

[COR0189]

Written evidence submitted by Mears Group (COR0189)

Dear Ms Cooper

Thank you for your letter, received at noon on the 21st July. I am replying as fully as possible, mindful of the next day turnaround you requested.

As you know, Urban House, Initial Accommodation Centre, in Wakefield, provides accommodation for asylum seekers usually for the first three weeks of their time in the asylum system. During the pandemic, on public health advice, people have been there for much longer than usual as the Director of Public Health at Wakefield agreed it was a single household in early April and no one should be moved into the building and only moved out if medically required. This has been a difficult time for service users and we have tried to provide the best possible support in the circumstances.

We have looked into the allegations about the service user that you highlight in the opening paragraphs of your letter connected to recent moves from Urban House. Regards health conditions, the NHS are on-site at Urban House providing healthcare support and advice and we do not recognise the allegation that healthcare was not provided appropriately. Decisions on healthcare arrangements during COVID-19 were made by NHS staff as explained further in answer to your Questions below.

We have looked into allegations about conduct of a member of staff prior to a move to alternative accommodation. A Mears staff member visited the service user to investigate, the service user gave an account of a conversation that seemed to involve a third party NGO, rather than a staff member. We have carried out our own investigation amongst staff members at Urban House but nothing we have heard substantiates the allegation. Mears staff have been in close touch with the service user to support her in new accommodation.

In your letter, and in the accompanying paperwork from SYMAAG, you raise issues about conditions at Urban House. All arrangements have followed public health recommendations. We operated at below capacity throughout the pandemic, to support social distancing, including at mealtimes, where a rota system has applied. Residents are provided with three meals a day that meet NHS EatWell standards. Cleaning has been increased for all areas, including for bathrooms, which are checked and cleaned regularly throughout the day. Bedrooms are cleaned on a weekly basis and bedlinen is changed once a week. Washing and sanitation supplies are available for all service users and checks on supplies are made regularly throughout each day. In line with good practice, the building offers 1 set of bathroom facilities per 5 service users at full capacity and we have been operating below capacity.

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On your Questions 1 and 2. Dispersal from Urban House

During the lockdown period there were no confirmed positive cases of COVID-19 at Urban House. We were obviously very disappointed when two cases were confirmed by the health services, as detailed in the statement from Wakefield Council on 10th July.

Mears discussed the situation with the Director of Public Health at Wakefield Council and the best approach to take in the circumstances. At this point, with lockdown easing, we had already received clearance for moves and had some properties available for moves that were due to begin w/c 13th July.

80 service users were moved on Friday 10th July, some were moved on specific health advice and others were moved for welfare reasons. Service users were very concerned to hear about the COVID-19 cases in the building, this was obviously causing anxiety, and we made the judgement that for welfare reasons we would expedite moves. By reducing the number of service users at Urban House, this would further mitigate the risk of COVID-19 spreading, for both those moving and those remaining. This was a discussion we had with the Director of Public Health, and the subsequent testing shows that the number of cases was contained.

Local authorities have expressed concern to us about not being notified of the urgent moves on the Friday. We accept that they should have been notified of the moves that day and prior to travelling. We are working with the Home Office to establish clearer processes around emergency moves and have committed with the Home Office to conduct a lessons learnt exercise led by Public Health Directors. We will ensure that this does not happen again in any circumstances. All local authorities had been informed by the Monday. We worked with local authorities to arrange tests. The national system does not require testing where there are no symptoms or where there is difficulty proving identity. We raised the process issue with the local Public Health team at Wakefield and it was then raised at a national level to extend testing. All of the service users who moved have been self-isolating and will do so until Friday the 24th. We contact each person daily to ensure they are well and have what they need to observe the regulations

Question 3. Service users at Urban House and health conditions

In light of Covid, Mears consulted the Director of Public Health at Wakefield Council, on the most appropriate arrangements. The NHS lead on healthcare at Urban House, with the on-site facility working with Mears as a lockdown situation appeared more likely. In our communication around the arrangements, we advised that service users with health conditions or where there were welfare considerations, such as families with young children, had been moved out. We have subsequently been challenged on why some families and individuals with health conditions were not moved. The reason is that all service users are assessed by the NHS, who advise on healthcare arrangements and how service user needs would be best met in the context of COVID-19. Following a visit by the Director of Public Health to Urban House on 7 April, and subsequent written advice

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on the 14th April, we have maintained a 'static household' with no moves in or out except on health or safeguarding concerns.

Question 4 on checks. The NHS are on site. All service users have a health assessment. There is an NHS drop-in every day from Monday to Friday. In addition, Mears welfare officers check in daily with service users. Welfare considerations were factored in to moves that took place prior to the building going into 'static household', and those moved in recent weeks now that lockdown has eased. We are intending to move all service users out as quickly as possible. At which point the building will receive a deep clean throughout. We will discuss with the Director of Public Health and the Home Office how and when the building could be re-opened for occupation

Question 5. How many other families were resident on 9th July and how long had they been there?

We were able to move families prior to the lockdown, particularly those with young children. 26 family units, including couples, siblings and older children, remained at Urban House during the lockdown period. The families arrived at various times, with one family from January, one from February and the rest during March or early April prior to the 'static household' advice.

Question 6. There are a number of specific allegations about the treatment of service users and we would like to assure you that we fully investigate any issues or concerns which arise. None of the issues raised by third parties were substantiated. There are formal procedures for incident reporting with the Home Office. We would also point out that the NHS work closely with Mears in Urban House and they would flag to senior Managers at Mears any issues around conduct and standards. Mears also operates a clear Whistleblowing Policy (please see attached copy of policy) and would respond should we receive any such notification. Staff are expected to act with professionalism and care towards service users and we would take action in any circumstances where a staff members fell short of the standards Mears expects, and which the Home Office requires. There have been incidents in other areas, not at Urban House, where where staff members have not followed process or behaved in a manner that is not in line with our ethos. In these cases disciplinary action has been taken where clearly appropriate up to and including dismissal. We always work to make sure that positive actions are taken to deliver the best service possible.

John Taylor
Chief Operating Officer

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