

John Griffiths AM
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff

18th January, 2017

Dear John

Thank you for your letter dated 12th January 2017. As requested please see my written response below. I have given answers to your specific questions, an outline of the services we are contracted by the Home Office to provide* and our response to the statements provided to the committee in regards to property condition.

'What specific responsibilities you have under your contract with the Home Office to asylum seekers in Wales, including whether you are responsible for ensuring that initial health screening takes place and that English lessons are available (as these have been highlighted to the Committee as problem areas).'

Clearsprings Ready Homes Ltd (CRH) have a contract with the Home Office to provide accommodation and transportation services for people seeking asylum in the UK whilst they await the decision on their Asylum claim. CRH currently provide these services to circa 9,000 people across the South of England and Wales (3,223 currently accommodated in Wales) and have been providing similar services to the Home Office since 2000. The contractual responsibilities* support Home Office statutory duties and provisions under legislation (in particular, Section 98, 95 and 4 of the 1999 Immigration Act) are detailed in the contract as follows:

The Accommodation Service is divided into 2 key areas – Initial Accommodation (IA) and Dispersal Accommodation (DA). The IA provision is short term full board 'Hostel' style accommodation currently delivered at the Newport Road IA in Cardiff. Under the Compass contract we are required to signpost each person/family unit to the Cardiff Health Access Practice (CHAP) based in Cardiff who will arrange for an initial health screening to be undertaken. The charity Migrant Help are also based at the Newport Road IA where they have the contract with the Home Office to provide the independent advice and outreach services to support clients' applications for asylum support assessment, as well signposting to other statutory services. Whilst there is no contractual requirement to ensure the health screening takes place, we work closely with CHAP to ensure that the health screening is offered to all Asylum Seekers entering the IA.

*Compass Contract and Statement of Requirements <https://data.gov.uk/data/cor/archive/contract/487962/>

CRH are also contractually required to ensure that we have an interpretation service available (phone based) for any client whose English proficiency is such that they cannot converse with our housing officers. There is however no contractual requirement for CRH to provide English lessons. The Home Office and DCLG can better explain the provision for ESOL across the UK. The Migrant Help service operates a national independent advice service inclusive of interpretation services. CRH is working together with Cardiff City Council to ensure parents with school age children are signposted to educational services whilst at the IA.

The second part of the CRH accommodation contracted service is asylum Dispersal Accommodation (DA), which is provided as small HMOs or family homes sourced from the private sector in identified dispersal areas (currently Cardiff, Newport, Swansea and Wrexham). It is a contractual requirement for CRH to ensure that it consults and engages with statutory bodies in each dispersal area including Housing, Health, Education and Police on an individual property by property basis. Before any property can be procured or used to house asylum seekers we must first gain the permission of the Local Authority and Local Police. In support of this process the Home Office provides an enabling grant to the Wales Strategic Migration Partnership (via Newport Council) so that across Wales and on an individual local authority basis consultation planning and management of the asylum population can be delivered through a partnership of statutory agencies. CRH and the Home Office are active in these structures.

Once a property has been approved and procured CRH furnish the property to the contractually prescribed standard* and ensure it is ready for occupation. CRH then collect the individuals from the IA and transport them and their luggage to the property. At this point CRH in line with contractual requirements* undertake an induction briefing and an introduction to the local area. Each person/family unit is provided with a welcome pack identifying local services and contact details as well as the process for raising complaints and how to contact CRH.

Each property is allocated a dedicated Local Manager (LM) who conducts the initial induction as well as providing local signposting information. This includes; how to register for a doctor and dentist and how to access education for children. This process is supported by UKVI asylum casework who issue the medical certification needed to allow an individual to join a local GP practice. As well as a dedicated LM, CRH also have a 24/7 Customer Support team who can deal with any issues, reported property defects or concerns raised by the occupants. The contact details for the LM and helpline are detailed in the welcome pack in a number of languages on each property notice board and in the occupancy agreement that each new occupant is required to sign (a copy of which is left with the occupant).

The LM will, in line with contractual requirements, visit the properties on a monthly basis to deal with any client issues, provide any further signposting required and to conduct a property inspection. The LM will also arrange for any maintenance required and ensure the property remains fit for purpose. Any defects identified or reported to the LM are logged onto our systems and are rectified within the contractual timescales dependent on the type and nature of the defect. The LM is also required to undertake investigations into any incidents that occur at the property, to ensure client safeguarding, manage any anti-social behavior and to undertake the formal disciplinary process if the rules detailed in the occupancy agreement are not being followed. In these circumstances referrals are made to the relevant statutory body directly or with support of the UKVI case work team, Health, Police, Social Services and UKVI asylum support compliance teams.

If a person seeking asylum is granted refugee status they are required to vacate the property 28 days later. Under the contract* CRH must notify the relevant local authority of this so that 'move

*Compass Contract and Statement of Requirements <https://data.gov.uk/data/cor-archive/contract/487962/>

on' arrangements can be made and the local authority is made aware that they may need to assist the person with any housing needs. The LM at this point will provide a 'move on' briefing detailing the next steps. This process is in support of UKVI asylum support casework action to refer newly recognised refugees to the Department of Work and Pensions if they wish to claim mainstream benefits. Once a move on has been completed the LM undertakes a 'move on' inspection identifying any defects/decorative issues and any missing inventory items. Once the works have been completed and the inventory is re-stocked the property is re-occupied.

I hope this provides an overview of the contractual responsibilities. The Compass contract statement of requirement is available at <https://data.gov.uk/data/contracts-finder-archive/contract/487962/> and details the responsibilities under the Compass contract.

What performance measures you use, or are required to use, to ensure that the accommodation you offer is of a satisfactory quality; the methodology and frequency of monitoring performance and reporting to the Home Office; and the processes in place to receive and investigate complaints'

Each property is approved prior to use through a consultation with the Local Authority and Police, before it is procured. Our contract requires that we meet housing legislation, including HMO and additional licensing requirements, where appropriate. The contract details the standards required for each property both at the point of dispersal and ongoing. This standard matches the 'decent home standards' or the Local Authority requirements whichever is the higher. Once the property is 'live' it is then subject to monthly inspections by the LM. Where defects are identified and logged, contractual rectification timescales apply*. CRH must provide the UKVI contract compliance team access to the findings of all visits and inspection activity on a monthly basis. This information is used in support of the contract performance management process. The UKVI contract compliance team conducts its own regular inspections of CRH properties. CRH are required to report or mitigate any failures and rectify defects within contractually prescribed timescales*. The Home Office can impose significant financial penalties for any supplier breaches.

The contract specifies the requirement for CRH to operate a complaints process*. This is in addition to the UKVI client customer contact centre and complaints procedures that also capture feedback and issues to ensure standards are routinely met. The CRH complaints procedure is detailed in the occupancy agreement and welcome pack which provides occupants with the ability to raise complaints in writing, verbally, by email or by telephone. In addition to this the voluntary sector have copies of our policy and complaints form. Once a complaint is received we confirm within 24hrs that we have received it and we attempt to resolve the complaint within 5 working days. The complaint outcome and any failure to meet the contractual timescales are reported to the Home Office as part of the monthly contract management process.

'Your response to the specific problems highlighted to the Committee in written and oral evidence.'

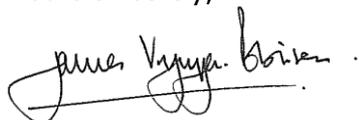
Having reviewed the statements and transcripts provided by your letter, there is very little detailed or specific evidence for me to comment on. The majority of the statements are anecdotal and a number of the comments from the Welsh Refugee Coalition members appear to use very similar wording, especially in regards to bringing the responsibility for Asylum Housing back into Wales. In the last six months we have identified and rectified 5,233 defects that have been reported by the occupants, their representatives or as a result of a LM or third party inspection. These defects have been rectified within the contractual timescales.

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In terms of the comments regarding a lack of third party scrutiny, this is simply not the case. CRH is subject to regular Home Office inspections and scrutiny around standards. The Local Authority have full control over the properties that are used to house Asylum Seekers in regards to licensing regulations and the voluntary sector have direct access to CRH through the Strategic Migration Partnership for Wales which meets regularly to discuss and resolve issues in regards to Asylum Seekers and Refugees. In addition to this we attend monthly local Health and Wellbeing meetings in each dispersal area where the voluntary sector, health and other local stakeholders have the opportunity to raise any issues and provide feedback on our services. At no point have any of the organisations that have provided statements to your committee approached us with the level of concerns raised in their submissions. These organisations are fully aware of how to contact us, and have done so in the past in relation to a small number of individual cases. In addition to this, both Displaced People in Action (DPIA) in Swansea and the OASIS project in Cardiff undertake regular resident forums for both IA and DA and neither organisation have raised the serious issues as alluded to in the statements provided to your enquiry. As we have not received any direct contact from these organisations it is our intention to write to each one of them requesting a meeting and the details of any outstanding issues. We will then investigate each issue and deal with them accordingly.

Clearsprings has a proud history of providing accommodation and transport services to people seeking asylum in Wales over the last 16 years and we are committed to ensuring that any identified issues are investigated and resolved. I hope my letter provides you with enough feedback to successfully conclude your inquiry, but if you require any further information please don't hesitate to ask.

Yours sincerely,



James Vyvyan-Robinson MBE
Group Managing Director

*Compass Contract and Statement of Requirements <https://data.gov.uk/data/cor/archive/contract/487962/>