

**Written evidence submitted by Newcastle City Council (COR0188)**

**Submission to the Home Affairs Committee on Home Office Asylum Seekers Dispersals to Newcastle during the Covid-19 Pandemic**

1. As Deputy Leader of the Council, I am very keen to respond, even with such short notice, to the work of the Select Committee. As you know, I have previously given evidence to this Select Committee and I have also spoken directly to the Minister previously. Our concerns from the City are not new.
2. Newcastle is a City of Sanctuary, we have a range of sanctuary work in libraries, gardens, schools and universities. We work together in partnership with others to do all we can for those vulnerable people from elsewhere in the world and will continue to help people in need. Families seeking asylum are supported by our local community, newly arrived residents are welcomed. As a city, we will continue to help those in need.
3. I have previously raised significant concerns about the way 'dispersal' is managed. We asked questions of that in the revision of the contract through the Home Office. So while the new contract seems to be minimally better than the previous one, we remain unconvinced that this is the best way to provide support for individuals and families seeking safety from oppression. The lack of communication with Mears is a real problem.
4. Moving families and individuals who already have received a positive test result of Covid is totally irresponsible.
5. When I came to speak to the Committee, I argued that local authorities are best placed to offer the support needed. It is local authority staff working with health, housing, the Police, schools and the voluntary and community sector who can provide proper support for those seeking asylum in the UK. It is our teams who know our communities well and the Home Office should recognise this, as the government have done through this pandemic. The local authority and our partners (like the Police) are well aware of how to manage community tensions and we take these issues very seriously. The distinct lack of communications from Mears has meant that our partnership working is not as effective as we would like it to be and it also puts undue pressure on public services.
6. Council staff will always do their best to offer support to those in need and they continue to be very frustrated with the lack of co-ordination.
7. The current system is inhumane and I am ashamed of the response and lack of care of this government. It needs a radical review.
8. Below is a factual update from our lead Officer. Of course, if we can offer more help, we will.

Cllr Joyce McCarty  
**Deputy Leader of Newcastle City Council and  
Labour Councillor for Wingrove Ward**

## **Dispersal from Urban House, Wakefield, following Covid-19 outbreak**

9. Newcastle City Council would like to make the Committee aware of our concerns about the way the dispersals to Home Office contracted facilities in Newcastle from Home Office contracted facility at Urban House were managed following an outbreak of Covid-19. The people being dispersed are vulnerable and at higher risk for Covid-19 transmission and there was no apparent systematic chain of communication to the Council (including its Public Health Team), Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) or Public Health England.

10. All of the people dispersed from Urban House were advised by Mears of the need to self-isolate for 14 days, whether they had symptoms or not. However, there was no forward planning regarding their possible health needs or notification to the Public Health England Health Protection Team regarding the transfer of cases, or potential cases, of a notifiable disease into our area. This put the health of these individuals and the health of our local communities at risk.

### **Lack of notification in advance of moves taking place and subsequent delays in the provision of data to facilitate support**

11. On 12/07/20 we received several emails from voluntary sector groups supporting individuals in Urban House alerting us of individuals who had been moved to Newcastle over the weekend following a suspected outbreak of Covid-19.

12. On Monday morning (13/07/20) Newcastle's Migration, Refugee and Asylum Lead raised these concerns with Mears' Group Partnership Director, seeking confirmation of the health status and details of any individuals who had been dispersed to Newcastle. A response was received stating that communications would be provided later that morning. That afternoon an email was received from the North East Migration Partnership confirming that 60 asylum seekers had been dispersed to 19 properties in the North East region (56 people in 18 families and 4 single people) but there was no confirmation of which councils these people had been dispersed to. We were advised that the details of who and where people had been placed would follow by the 14/07/20 at the latest. Below is listed the subsequent dispersal information from Mears on dispersals to Newcastle:

- 14/7/20 that one household with no names, contact details or address
- 15/7/20 that two households with no names, contact details or address
- 16/07/20 three additional households dispersed between 14-15/07/20 after testing positive for Covid-19. This information only contained household size and address – no names or contact details were provided

13. After requesting further information from Mears the Council was provided with names, dates of birth, telephone numbers and Covid-19 status of the above and confirmation that the three new households were all recorded as having tested positive for Covid-19.

14. These dispersal from Urban House also came at the same time as colleagues in the city were trying to manage the arrangements for the 126 people being dispersed by Mears into hotel accommodation in Newcastle. Similarly, efforts to ensure that appropriate health care arrangements were in place for residents at the hotel were hampered by the lack of real time data and systematic communication from Mears. There was also an apparent lack of appreciation of the strain placed on local services by these uncoordinated dispersals.

## **Concerns regarding conditions of dispersed accommodation and support provided**

15. The Council's Local Authority Asylum Seeker Liaison Officer (LAASLO) team have managed to contact each of the 5 households. This contact has led to concerns around safeguarding, the lack of wrap around support being provided by Mears as well as the lack of complete inventory checks before a property is signed off.

### **Safeguarding concerns**

16. Family 1 mother and 4 year old child dispersed to Newcastle on 10/07/20:

17. We were alerted to this household following a referral to the Council by Wakefield's health visiting team on 15/07/20). The concerns related to the vulnerabilities of the mother and the fact that a child protection safety plan was in place for the child. None of this was communicated to the Council by Mears.

18. Our LAASLO team made contact with the household and had sufficient cause for concern for the mother's emotional/mental state that, in liaison with the CCG, arranged for an emergency consultation with a GP that evening.

19. This lady is believed to be a victim of modern day slavery and there are concerns that the dispersal and lack of information she was provided with about her new circumstances may have triggered emotional distress. The lady's distress was further compounded by the fact that she was unable to bring all her belongings with her from Urban House. She was finally reunited with her belongings 6 days after moving.

20. The LAASLO raised concerns with Mears and requested that their Welfare Officer make regular contact, including over the weekend. Unfortunately, we were not confident that these welfare checks were identifying and responding to the household's welfare needs. For example, the household were dispersed to a two bedroom property but with only one bed which mother and child are sharing, the lady was incredibly distressed in every contact we had with her, she had run out of the medication she had been provided with at Wakefield, and in addition she made a request for paracetamol and sanitary products to the LAASLO as these had not been provided by Mears.

### **Property conditions and wrap around support**

21. We have established contact with all the dispersed households and the following issues have been raised:

- Female house in multiple occupation (HMO) – no working shower or heating, lack of bedding and carpets, request for sanitary products, fresh fruit and vegetables, requirements for urgent referrals to GP for repeat prescriptions
- Family household – washing machine not working and back gate to property unable to be secured
- Family household of mother (Covid-19 positive) and four children (one child with partial paralysis), no referral to the Council's Children with Disabilities Team
- Family household of father and son (Covid-19 positive) dispersed to Newcastle but not into same property as the mother and two other children who were dispersed to Newcastle in March 2020. Despite being advised of the 14 days self-isolation requirements the two families have reunited with one another.

## **Mears use of hotels in Newcastle as 'Initial Accommodation' for asylum seekers**

22. Mears are utilising two hotels in Newcastle as temporary 'Initial Accommodation' to help manage the national demand on asylum accommodation caused by the temporary pause on asylum accommodation evictions.

23. The [first hotel] is being used to accommodate 60 single, male, asylum seekers. The [first hotel] was previously being used as contingency accommodation for people who needed to be rehoused due to the change in accommodation providers following the asylum accommodation contract transition. Around 30 people had been accommodated in the hotel since the beginning of January 2020 and in March 2020 Mears also started to accommodate individuals who required 'Initial Accommodation'.

24. The [second hotel] has been used by Mears since 01/07/20 and has capacity to accommodate 126 single asylum seekers. Prior to the use of the [second hotel] public authorities in Newcastle including the CCG, Northumbria Police and Public Health raised the following concerns with the Home Office:

- Primary health care provision: the [first hotel] is close to the [second hotel] and an additional 126 asylum seekers places a strain on the primary care provision in the local area. The CCG and NHS Trust are working to provide primary care to the hotel; however, this has been constrained by the lack of lead in time and real time information on dispersals to help plan services
- Lack of health screening: prior to people being placed in hotel accommodation: There are concerns about how quickly or systematically communicable diseases will be able to be picked up without a coordinated system in place
- Community tensions: Northumbria Police have raised specific concerns about the [second hotel] being located so close to the [first hotel] and the possible community tension impact of Mears using two hotels so close to one another. There are concerns that as lock down restrictions are eased with regards to exercise and gatherings in groups of more than six this may cause issues especially in and around the [local area]. There are concerns that this could have a dramatic effect on the dynamics of the local community, which may lead to an increase in community tensions.
- Lack of community support facilities and amenities in and around this area: the location of these hotels will make accessing wider support networks in the city very difficult and without the provision of cash support to pay for public transport these services will be inaccessible for many. This will be further compounded by the lack of face to face outreach being provided by the voluntary and community sector at this time.

25. Despite these concerns on the 26/06/20 the Home Office advised that the national pressure on asylum intake was such that they were instructing Mears to start using the [second hotel] with immediate effect. Dispersals into the hotel started on the 01/07/20 and it is now almost full.

26. The Council, Northumbria Police and NHS partners are trying to work with Mears to support this process, to minimise disruption to the local community while emphasising the need to practise public health advice in respect of Covid-19.

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27. However, as with the dispersal of households from Urban House there is a lack of systematic communication with local public authorities and concerns around Mears' capacity to adequately support vulnerable service users in pressurised circumstances.

28. The Council wants to work with the Home Office and their contracted providers to support the more effective and humane management of the asylum system. We have asked that the Home Office works with local councils, like Newcastle, to develop an 'end to end' approach to managing asylum and the transition from this status when the Home Office makes decisions. The Council and partners want to contribute to a more strategic national approach to managing the asylum seeker dispersals by using our local knowledge to help facilitate local delivery that works for our communities.

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