



Home Office

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Dear Ms McDowell

Thank you for your letter of 17 July 2023 about the accommodation of asylum seekers. Your e-mail has been passed to Asylum Support, Resettlement and Accommodation for a reply.

The record number of people that have crossed the Channel in small boats in recent years has placed the Home Office's asylum support infrastructure and accommodation services under immense pressure.

Under the Immigration & Asylum Act 1999, the Home Office has a statutory obligation to provide asylum seekers, who would otherwise be destitute, with accommodation and support whilst their claim is under consideration. Eligible asylum seekers are ordinarily placed in housing accommodation; however, the unprecedented number of small boat arrivals has forced the Home Office to consider alternative accommodation options to ensure that we meet our statutory obligations, which has resulted in the temporary use of hotels.

There are currently just under 51,000 asylum seekers living in hotels or other contingency accommodation across the country, costing the taxpayer around £2.3 billion a year. On Wednesday 29 March 2023 the Government announced a range of measures to gradually reduce the use of contingency sites (mainly hotels), and we are putting measures in place to operationalise this commitment.

It is becoming increasingly challenging to find suitable and cost-effective accommodation for destitute asylum seekers, as we approach the peak months for small boat crossings. The Home Office needs to ensure adequate capacity to support and accommodate destitute asylum seekers in line with statutory obligations. Our main aim is to utilise available hotel space more effectively in accordance with legislative and contractual regulations to accommodate destitute asylum seekers and provide value for taxpayer money.

How this can be achieved is where a hotel room is occupied by a single service user and there is adequate space, in accordance with legislation and contractual regulations, they will be asked to share a room with an unrelated service user of the same sex. Room sharing is not a new thing, we have seen room sharing work successfully across the estate for a number of years to make the best use of the space we have available to us. A

phased approach is being taken to optimisation of hotels to reduce the impact on services on local authority areas.

Our providers must meet strict standards for their accommodation which is mandated in their contract. We expect the following standards from our providers:

- Safe, habitable, fit for purpose and correctly equipped, as set out in Schedule 2;
- The Asylum Accommodation service providers identify suitable accommodation and ensure that it conforms to the accommodation standards and provision set out in Schedule 2 of the Asylum Accommodation and Support Contracts (AASC). The Statement of Requirements, available via the link below, sets out the full details of our contractual obligations: <http://data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/Files/DEP2018-1112/AASC - Schedule 2 - Statement of Requirements.pdf>(opens in a new tab)'.
<http://data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/Files/DEP2018-1112/AASC - Schedule 2 - Statement of Requirements.pdf>
- Licensed for its intended use in accordance with statutory requirements and/or Local Authority rules and regulations.
- Compliant with the Sharing and Relocation Rules defined in Annex C of Schedule 2 of the AASC contracts.
- Suitable for Service Users with specific needs, as notified by the Authority or were identified as necessary by the Provider, and in compliance with the Disability Discrimination Legislation.
- The Provider shall provide a full board service to entitled Service Users who are supported and accommodated in full board style accommodation without access to facilities for food storage and preparation.
- The food service shall be provided in a location easily accessible to the Service User and/or within the relevant accommodation within which the Service Users are accommodated.
- The food provision under the full board service shall include breakfast, lunch, and evening meals, with a choice of at least one hot and one cold selection.
- At least one vegetarian option shall be provided at each meal; a beverage service with each main meal; a food service for babies and small children with the appropriate foodstuffs.
- This service shall enable babies and small children to be fed whenever necessary.
- Options must be provided which cater for special dietary, cultural or religious requirements (including, without limitation, gluten free and diabetic options where necessary);
- Additional foodstuffs or meals as required to meet the nutritional needs of Service Users for whom three daily meals may be insufficient.
- The food service shall meet appropriate nutritional standards for each varied menu and satisfy cultural, religious, health or other specific requirements.
- The Provider shall also clearly advertise the availability of religious or culturally sensitive meals to relevant Service Users, where appropriate.
- The Provider shall ensure that each varied menu is validated by a suitably qualified nutritionist or health professional as being appropriate to the dietary needs of Service Users.
- The full board service shall include additional support items required by Service Users, including a. baby care equipment and disposable nappies, and b. personal toiletries and feminine hygiene products.
- Access to laundry facilities or a laundry service must be provided.
- Induction should be completed on arrival either by the Provider or their sub-contractor; and The Provider should facilitate access to health screening as commissioned by the local Integrated Care Boards (ICBs).

The enduring solution to this challenge is to stop the illegal, dangerous, and unnecessary small boat crossings that are overwhelming our asylum system. Not only is every crossing attempt a potential tragedy, as we have seen far too often, but the people arriving via these small boats have travelled through, and have left, safe countries with fully functioning asylum systems to reach the UK. Furthermore, the immense pressure these arrivals place on our system diverts our finite resources away from those in genuine need.

Meanwhile, we are taking a range of steps to reduce our dependency on hotels to support those already in the asylum system. All local authority areas in England, Scotland and Wales became an asylum dispersal area by default in April 2022. This is increasing the number of suitable properties that can be procured for destitute asylum seekers across the UK, ensuring a fair spread across the country and reducing our reliance on hotels. We also intend to bring forward a range of alternative sites, such as former student halls and surplus military sites, to add thousands of cheaper and more appropriate bed spaces.

The Home Office is tackling the asylum legacy caseload so that people can receive a decision and exit the system, either by returning to their home country, or granting them asylum so they can begin to make a contribution to the UK. We have already increased the number of decision makers to over 1,300. We will continue to increase the number of caseworkers to help clear the asylum backlog by the end of 2023. This will take our expected number of decision makers to 1,800 by summer 2023 and 2,500 by September.

We are also improving the productivity, volumes, and speed of decision making so that people spend less time in asylum accommodation. We are streamlining and modernising the end-to-end process, with improved guidance, more focused and fewer interviews, enhancing use of digital technology, and we are introducing a more efficient approach to how claims are handled by decision makers. The aim is to clear initial asylum decisions relating to claims made before 28 June 2022, when the Nationality and Borders Act measures came into force, by the end of 2023.

I can assure you that the Home Office takes the safety and security of the local community, hotel staff and asylum seekers, extremely seriously. As part of the asylum process, the claimant's biometrics are captured and they undergo security checks against immigration and police databases to identify any threat to the UK or its interests, and their travel history to and within the UK, before they are placed in a hotel. All asylum seekers also undergo health checks and a screening interview to establish any vulnerabilities, and the basis of their asylum claim.

Additionally, our accommodation providers are experienced and have a strong record of running these types of sites with minimal impact on local communities. All have the required policies and procedures in place around security, safeguarding, critical incident management, and health and safety. Security officials and support staff are also on site 24 hours a day and are obliged to immediately report any security incidents to the Home Office. If required, we work with the provider to put additional measures in place.

Your sincerely


G Preston

Briefing & Correspondence Hub

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