Dear Ms Tapsfield and Ms Filipova-Rivers,

Thank you for your email of 14 September to the Home Secretary outlining your concerns about refugee and asylum accommodation. Your email has been passed to the Direct Communications Unit at the Home Office and I am replying on behalf of the Minister of State for Immigration.

We appreciate the ongoing support provided by City of Sanctuary to asylum seekers, Afghan evacuees and displaced Ukrainians in need. Regarding your concerns about asylum accommodation, the exact date an individual’s support and accommodation is due to end is issued in a ‘notice to quit’ (NTQ) or ‘notice to vacate’ letter. This will either be at least seven days from when the notice is issued, or the date on which the grace period comes to an end, whichever is the greatest. This means that where an individual’s grace period has passed and they are issued an NTQ, they will remain eligible to support and accommodation for at least another seven days. An NTQ will only be issued once a person has been issued a biometric residence permit (BRP).

Individuals should make plans to move on from asylum support as soon as they are served their asylum decision, regardless of when their BRP or NTQ is issued. We offer support to all individuals through Migrant Help or their partner organisation in doing this. This includes providing advice on accessing the labour market, applying for Universal Credit and signposting to local authorities for assistance with housing. Newly recognised refugees are entitled to housing assistance from their local authority and are treated as a priority need if they have children or are considered vulnerable. Individuals do not need to wait for their BRP to make a claim for benefits and are encouraged to do so as early as possible, if they require them.

We are ensuring our cross-government partners, such as the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) are sighted on data to enable them to consider the impacts of increased decision making and effectively plan. We are also working with DLUHC to ensure the right asylum decision data is being shared with local authorities to enable effective planning and to lessen the impact on existing homelessness and rough sleeping pressures. Our accommodation providers are directly working with local authorities to notify them when an individual’s asylum support is due to end.
We understand that these pressures, alongside the challenges of domestic homelessness, have further stretched local council services. In recognition of these pressures, the Government announced an increase in funding for local authorities who help to support asylum seekers and encourage councils to bring properties online more quickly.

Grant 4 was launched in April 2023 with the same principles as Grant 2. This is to incentivise local authorities to increase volume of dispersal beds. The £3,500 payment was made for the net growth in each quarter for each new occupied bed space. Within the Home Office this includes supported asylum seeker accommodation within the geographical bounds of the local authority under the following categories: dispersal accommodation (DA), overflow dispersal accommodation (ODA) and initial accommodation (IA).

In addition, as part of a four-month pilot, councils will receive a further incentive payment of £2,000 or £3,000 where a dispersal bed is brought online within an expedited timeframe following identification. This almost doubles existing funding for those local authorities which take on new accommodation and do so quickly. The pilot ended on 30 September and bedspaces will need to be occupied by 30 November.

The Government currently provides £3,500 to local authorities for each new dispersal bed that comes online. The £3,500 payment is paid for all new and occupied bedspaces across DA, ODA, and IA only but not contingency accommodation as we look to end our reliance on expensive hotels and provide good value for money for the taxpayer.

The reform in licensing requirements for House in Multiple Occupation (HMO) properties housing asylum seekers is important to the Government as part of the wider asylum dispersal plans. There are over 56,000 asylum seekers living in contingency accommodation (mainly hotels); the temporary reform will form part of a suite of measures being taken to accelerate moving asylum seekers out of costly hotels into more suitable and cost-effective accommodation. The introduction of the licensing exemption will remove the higher regulatory standards set by local authorities over and above other privately rented accommodation. This will mean that national housing standards will apply uniformly to all new HMO properties acquired for asylum seekers, for a period of two years.

Whilst the barriers posed by local authorities will be temporarily removed, housing quality standards including fire and safety will be maintained as the Home Office requires its accommodation providers to comply with all statutory and regulatory requirements when sourcing and providing accommodation. We have worked with the National Fire Chiefs Council to ensure that our fire safety checks and standards are of an acceptable level.

In relation to those residing within any initial accommodation site (therefore in receipt of S98 Asylum Support), our providers are contractually obligated to share information in a GDPR compliant way to local authority partners who have a statutory obligation to deliver supporting services. As you will be aware, this is done through the information sharing portal via access for statutory leads.

In relation to those residing within dispersal accommodation (therefore in receipt of S95 or S4 Asylum Support) our provider will notify one local nominated health partner and one nominated local authority partner through the arrivals portal of individuals who have arrived in their area in the scenarios laid out below. This is of course searched in a GDPR compliant way.
The Home Office takes the safety and wellbeing of those we accommodate extremely seriously. Our accommodation providers comply with the stringent standards required by their contracts, as well as statutory and local authority legislation. The Home Office has published the Asylum Support Contracts Safeguarding framework, which can be viewed at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/asylum-support-contracts-safeguarding-framework.

This framework sets out safeguarding standards across the asylum support contracts, reflective of the robust processes that the Home Office and accommodation providers have in place to support those in our accommodation.

Room sharing is not optional as we need to ensure destitute asylum seekers are provided with cost-effective accommodation. We encourage asylum seekers to comply with any changes made to their accommodation. We have taken the following into consideration as part of the room sharing process: privacy and dignity, gender and family considerations, safety and security, health and hygiene, emotional wellbeing, cultural and religious considerations, communication and support and legal obligations.

Families are not expected to share with other single males or females. Asylum seekers accommodated are encouraged to speak with their Housing Officer or healthcare professional in the first instance. All personal circumstances will be considered before deciding if room sharing is suitable. Our accommodation providers will look at increasing the security, wraparound provision and support at these sites to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all asylum seekers is maintained.

Large sites will provide basic safe and secure non detained accommodation for asylum seekers who will be free to come and go. They are designed to be as self-sufficient as possible, helping to minimise the impact on local communities and services. Each person’s suitability will be assessed at regular intervals and if they are no longer suitable for any reason, they will be moved to alternative accommodation. The safety and security of the local community and those asylum seekers on the site are of the utmost importance. Security forms an integral part of the proposed site; therefore a specialist security provider is working on site 24/7.

Yours sincerely,

N Jessup
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