



House of Commons
Home Affairs Committee

**Asylum
accommodation:
Government Response
to the Committee's
Twelfth Report of
Session 2016–17**

**Second Special Report of Session
2017–19**

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Home Affairs Committee

The Home Affairs Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Home Office and its associated public bodies.

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Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Carol Oxborough (Clerk), Phil Jones (Second Clerk), Harriet Deane (Committee Specialist), Simon Armitage (Committee Specialist), David Gardner (Senior Committee Assistant), Mandy Sullivan (Committee Assistant) and George Perry (Senior Media and Communications Officer).

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Second Special Report

The Home Affairs Committee published its Twelfth Report of Session 2016–17, [Asylum accommodation](#) (HC 637), on 31 January 2017. The Government's response was received on 31 October 2017 and is appended to this report.

In the Government response the Committee's recommendations are shown in bold type; the Government's response is shown in plain type.

Appendix: Government Response

The Home Office would like to thank the Committee for its report on Asylum Accommodation published on 31 January 2017. Since the Committee's enquiry first began taking evidence in January 2016, the Home Office has taken a number of steps to improve the performance of the asylum accommodation contracts and the experience of service users in the asylum accommodation system. These improvements include substantive changes in the contract that were announced to Parliament by the then Immigration Minister on 7 December 2016¹. The Minister said:

There has been considerable interest in the accommodation and support that is provided to asylum seekers. I am committed to ensuring that destitute asylum seekers are accommodated in safe, secure and suitable accommodation and that they are treated with dignity. I have listened carefully to Hon. Members and non-governmental organisations' concerns about the arrangements, including their observations and criticisms of the current contractual arrangements.

The current contractual arrangements expire in 2017, with an option to extend them for a further two years. I have considered carefully whether to extend these contracts and weighed up a range of factors, including the value for money they offer the taxpayer and the improvements that have been made to the standard of accommodation when compared to those achieved under previous arrangements. I have decided to extend the contracts until 2019. However, I recognise that there are improvements that can be made. Therefore I have taken this opportunity to make changes and additional investment to address the concerns that have been raised and improve the services that are provided. These changes will build upon the improvements that we have already made this year in response to the concerns of Hon. Members and others.

Firstly I have increased the amount of money that the Home Office pays for the provision of welfare officers and staff property management. This is in direct response to feedback that more attention is needed to ensure that asylum seekers receive the welfare support they need and are able to raise any concerns they have with the accommodation providers. It will also ensure that property standards continue to be closely managed and

¹ <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2016-12-08/HCW5335/>

further improved; and that sufficient suitable property is available. The money will only be available for the employment of additional resources engaged directly on these customer focussed activities.

I have also agreed that the Department should work with providers on developing different contractual terms to ensure that there is sufficient Initial Accommodation available and thereby further reduce the need to use contingency arrangements, such as hotels, in the future. I am pleased to report that the use of contingency accommodation is already much reduced but these changes will add in resilience, further reduce the numbers and keep them down.

Finally I have introduced a new higher price band for any increases in the number of asylum seekers requiring accommodation, this will allow the providers to further increase their property portfolios if required and widen the areas in which they operate. This will reduce the need to continually increase the number of asylum seekers accommodated in certain communities. This follows work to increase the number of local authority areas that participate in the asylum dispersal scheme, which I am pleased to report has increased the number of participating areas by over one third in the past 18 months.

The Department will continue to monitor the providers closely to ensure that they comply with the requirements of the contract and work closely with non-Government Organisations and service users to respond to feedback and continue to improve the system.

My officials have started work on putting in place new arrangements for when these contracts expire in 2019. This work is at an early stage and we are engaging with a range of stakeholders to consider options for the future arrangements.

The Home Office have continued to make improvements to the contracts to ensure sufficient accommodation is available, property standards meet the requirements of the contract and asylum seeker welfare is given appropriate focus. The Government's response details many of those improvements.

Demands of the asylum system

We have warned in previous reports that the asylum system is under strain and that a backlog in cases has been developing. Those warnings were not heeded and the consequences are now evident, with Providers struggling to source sufficient adequate accommodation to meet demand. Pressure on the asylum system, and on accommodation in particular, will not reduce unless the Government takes action to increase its capacity to process applications. The Home Office was successful in doing this, albeit for only a few quarters, by devoting more resources to the task, and it needs to do so again as a matter of urgency. There are clear benefits in applications being processed quickly and these far outweigh the cost of increasing capacity in the

responsible section of the Home Office, UK Visas & Immigration. We need to see a marked fall in the number of applications awaiting a decision in the statistics covering the first half of 2017. (Paragraph 15)

The Government continues to meet its ambition to decide at least 98% of straightforward asylum cases within six months of the date of claim, and has done so consistently for almost three years. The Home Office has recruited and trained additional staff to make asylum decisions, which has ensured the customer service standard is met and has reduced the number of asylum seekers awaiting a decision.

The Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration found in his report into the asylum system that the Home Office had made significant improvements in the efficiency and effectiveness of its management of asylum casework. The inspection also found that decision-makers, and other staff within Asylum Operations, were professional, dedicated, and demonstrated a commitment to fairness.²

In addition to increasing its capacity to process applications for asylum, the Government should do more to ensure that its initial decisions are correct. Around 30% of decisions to refuse asylum are overturned in the courts, and this figure is much higher for certain nationalities such as Eritreans and Iranians. This is an unacceptable rate of error on the part of the Home Office. Incorrect decisions, if appealed, mean that those affected will require asylum accommodation for longer, adding further pressure to an already stretched system. The Government needs to improve its decision-making and commit to regular reviews of its approach to those nationalities which the courts are consistently identifying as receiving incorrect decisions. We have highlighted specific nationalities, such as Eritreans and Afghans in this and previous Reports. We need to see progress in this area and for this to show in future quarterly immigration statistics. (Paragraph 19)

All asylum claims lodged in the UK are carefully considered on their individual merits against a background of relevant case law and up to date country information.

We are continuously working to improve the quality of decision-making to ensure that we properly consider all the evidence provided and get decisions right the first time. UK Visas and Immigration has an internal audit process, consisting of reviews by senior case workers and independent auditors, which assesses whether Home Office policy has been followed.

There are various reasons why the First-tier Tribunal may allow an asylum appeal. These can include the claimant submitting new evidence at appeal which was not available to the decision maker at the time of the initial decision. An allowed appeal is not in itself an indication that the initial decision was incorrect at the time it was made.

Initial Accommodation

Initial Accommodation is unsuitable for long term use, and indeed it is not provided for this purpose. However, the reality is that people have been housed in such accommodation for far longer than the target of 19 days. As longer stays are a common occurrence which does not seem likely to be addressed in the near future,

2 <http://icinspector.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/ICIBI-Asylum-Report-Feb-2016.pdf>

the Government should take steps to ensure that people in Initial Accommodation are properly supported for the duration of their stay. As a minimum, this should include the provision of accommodation appropriate to an individual's needs; and ensuring that healthcare requirements are met and that there is clarity about who is responsible and accountable for them. The Government should also set out what different contractual arrangements it is seeking with the Providers for the provision of Initial Accommodation as part of the COMPASS contracts extension. (Paragraph 24)

The Government is committed to providing safe and secure accommodation while asylum claims are considered. All accommodation must meet clear contractual standards and be appropriate to the needs of individuals.

The Government agrees that Initial Accommodation should be used for short term accommodation and will continue to move service users to longer term accommodation within 19 days in most cases. There are individual cases where longer stays in Initial Accommodation are appropriate and UKVI works with its Providers to manage these cases on an individual basis.

Service users experienced longer stays in Initial Accommodation during the high demand period in 2015/16. Since then UKVI and its Providers have increased the accommodation capacity within the system to allow service users to move to dispersed accommodation more quickly.

It is vital that pregnant women and young mothers in Initial Accommodation receive the support they need. Women in the late stages of pregnancy should generally be provided with their own room; pregnant women and young mothers need access to transport for all medical appointments and related matters such as baby banks and ante-natal education; and safe areas should be provided for young children to play. The Home Office should review Initial Accommodation centres to ensure that provision is appropriate, including by taking advice from health professionals on whether the food available is sufficient to meet the nutritional needs of pregnant women. The review should also assess the treatment of women more broadly, to ensure that safety and privacy measures are in place (including for bathroom facilities), and assess the treatment of children, particularly that appropriate policies on safeguarding are being followed. Requiring health screenings to be carried out when people move to Initial Accommodation would also help to ensure that health conditions and special needs are identified and dealt with properly, including when asylum seekers move on to dispersal accommodation. (Paragraph 30)

The Government is committed to providing pregnant women and young mothers the support they need. The contracts set out how the needs of all vulnerable groups, including pregnant women, women and children should be met during their stay in asylum accommodation.

Initial Accommodation centres either have on-site health services or provide transport for off-site medical and antenatal appointments.

Accommodation Providers are required to take account of recommendations from health professionals. Where meals are provided (as opposed to providing funds for self-catering) Providers are required to cater for special dietary needs where they are made aware of such requirements.

All Initial Accommodation sites include access to health services and service users are encouraged to attend a health screening appointment shortly after their arrival. The Home Office and its Providers actively support the local structures established by the relevant Clinical Commissioning Groups.

The Home Office will continue to work with Providers to ensure the estate has appropriate safety and privacy measures in place for service users, this will include creating more gender specific areas where the constraints of the estate allow.

Dispersal accommodation

The policy of dispersal was introduced to deliver an equitable distribution of asylum seekers across the UK. It has failed to achieve this. Pressure on the south-east of England may have been alleviated, but it has been replaced by the clustering of asylum seekers in some of the most deprived parts of the country. This is clearly unfair and is putting considerable pressure on local authorities whose public services are already under immense strain. It is unacceptable that so many parts of the UK have no asylum accommodation at all, including areas where Providers have been able to source accommodation only for there to be a blanket refusal by the local authority to accept it. (Paragraph 43)

To date the Government has had only limited success in persuading local authorities to accept asylum seekers. For the remainder of the COMPASS contract period the Government should revise its approach and give local authorities greater flexibility over where accommodation is provided within their area. For example, local authorities should be given more control over where asylum accommodation is located and a longer timeframe in which to consider Providers' requests. The option for local authorities to refuse requests should be maintained where there are genuine concerns over the quality or concentration of accommodation, the capacity of local health, education and other support services, and risks to social cohesion; and refusals should only be overturned on appeal in exceptional circumstances. The Government should also provide additional resources to local authorities which continue to bear the brunt of supporting the asylum system while broadening dispersal remains a challenge. (Paragraph 44)

We believe these changes would encourage more local authorities to become involved in providing asylum accommodation on a voluntary basis. If, however, after these changes are implemented, local authorities continue unreasonably to refuse to become involved, the Government should, within 12 months, use its available powers to require those local authorities to take their fair share. It is clearly unfair that the brunt of the burden of accommodation and related asylum provision should be borne by many local authorities where there is recognised deprivation and hardship, while local authorities in undoubtedly far more prosperous areas continue to refuse to be party to the dispersal scheme. In using such powers, the Government should ensure that access to the necessary specialist services is available in the local authorities affected, including health care, legal representation and interpreters. Work should also be undertaken to ensure that host communities are informed and involved in plans for new areas to take on asylum seekers. (Paragraph 45)

The Government is committed to ensuring a more equitable distribution of asylum seekers across the UK. In considering the distribution of asylum seekers one must also consider where asylum seekers who do not apply for Home Office support are residing and how local authorities are contributing in other ways, for example through supporting unaccompanied asylum seeking children or refugees who are part of a resettlement scheme.

Since 2015, the Home Office has been working closely with local authorities across the UK to increase the number of areas that participate in the dispersal scheme; this activity has increased the number of dispersal areas by a third. The Government welcomes the Committee's recommendation that more local authorities should be involved in asylum dispersal, and will continue to engage in constructive dialogues to achieve this, including with the support of the UKVI funded Strategic Migration Partnerships.

The Home Office and its Providers will continue to work with local authorities on the placement of asylum seekers within their areas to understand the pressures and opportunities and develop plans over the longer term. This will allow local authorities to continue to shape the provision of service in their area and to ensure the impacts of dispersal on local communities and services are taken into account when allocating accommodation. This consultation process includes the input of local health, police, education and other services and provides a flexible and established mechanism by which local authorities can influence where asylum accommodation is located.

The holistic support which the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme has been designed to provide is a model that should be replicated for all those whose asylum applications are accepted. As well as providing a more holistic form of support, this would also help address local authorities' concerns that, in accepting asylum accommodation, they will face additional costs further down the line when the person seeking asylum has received a decision on their application and is accepted as a refugee, and may be transferred to the local authority's care. (Paragraph 46)

The Syrian programme has been successful not just because of the additional resources, although they are an integral part, but also because local authorities have been consulted and engaged in the design of the scheme from very beginning. In comparison, the COMPASS system has corroded confidence in the asylum system for many local authorities because they have seen their influence marginalised while still having to carry many of the consequential costs. The result has been less participation, less holistic provision of support in the community, less integration planning, and more reliance on emergency and voluntary services. The Government should reflect on the success of the Syrian programme in attracting local authority support and engagement and the failure of the COMPASS scheme to do the same, and design a new approach which attracts (and, if necessary, requires) local authorities to participate, but gives them more flexibility and control. (Paragraph 47)

The Government notes the Committee's support for the approach taken in the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme. The teams working on asylum support and resettlement have been brought together to ensure that the learning from each can be shared and there is a more joined up approach between the Home Office and local authorities. This will include considering how both systems can make use of the local infrastructure and support of the voluntary sector and community to support asylum seekers and refugees.

Although there is good practice that can be shared across the different schemes, the challenges are different in many respects and therefore the model is not completely replicable.

Local authorities must be actively involved in developing the replacement to COMPASS and the Government should engage them on the provision of accommodation, support and integration and how a fair distribution of accommodation might be achieved. Commissioning of asylum accommodation should be devolved rather than being done centrally by the Home Office to give local authorities greater responsibility and flexibility about how and where accommodation and support are provided. The Home Office should consult on devolving the commissioning of asylum accommodation to regional Strategic Migration Partnerships. This would not preclude private sector provision of asylum accommodation but would allow local decision-making and responsibility, and make it easier to address community cohesion. In relation to asylum accommodation in the devolved nations, the devolved governments should be given a significant role in deciding the appropriate arrangements for decentralising commissioning and ensuring a fair distribution of accommodation. (Paragraph 48)

A project has been established to design, develop and deliver new arrangements for asylum accommodation and support following the end of the current contracts in 2019. Since the establishment of the project in the autumn of 2016 there has been considerable engagement with local government and non-governmental organisations to feed their views into the design of the next generation of contracts.

Temporary dispersal accommodation

The evidence we have received suggests that some of the premises used by Providers as temporary accommodation are substandard and unfit to house anyone, let alone people who are vulnerable. Dispersal accommodation is subject to strict criteria and regular inspection yet it appears that the same rigorous standards are not being applied to temporary accommodation. We recommend that temporary accommodation is inspected before its use is sanctioned, and on a monthly basis thereafter. Such inspections should include: whether an individual's health or special needs are being met; the quality and quantity of food available; the fabric of the building itself; and whether there are facilities which are appropriate for vulnerable people, including mothers and children and victims of torture and trafficking. We further recommend that asylum seekers in temporary accommodation receive some financial support, given that the Home Office will have already decided that they are entitled to this. The level of financial support should reflect the fact that meals are provided. (Paragraph 54)

The Government is clear with its Providers that contingency accommodation for asylum seekers should only be used as a temporary measure to manage peaks in demand. The Home Office and its Providers have increased the capacity of accommodation in the system and managed demand so that contingency accommodation has not been used for a number of months.

Where contingency accommodation is used, the contract is clear that the same standards are required as for non-contingency accommodation. The Home Office has been clear with Providers that they must consider the needs of vulnerable service users when

considering where to accommodate them. Individuals' requirements can change over time and close working between Home Office, its suppliers and health and social services ensure provision is tailored to changing requirements.

Initial and Contingency accommodation is usually provided on a full board basis. Asylum seekers receive three meals per day and essential personal hygiene items as part of this support package. Cash payments are only provided to those in temporary accommodation where full-board services are not available.

The Home Office regularly inspects all accommodation, including contingency accommodation, when it is used, to ensure that it meets the requirements of the contract and the needs of service users. During 2016 the Home Office visited some contingency accommodation sites on a daily basis to ensure that the needs of service users accommodated there were met.

In order for us properly to assess the pressure on the asylum system the Government should include the number of asylum seekers in temporary accommodation in future quarterly statistical releases. In response to this Report the Government should also address the concerns raised with us by Sandwell Women's Aid, specifically that the Home Office either ignores requests for vulnerable women to remain in SWA safe houses until dispersal accommodation is available, or considers such requests as detrimental to applications for asylum support. (Paragraph 55)

The Home Office publishes a range of official statistics on the number of asylum seekers accommodated under Section 98 and Section 95 of the Asylum and Immigration Act 1999 in the quarterly migration statistics release; there are no plans to include a breakdown by premises type within these figures.

If an asylum seeker who would otherwise be destitute is being accommodated by another organisation, including in a safe house for vulnerable women, they will not need to access the accommodation provided by the Home Office to destitute asylum seekers. However, Home Office accommodation will become available as soon as the accommodation provided by the organisation is no longer available. UKVI would consider any requests to provide accommodation close to where a service user has been living if that would allow the continuity of assistance, for example counselling and other outreach support.

Strategic Migration Partnerships

Effective coordination and cooperation between key stakeholders is essential if the current system is to work effectively but we found it to be absent in too many parts of the country. As part of managing the remaining two years of the COMPASS contract the Government should insist on formal, regular meetings between Providers, local authorities and the third sector (and devolved governments). These meetings should be coordinated by the local Strategic Migration Partnership, which is well-placed to provide this necessary function. However, SMPs are currently poorly funded and overstretched. The Government should increase funding of SMPs to a more sustainable and consistent level so that they have the capacity to encourage communication and improve planning within the dispersal system, and are better able to negotiate tensions between its different levels. Over the longer term, we have already suggested that the

Government consult on giving SMPs a central role in the regional allocation of asylum seekers and they will require more resources if they are to perform this function. (Paragraph 58)

The Home Office funded Regional Strategic Migration Partnerships have a key role to play in coordinating asylum and refugee dispersal issues across the UK. The Strategic Migration Partnerships arrange regular meetings bringing together local authority representatives, the Home Office, accommodation providers, the third sector and other partners. These meetings are in addition to national engagement structures between Home Office, devolved and local government and the third sector.

The Home Office has provided Strategic Migration Partnerships with additional funding, on top of the core enabling grant, to enable them to support the resettlement schemes and the Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children National Transfer Scheme. This further funding has enabled the partnerships to coordinate a range of asylum and resettlement issues in their region.

The Home Office will review the role played by Strategic Migration Partnerships and their funding for the 2018/19 financial year and beyond.

Standards in dispersal accommodation

The poor standard of asylum accommodation was the most significant issue identified in the evidence we received, which focused largely on contracts administered by G4S and Serco. It is clear that in too many cases Providers are placing people in accommodation that is substandard, poorly maintained and, at times, unsafe. Some of this accommodation is a disgrace and it is shameful that some very vulnerable people have been placed in such conditions. Urgent action must be taken by the Home Office and Providers to deal with this issue. Even when significant concerns have been raised, a lack of alternative accommodation has led to vulnerable people remaining in housing that is unfit or unsuitable for many months until they are moved. Providers are also failing to ensure that items they are obliged to provide are present and in working order when a person is placed in a property. We acknowledge the financial constraints of the COMPASS contracts and the systemic problems in the dispersal system but, nonetheless, Providers have a clear obligation to provide safe, habitable accommodation and it is beyond doubt that this obligation is not being met in a significant minority of cases. We request that the Government now set out the details of the additional resources it has pledged to make available for staff property management purposes as part of the agreement to extend the COMPASS contracts. (Paragraph 68)

The Government does not agree with this conclusion, but welcomes the acknowledgement in the body of the report that accommodation standards have improved since the start of the COMPASS contract and the recognition that the majority of accommodation provided is of a good standard despite significant increases in the number of asylum seekers requiring such accommodation.

Accommodation Providers are required to provide safe, habitable, fit for purpose and correctly equipped accommodation that complies with the Decent Homes Standard in addition to standards outlined in relevant national or local housing legislation. The contract requires Providers to visit and inspect each property every month and UKVI

inspects a significant proportion of properties each year to ensure standards are being met. Over the last year UKVI has taken further steps to raise awareness amongst service users of how to report a problem and has worked with Providers and the voluntary sector to establish service user forums to provide a further opportunity for feedback. Where asylum accommodation is found to be falling short of the required standards UKVI has procedures in place to inspect, investigate and quickly resolve when specific information is received and a contract management regime to monitor supplier performance and take measures where appropriate.

Providers will no doubt point to a low number of fines under the Key Performance Indicator (KPI) system to suggest they are fulfilling their obligations. We also accept that asylum seekers and third sector organisations may not be fully aware of Providers' contractual obligations and deadlines for rectifying faults. However, the weight of evidence that we have received suggests that the compliance and inspection system is failing. We address the inspection regime later in this Report. (Paragraph 69)

The COMPASS contracts lack sufficient detail regarding response times for reactive maintenance. The 'Performance Regime' schedule, which sets out how performance should be measured against the Key Performance Indicators, has been redacted from the published contracts, which may partly explain the disconnect between people's expectations and what Providers are obliged to deliver. We recommend the schedule be placed in the public domain. (Paragraph 70)

The Statement of Requirements for the Contracts, which is in the public domain, sets out the standards that are expected of asylum accommodation, including examples of defects and clear timelines on the timescales within which any defects must be remedied. Home Office inspections have found that accommodation generally meets the required standards and where defects are identified they are resolved within the timescales set out in the contract. Where Providers have failed to meet these contractual service standards sanctions have been imposed.

We will continue to work with our Providers, local authorities and non-government organisations to ensure the stock of housing used for asylum accommodation is of the required standard and that asylum seekers are made aware of their rights and responsibilities.

We also recommend that any future frameworks and contracts governing the provision of asylum accommodation provide more extensive guidance on compliance standards and include examples of the most common complaints and deadlines for expected resolution. Such guidance should be made available to asylum seekers in a form they can understand, and to those who advocate on their behalf, so that they are clear about the standards they are entitled to expect; and it should also be made available to local authorities. (Paragraph 71)

The majority of people moving into asylum accommodation will not have English as their first language yet crucial documents are only made available in English, a language which the people who need to use them do not understand. It is unacceptable that such a situation should have been allowed to occur in the first place and we fail to understand why, after four years of the COMPASS contract, it has still not been addressed despite it being raised as a problem on multiple occasions. Welcome packs

and tenancy agreements should be made available in the most common languages spoken by asylum seekers as a matter of urgency. We welcome a commitment by Serco to make their occupancy agreements available in five languages, and other Providers should do the same. (Paragraph 73)

The Home Office will work with Providers and Strategic Migration Partnerships to ensure that relevant parties are aware of and understand the accommodation standards required by the contract and the timescales within which defects must be remedied. Accommodation induction information packs are provided in a range of languages and include occupancy agreements and repair and complaint mechanisms. We will expedite work already underway to ensure that there is a consistent standard of information being provided that meets the needs of those we accommodate.

The Home Office will consider the specification for accommodation standards in the contracts that will operate from 2019 as part of the work to design those contracts.

Complaints mechanism

People seeking asylum generally have a low awareness of their rights and entitlements and need support with this. The roles and responsibilities of landlords, and Providers' housing officers and contact centre staff, should be clearly explained to asylum seekers when they first arrive in their property. This should also be set out in the welcome pack, together with the housing specification and other entitlements defined in the COMPASS contract, the complaints procedure and what asylum seekers can legitimately expect of the Provider, including turnaround times for addressing common problems. This may help reduce frustrations on both sides. (Paragraph 76)

The Home Office has reviewed its accommodation induction packs and other communications to asylum seekers to ensure that they are clear about how complaints can be raised. Improvements have been made to the way in which asylum seekers can provide feedback to UKVI about their accommodation so that we can better target compliance activity.

There needs to be more transparency around the complaints regime. We do not believe that the low level of complaints reported by Clearsprings and Serco are a true reflection of the number made by their service users; this is more likely to reflect a lack of consistency around how complaints are defined and recorded. The Home Office should ensure that there is a consistent definition of a complaint that has to be recorded. Housing officers should log all complaints and requests for maintenance. Calls to contact centres are already logged but should also be recorded. (Paragraph 81)

For a complaints system to work people must feel able to complain without threat of negative repercussions. Providers should make it explicit in the welcome pack, and in oral introductions when someone is first placed in accommodation, that raising concerns about accommodation will not affect their application for asylum. This should also be set out in the guidance on compliance standards to which we have referred. If the complaint is about a member of staff then the asylum seeker should be advised to raise it directly with the local authority, if responsibility is transferred to

local authorities as we recommend later in this report. Concern was also expressed to us that Provider contact numbers were often engaged or calls went unanswered. We recommend that the Home Office investigate this issue. (Paragraph 82)

The Home Office and our Accommodation Providers take complaints extremely seriously and have robust procedures in place to inspect, investigate and resolve when specific information is received. In accordance with the contract, Accommodation Providers provide a confidential complaints service for all service users of asylum accommodation.

Over the last year the Home Office has taken steps to increase the mechanisms available to Service Users to raise a complaint or provide feedback on their accommodation and support. The Home Office has established a national accommodation advisory board to bring together a range of non-governmental organisations to bring any issues to the attention of the Home Office and work together to resolve them. The Home Office and its Providers have also established a number of localised service user groups to facilitate local feedback.

These improvements are in addition to the established routes for service users to make a complaint, which includes through the helpline operated by Migrant Help, directly to the provider through either the call centre or face to face at the monthly property inspection visit, and to the Home Office through the UKVI contact centre. UKVI has made changes to its own inspection regime in 2016, which resulted in increased volumes of inspections and more checks of client welfare being undertaken by UKVI staff.

Inspection

Although standards have improved since 2012, the poor condition of a significant minority of properties leads us to conclude that the current compliance regime is not fit for purpose. Those it is meant to help safeguard have little confidence in it and we do not find that it acts as an adequate deterrent to poor compliance. Home Office inspections are infrequent and the low number of penalties appear at odds with the persistent criticisms of the standard of asylum accommodation. (Paragraph 87)

We recommend that the inspection duties currently carried out by the Home Office are transferred to local authorities, along with the necessary resources to carry out this function effectively. Local authorities have a crucial role in the asylum system but their ability to influence standards seems to have been eroded since COMPASS contracts were introduced. Giving local authorities responsibility for inspection, monitoring compliance and imposing sanctions will increase their influence in the system to the benefit of those supported by it. They already have experience in property inspection and are likely to have a better knowledge of asylum properties in their areas than the Home Office, having already been consulted on their use. (Paragraph 88)

The Home Office welcomes the Committee's conclusion that asylum accommodation standards have improved since 2012.

Asylum accommodation is subject to a rigorous inspection regime; Providers are required to inspect each property when a service user moves in and out of a property, then again every month. The Home Office also inspects a significant proportion of accommodation each year and prioritises its inspections on an intelligence led basis to target accommodation

where there have been issues. Following the recommendation of the National Audit Office in January 2014³ the Home Office conducts some of its inspection jointly with the accommodation provider to ensure better access to the properties, agree what the defects are and allowing rectification work to start immediately. In the last financial year the Home Office inspected over 4,000 properties, which represented almost half of all the properties that were used to house asylum seekers.

The Key Performance Indicator (KPI) and contract management regime allows the Home Office to impose sanctions and withhold payment where Providers fail to meet the required standards. The Home Office has and does use the service credit regime. The KPI and future contract management regime will be considered as part of the project to develop new arrangements.

The Home Office works with local authorities and welcomes their involvement in ensuring that the properties are of the required standard where the local authority feels this is necessary. The Home Office has undertaken inspections jointly with local authorities and would be happy to continue that practice in future.

The Home Office does not agree that property inspection should be handed over to local authorities as it would reduce the accountability of the Home Office and the ability to hold Providers to account. Discussions with local authorities have not indicated that this is a responsibility that they would like to assume.

Where an asylum seeker has a complaint against a member of Providers' staff, this should be raised directly with the local authority inspectorate and guidance to this effect should be included in welcome packs. Local authorities should be given the necessary powers to investigate such complaints, given that they are independent of the asylum application process and the system for allocating an individual's accommodation, and vulnerable people are therefore likely to be more comfortable raising concerns with them. (Paragraph 89)

Any allegation of misconduct by a staff member can be reported directly to UKVI or to the Provider so that a full investigation can take place and appropriate action can be taken. As the Authority for the contract it is appropriate that the Home Office investigates complaints; anyone who has a concern should contact the Home Office to ensure it is investigated and resolved.

We recommend that property standards be aligned with local authority housing standards and that Providers' Key Performance Indicators are appropriately adjusted. Local authorities should have the power to conduct routine, proactive and unannounced visits and to report publicly on their findings to address the current lack of transparency. Placing the Performance Management regime for the contracts in the public domain would also boost transparency and accountability, and this should include specific information about the failures which generate a penalty and the scale of penalties. In relation to asylum accommodation in the devolved nations, the devolved governments should have a significant role in deciding the appropriate arrangements, including, for example, a possible role for the national housing regulator. Periodic

3 <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/10287-001-accommodation-for-asylum-seekers-Book.pdf>

inspections by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration across the UK could also complement and build upon this inspection regime by providing a country-wide overview of the system. (Paragraph 90)

Under the terms of the existing contract, providers of asylum accommodation are required to comply with the national legislative standards established in the Housing Act 2004, Decent Homes Standards and any relevant local legislation. As such, asylum accommodation property standards are already aligned with, and in some cases exceed, those used in others parts of the public sector. These contractual standards are published in the contract's Statement of Requirements.

Local authorities may inspect any property in their area and the Home Office and its suppliers will continue to work with local authorities to facilitate such inspections.

The COMPASS penalty system contains inconsistencies. Disproportionate sums are imposed for routine failures while Providers avoid meaningful sanctions for more severe breaches. Any future system reliant on the private sector must better balance penalties for breach of contract with the severity of the complaint. (Paragraph 91)

The Home Office will consider the performance regimes of the contracts that will operate from 2019 as part of the work to design the contracts.

Wellbeing of asylum seekers

When allocating accommodation Providers should do much more to address the needs of particularly vulnerable asylum seekers, such as expectant mothers, those living with mental health needs and victims of trafficking, rape and torture. At the very least people in these circumstances should not have to share a room or be placed in large-scale Houses of Multiple Occupancy. Indeed, we recommend that forced bedroom sharing be phased out across the asylum estate as a whole and that the use of large scale HMOs be reduced. (Paragraph 97)

The Home Office ensures suitable accommodation is allocated according to the specific needs of all asylum seekers and their dependants. All Providers are contractually required to take account of any particular circumstances and vulnerability of those that they accommodate, including those who have health care issues or are pregnant.

Room sharing allows the Providers to use their portfolio to meet the demands of asylum intake and ensure that destitute asylum seekers are housed safely and securely. There are strict criteria set out in the Statement of Requirements around when room sharing can take place and who can share a room. Providers also comply with advice from social services and primary and secondary care bodies on whether room sharing is inappropriate. Houses of multiple occupancy (HMO) are widely used across a number of sectors and in many circumstances are an appropriate way in which to accommodate people.

Providers are required to consider the specific needs of individual service users when proposing accommodation for them. The Home Office will consider all requests from asylum seekers and their children who may have particular vulnerabilities, care needs or health problems that necessitate a need for specialist accommodation requirements.

The Public Sector Equality Duty should act as an essential means of ensuring that the Home Office and Providers understand how the COMPASS contracts affect different groups and that there is no discrimination in delivery of the contracts. Many of the issues identified in this report could have been avoided had the needs of different groups of asylum seekers been more clearly identified. We recommend that the Government publish the outcome of its consideration of the equality impacts of the COMPASS contracts which the Minister for Immigration has indicated the Home Office was undertaking. (Paragraph 99)

The Home Office will comply with the duties under the Equality Act and assess equality impacts of its policies.

Moving people around the asylum system without their consent can disrupt vital support networks and can cause emotional distress to the individual. The system of allocating properties strikes us as chaotic. Too often people are moved because they have been housed in unsuitable or unfit accommodation in the first instance or because it suits the Provider to do so. Movement without consent should be limited, and for those individuals engaged with local services, such as schools or specific welfare support, it should be used only in exceptional circumstances. Where movement is unavoidable the Provider should first ensure that the destination location fully meets the needs of the individual, including by liaising with the local Strategic Migration Partnership, local authority and, where relevant, third sector organisations. (Paragraph 102)

The Government has a longstanding policy of providing accommodation to asylum seekers on a no choice basis, with guidance on where there are exceptions to this overarching policy.

Once a service user has been accommodated in dispersed accommodation there are controls around how often they can be relocated by a Provider. All relocation requests from Providers need to be approved by UKVI. Consideration will be given to the reason for the relocation request and the needs of the service user. An individual should not be moved on more than two occasions within a twelve month period.

Under the current system the condition of asylum accommodation is covered by inspections but not the wellbeing of those inside it. This needs to change so that the voices of those in the accommodation are heard. The monitoring and inspection process should be reformed to capture the experience of vulnerable people, such as victims of torture and trafficking, and issues relating to gender, including women who are pregnant and new mothers. An obligation should be placed on Providers to have regard for the wellbeing of those they house and, under certain circumstances, Providers should face sanction if they fail in this duty. For example, Providers should ensure that pregnant women are relocated to accommodation suitable and appropriate for their needs by 28 weeks of pregnancy and should face penalties where this target is not met. There should also be stricter limits on how often people are moved against their will. The wellbeing of the individual, particularly those who are most vulnerable, has to be at the heart of a reformed asylum system. (Paragraph 103)

The Home Office is committed to treating all those who seek asylum with dignity and respect, and we take the needs of the most vulnerable extremely seriously. Providers of asylum accommodation are contractually obliged to ensure that they understand any

particular characteristics and special needs of those in their care, and provide adequate and appropriate signposting to health services and support systems. Pregnant women are not required to move accommodation for a period of 6 weeks prior to and after their due date, or until they are discharged from the care of their clinician. The contract is clear that asylum seekers need to be managed with sensitivity, treated in a polite and courteous manner and their safety and security must not be jeopardised.

The Home Office and its Providers take the welfare of service users and the staff who work with them extremely seriously. We remain in regular discussion with the Providers, stakeholders and service users about ways to improve the services provided. Over the last year the Home Office has taken a number of actions to ensure that the wellbeing of service users are considered in addition to the standards of their accommodation. UKVI inspection staff now speak with Service Users who are present in a property and complete a short feedback form, capturing information about how their dispersal induction was conducted, their knowledge of and ability to access local services and any issues relating to anti-social behaviour, intimidation or hate crime (including providing help to report any such issues). We will continue to work with statutory partners to identify, manage and prevent welfare and cohesion concerns in accommodation and with the local community.

As part of the development of the arrangements for asylum accommodation and support after the current contracts end, UKVI has sought the views of local authorities and NGOs on a range of issues, including the support needs of vulnerable service users. This work is continuing to ensure that the support needs of vulnerable service users can be adequately translated into a clear statement of requirements, with associated performance standards.

In response to this report we request that the Government set out how much extra financial support it will make available to pay for more welfare support officers, as part of the agreement to extend the COMPASS contracts, and how many more welfare officers it expects will be employed as a result. (Paragraph 105)

As the then Immigration Minister announced to Parliament in December last year, the Home Office has made additional funds available to Providers to invest in the provision of welfare officers and staff property management. This is in direct response to feedback that more attention is needed to ensure that asylum seekers receive the welfare support they need and are able to raise any concerns they have with the accommodation providers. In addition to contributions that Providers intend to make, the Home Office has made a total of over £1m available to Providers for the employment of additional resources engaged directly on these customer focussed activities. Each of these proposals will be considered and evaluated on an individual case-by-case basis.

We acknowledge that many staff working in the asylum system act professionally and respectfully but we are concerned by reports of staff who do not come up to this standard. Bullying behaviour is completely unacceptable, particularly against vulnerable people. We recommend that Providers work with local third sector organisations to improve staff training and increase staff understanding of the experiences and anxieties of people seeking asylum. Staff seeking entry into asylum accommodation should provide appropriate notice; they should not enter a property which is unoccupied without permission from the resident; and they should wear identification. All employees who

make harassing or discriminatory remarks should be held accountable by Providers. Staff likely to have regular direct contact with asylum seekers should be subject to the highest standards of disclosure checks. (Paragraph 109)

The Government agrees with the Committee's conclusion that the vast majority of staff working with asylum seekers act professionally and respectfully.

Providers are required to undertake the appropriate pre-employment checks and risk assessments in accordance with their legal and contractual obligations and to ensure that all staff that have contact with service users have undertaken an appropriate level of criminal records check. The Provider's training programme for staff who have regular contact with asylum seekers includes as a minimum race relations; cultural awareness; suicide and self-harm awareness and prevention. In addition Providers must ensure that all staff who have contact with asylum seekers on behalf of UKVI do so having regard to the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in the UK in accordance with section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009. The Home Office monitors closely all new starters and recruitment to ensure that Providers undertake appropriate risk assessments in relation to their employees.

Staff inspecting asylum accommodation provide advance notice when they intend to visit a property wherever possible, though if responding to urgent intelligence or a complaint, this will not always be possible. Staff are always expected to knock before entering the property, and should always identify themselves to the service user. In order to ensure that properties comply with the required standards it will continue to be necessary for inspection staff to access the property if the service user is not home.

Any allegation of misconduct by a staff member should be reported to UKVI and the Provider so that a full investigation can take place and appropriate action can be taken.

We are concerned by reports that one of the Providers will be equipping its staff with body-worn cameras, apparently without any proper consultation having taken place or any policy being published. Such an action raises issues of consent, safeguarding and privacy that need to be considered, as well as questions about whether it is appropriate for a system which supports vulnerable individuals. The Home Office should publish its policy on the use of body-worn cameras by Providers' employees as a matter of urgency. (Paragraph 110)

The use of body cameras by Providers is not a requirement of the Home Office. The introduction of body worn cameras followed positive experience of the use of this technology in other sectors and was in response to incidents of unacceptable behaviour towards G4S staff and allegations of inappropriate behaviour against staff. The change was undertaken in accordance with the terms of the contract and all service users affected were informed in writing prior to the implementation. G4S has worked closely with the Information Commissioners Office and the Office of the Surveillance Commissioner to ensure that its policies and practices are in line with regulation and industry practice and are proportionate and appropriate.

Over recent months G4S has issued more detailed communications to service users, translated into ten different languages and have engaged with the Regional Strategic Migration Partnership and other stakeholders.

After the asylum claim

The Government is currently reviewing the 28-day grace period for people granted refugee status and the Department of Work and Pensions' ability to manage applications for support from people transferring out of the asylum system. The evidence we have received demonstrates to us that a 28-day period is not sufficient to enable a smooth transition from asylum seeker to refugee status, and we recommend that the period be extended. (Paragraph 113)

The Home Office is aware that some refugees have not accessed benefits before the 28 day transition period elapses and has worked with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to establish a new process to address this. For supported asylum seekers who are granted refugee status, UKVI will contact the service user and offer them an appointment with the DWP's 'Vulnerable Persons' service. The process was been piloted in the North East and Humberside and Yorkshire regions and is now being rolled out across the UK. Those contacted who have accepted the offer of assistance and attended the appointment arranged for them have been able to receive the first payment of any benefit they are entitled to before the 28 day period elapses. The service has also been able to assist with various practical matters, including setting up a temporary Post Office account for the benefits payment to be paid into if the person does not yet have a bank account.

The introduction of the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme means that the UK now has a system which differentiates between refugees in terms of the services they receive based on the country of origin and the process through which they arrived in the country. We believe that this is inappropriate and that the same support should be available for refugees who transfer from the asylum system as those who arrive under a resettlement programme. Schemes like the Syrian programme and bespoke council-run services are extremely successful, including in contributing to integration, which is critical for social cohesion, successful re-settlement and entering the employment market. The challenge for the Government is now to bring the level of support available to all refugees up to the standard set by the Syrian scheme, with the prospective benefits of a reduction in overall costs through reduced reliance on welfare and other support services. The Government should introduce a service along the lines of the discontinued Refugee Integration and Employment Service, or other models currently in operation in some parts of the UK, as part of this improvement. (Paragraph 116)

The intention of our resettlement schemes is to offer safe and legal routes to protection for those most in need, and to discourage people from putting their lives at risk by making dangerous journeys to Europe. The level of support provided to individuals arriving via our resettlement schemes reflects the fact that they have been referred for resettlement to the UK by the UNHCR on account of their particular vulnerability. The Home office does not accept that the support given to successful asylum seekers should be the same as the refugees brought to the UK under the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme. Those granted asylum are given access to the labour market, access to mainstream benefits and can access a Home Office provided Integration Loan.

The Home Office is considering the conclusions of the Casey Review on Opportunity and Integration in relation to the integration of recognised refugees and the Government will respond to that review in due course.

The future of COMPASS contracts

We recommend that the National Audit Office undertake a further review of COMPASS, following up their previous report, to determine whether it will achieve the savings the Government expects and whether there has been a wider displacement of responsibilities and costs. (Paragraph 118)

The asylum accommodation and support contracts have been reviewed a number of times since they were implemented in 2012, including by the National Audit Office in 2013. The work programme of the National Audit Office is a matter for them, the Home Office will cooperate with any audit they wish to undertake in this area.

Given the significant problems we have identified, we believe that the COMPASS contracts should have been reviewed sooner, so that they could have been replaced with a better approach when the term of the contracts ended this year. It is disappointing that the Home Office did not do this and as a result has had to extend the existing COMPASS contracts while wider changes to the system are now considered. We recognise, however, that the fundamental changes required to these complex contracts need time to be properly developed and negotiated. In this Report we have made recommendations that look to the long-term future of the asylum system and should be considered as part of the process of putting together a successor to COMPASS. However, many of our recommendations, which would bring real improvements to the service asylum seekers receive, do not require further renegotiation, and should be implemented within six months. (Paragraph 119)

Significant improvements have been made to the services delivered through the asylum accommodation and support contracts. As this report acknowledges the standard of accommodation provided to asylum seekers has improved since 2012. Since the Committee commenced and conducted much of its work on this enquiry in the first half of 2016 the Home Office has made a number of improvements to its inspection regime, including through making the service user experience more central in the inspection process. The Home Office has also increased its engagement with the NGO and voluntary sectors to provide more opportunities for those who work with asylum seekers to feedback on how the system is working. Furthermore, in December 2016 the then Immigration Minister announced a number of improvements to the contracts which address many of the concerns raised in this report. Over the course of this year the use of contingency accommodation has dramatically ceased and the number of areas participating in the dispersal scheme has increased. The Home Office is committed to continuing to make improvements to the asylum support system.

A project has been established to design, develop and deliver new arrangements for asylum accommodation and support following the end of the current contracts in 2019. Work to design and develop a new model for asylum accommodation and support has been underway since the autumn of 2016. The Home Office is working with a wide variety of stakeholders, from a range of sectors, including local authorities, Strategic Migration Partnerships and NGOs to develop options for the future system. The aim of this work is to deliver a sustainable, efficient and high quality end-to-end asylum accommodation and support system which works for all parties, and which effectively safeguards the vulnerable.