had not been contacted or consulted by Mears.

No prepared plan in place

21. I wrote a series of news articles for the Institute of Race Relations over the whole period of COVID-19 and warned of the possibility of an outbreak in the centre. Official bodies like the Strategic Partnerships alerted Home Office representatives and Mears at their Zoom meetings of the dangerous conditions in Urban House.

22. Still there was no plan to manage an outbreak and perhaps as important no preplanning was done in consultation with residents in Urban House. They had very little information throughout lockdown. Despite public assurances over the past months by Mears no one in Urban House has had face to face briefings in their own language about COVID-19 and what plans were in place should there be an outbreak there.

The weekend 11th and 12th July

No health cover, no cleaners for the toilets and showers

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23. On Saturday residents were told that an Army team would be undertaking testing for everyone on Sunday afternoon.

24. There was no health cover in Urban House over the weekend. The nursing staff do not normally work weekends and their manager had obviously decided that even in the midst of a major COVID-19 outbreak they should take the weekend off.

25. A middle aged woman collapsed in the showers on Saturday evening and her friends took her to their room to recover. They were only able to get paracetamol from reception.

26. On Monday 12 July, I was contacted by a resident who sent me a picture of his room demonstrating that people were still forced to share rooms even after the outbreak. He also sent me pictures at 6 p.m. from the canteen demonstrating that there was no social distancing. He told me that there was no health cover at the weekend and that cleaners had not come in over the weekend and the toilets and showers had not been cleaned from Friday evening to Monday morning.

27. On Tuesday 13 July test results were given to residents and 35 people tested positive. Some of these residents, who I knew, were dispersed the next day 14 July not immediately on the 13th. They all went to isolation asylum houses.

28. In South Shields Mears appears to have sent 12 people during the week to isolation properties. They contacted local support networks but allegedly no official information was given to local health authorities.

Urban House management disappear

29. Although Mears are responsible for Urban House under the Home Office AASC contracts, they subcontract the running of Urban House to Urban Housing Services LLP (UHS) who in turn are owned by the Citrus Group. Urban Housing Services employ all the full time and agency staff there. The nursing staff are contracted NHS nurses from the hospital trust in Wakefield.

30. The many and varied complaints residents have made about UHS staff suggest that the staff are poorly trained and budgets for food seem to be much lower than comparable IAC's.

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31. After the Testing results were given to residents on Tuesday 14 July the four management staff of UHS according to residents 'disappeared' only one of them came into the centre for a brief two day stint. The management team reappeared on Monday 20 July. During that week without managers residents said there had been a case of Covid-19 which Mears have not confirmed.

32. Reception staff and security staff were the only staff in the centre along with the nursing staff. The nursing staff again took a weekend break Saturday and Sunday 18th and 19th July

33. Over that week eighty seven people were still in Urban House some of them with asthma, kidney disease diabetes and elephantiasis.

34. On Monday 20 July I was outside the centre speaking with residents. They told me that Mears had said everyone would be transferred out of Urban House 'this week'.

35. On Tuesday 21 July, a list appeared in reception with thirty one names with some of the people I knew to be at risk who were to be moved on Wednesday 22 July. Others who I knew to be at serious risk were not on the list. Two weeks after the outbreak there are still people in Urban House who Public Health England define as at serious risk if contracting COVID-19.

Media coverage and action

36. The COVID-19 outbreak was widely reported in the local and mainstream media including the BBC. The BBC website had a follow up piece on Thursday 16 July and BBC TV North devoted a large section of its evening *Look North* programme at 6.30 p.m. to Urban House with video interviews with people inside Urban house. This coverage had a major impact on Mears and the way they have managed the dispersal since. For days after the dispersal of 10 July nobody had been tested at their houses. With colleagues I have been checking early this week it seems now everybody they contacted was able to access testing. Reports suggest Mears staff are now fully supporting people and families in isolation.

37. But two weeks after the outbreak, there are still fifty or so people in Urban House.....and at risk.

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