

Briefing – Asylum Hotel in Westhill, Aberdeenshire

There are currently approximately 150,000 asylum applicants in the UK. 100,000 are in supported accommodation with approximately 45% of people accommodated in asylum housing and 55% in asylum contingency hotels. Historically, the majority of asylum accommodation has been in England and Glasgow, but the Home Office has now extended across the whole of the UK including all councils in Scotland. CoSLA (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities) and Local Authorities have been informed that additional capacity is required as a result of sustained and unprecedented pressure on the asylum system caused by a large number of people arriving into the UK via the English Channel.

In November 2022, CoSLA Leaders agreed that any widening of asylum dispersal would need to take place across all 32 Scottish Local Authorities on a proportional and equitable basis. This would include the procurement of asylum housing and contingency hotels. On 3 April 2023, the Home Office published a further update and factsheet on Asylum Accommodation Sites [Home Office accommodation sites factsheet - April 2023](#)

The Home Office has Ministerial approval to procure a hotel in Aberdeenshire. More hotels may follow in the future. The Hampton by Hilton Westhill will be used to accommodate approximate 173 single men between the ages of 18 and 40. The hotel will be active from end of April and arrivals will be on a phased basis over a two month period, to allow adequate time for planning and assessment.

The decision to open a hotel in Westhill to accommodate asylum seekers was taken by the Home Office, not Aberdeenshire Council. Immigration is a reserved power, and the management of asylum seekers is directed by the UK Government and delivered by the Home Office and Mears. Aberdeenshire Council has no decision-making powers around the use of hotels or the identification of hotels, therefore the authority to change any asylum accommodation decision sits solely with the Home Office.

Home Office policy is to not directly inform or engage with communities around the sighting of hotels, but Aberdeenshire Council ensured that the Home Office agreed that the Westhill community be informed appropriately and discuss any planning and response. Council officers contacted Westhill councillors and representatives of local churches, the community council and community groups to share details and to answer questions about community concerns and matters. This had to be on a confidential basis initially. The community representatives group continues to meet regularly sharing community concerns, ideas and opportunities. Aberdeenshire Council and its community planning partners, including Police Scotland and NHS Grampian also meet weekly, and will all continue to work with the Westhill community to support residents and those being accommodated, while the hotel is in operation. Other key services and organisations in Westhill have also been contacted to ensure they are informed and aware. Work is ongoing with the local library to develop access to library services and online resources from within the hotel, and North East Scotland College (NESCOL) is exploring access to English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses. Key business contacts, schools and services have also been contacted to ensure they are well informed and know who to contact if an issue arises.

Mears

Asylum housing and support is private sector led and delivered via a government contract. Houses and hotels are procured and supported by [Mears](#) on behalf of the Home Office. Mears secure hotel contracts on a commercial basis with market forces and availability being key.

Mears is required to ensure that asylum accommodation is safe, habitable and fit for purpose and meets all contractual and regulatory standards. Mears are required to work with Local Authorities to ensure that they understand the local area, service provision and challenges. Mears mainly procure private rental accommodation but are also tasked with managing hotels.

Mears will have two welfare officers who are based at Hampton by Hilton Westhill and will work initially on rotation. When fully occupied, both welfare officers will be working there. There will be a Mears employee on site at all times. Mears advise that security guards will provide cover 24/7.

Mears are responsible for their clients' welfare and support needs including GP registration, daily welfare checks, supporting clients with appointments. The national charity [Migrant Help](#) is procured by the Home Office to provide advice, facilitate issue reporting and eligibility services to people seeking asylum.

Mears and NHS colleagues are working with the local medical practice to ensure that arrivals will have minimal impact on local health services. Mears' data estimates that only around 5% of hotel residents require to see a GP post arrival. Mears has a dedicated Partnership Manager who will work with partners to develop a range of learning and activities for hotel residents. Partnership planning work is already underway with local church groups preparing Welcome Packs, sports organisations reaching out with taster sessions and community groups and organisations offering volunteering opportunities. A donation plan will help identify and respond to the urgent needs of residents including jackets, socks and shoes.

Governance

The Aberdeenshire Asylum Oversight Group (subgroup of the Aberdeenshire Refugee & Asylum Strategic Group) will act as a conduit between Aberdeenshire Council, the Home Office and Mears. Meetings are held on a weekly basis. **Local Authorities have no direct responsibility for asylum hotels**, but Aberdeenshire Council will work closely with Mears to ensure that our communities, services and community planning partners are fully involved and able to respond to any emerging issues or concerns.

Aberdeenshire Council will continue to work in partnership with the Home Office, Mears, Police Scotland and NHS Grampian, communities, and public, faith and third sector organisations to mitigate any negative impacts on the Westhill community and maximise the strengths, goodwill and resilience in our community.

Frequently Asked Questions

- *What is Asylum?*
Asylum is protection given by a country to someone fleeing from persecution in their own country. An asylum seeker is someone who has applied for asylum and is awaiting a decision on whether they will be granted refugee status. An asylum applicant who does not qualify for refugee status may still be granted leave to remain in the UK for humanitarian or other reasons
- *How many asylum seekers are there in the UK?*
Approximately 150,000 people have asylum status and are awaiting a decision by the Home Office
- *Do asylum seekers receive benefits?*
No, clients in hotels receive £9.10 / week and are provided with accommodation and food.

- *Where do people live?*
Approximately 50,000 people are living with friends or family
Approximately 45,000 people are in asylum housing
Approximately 55,000 people are in asylum hotels
- *What countries do Asylum Seekers come from?*
The top five most common countries of nationality of people who apply for asylum in the UK are Afghanistan, Iran, Albania, Eritrea and Syria
- *Why don't people fleeing war or persecution seek asylum in the first country they reach?*
Currently, there is no law that says asylum seekers must make their asylum claim in the first safe country they arrive in after leaving their country of origin. However, under an EU law called the Dublin III Regulation, asylum seekers could in theory be transferred to the first EU member state in which they arrived after leaving their origin country. The UK is no longer a part of the Dublin arrangement (post Brexit), but has introduced new laws on "inadmissibility" to bar people from claiming asylum in the UK if they had an earlier presence in or connection to a safe third country

The UK Government [Illegal Migration Bill](#) proposes changes to the current legislation:

A Bill to make provision for and in connection with the removal from the United Kingdom of persons who have entered or arrived in breach of immigration control; to make provision about detention for immigration purposes; to make provision about unaccompanied children; to make provision about victims of slavery or human trafficking; to make provision about leave to enter or remain in the United Kingdom; to make provision about citizenship; to make provision about the inadmissibility of certain protection and certain human rights claims relating to immigration; to make provision about the maximum number of persons entering the United Kingdom annually using safe and legal routes; and for connected purposes

- *Which countries host the most asylum seekers and refugees?*
Turkey 3.7 million, Colombia 2.5 million, Germany 2.2 million, Pakistan 1.5 million, Uganda 1.5 million. In Europe, France has the most asylum seekers, followed by Germany, Spain, Italy, Greece and Belgium. The UK is below the average among EU countries for asylum applications per head of population, ranking 16th among EU27 countries [UK Government Asylum Statistics](#)
- *Why do people enter the UK illegally?*
To claim asylum in the UK, a person must be in the UK. It is not possible to apply from outside the country, and there is no asylum visa to enable people to travel to the UK legally to apply for asylum. Therefore, for people who do not have visa free travel to the UK, they must enter irregularly, such as by small boat, lorry, or by using false documents, or on a visa for some other purpose, such as tourism or study
- *Where will people arrive into Aberdeenshire from?*
Asylum applicants are transferred from south east England, after initial assessments and security checks have been completed
- *How can you make sure that asylum seekers do not have a criminal record?*

The Home Office will notify Mears of any previous known offences and perceived risks in advance of arrival in any sites. Asylum Seekers are screened by the Asylum Intake Unit and are required to go through a security check including body scans and searches. If there is a security concern, asylum seekers will be detained. If there are no concerns, an assessment is then made to ensure that the property/hotel is appropriate accommodation. [Asylum Security Screening](#)

- *Will there be women and children in hotels?*
To date the focus in Scotland has been on accommodating single adult males only. It is common for men seeking asylum to travel alone due to cost and safety. If their asylum application is approved, married men can then apply for their wives and children to join them via Family Reunion
- *How long will people be in the hotel?*
The Home Office has indicated that the population in the hotels will not be static. Decisions are being escalated and six months to one year is the current average length of stay
- *Will Asylum Seekers be given priority to get local housing?*
Asylum seekers are unable to get help with housing or homelessness from Aberdeenshire Council. Asylum seekers are also unable to hold a tenancy. If they receive refugee status and permission to stay in the UK, they then have 28 days' notice to leave the hotel and can then look for help with housing. At this point, most asylum seekers are expected to move towards more urban areas where they could have more established communities and where there are more employment and housing opportunities. We do not expect many to remain in Aberdeenshire
- *Will asylum seekers be able to undertake any paid or unpaid work?*
People who have claimed asylum in the UK can apply for permission to work if they have been waiting 12 months for a decision, and they are not considered responsible for the delay. If the Home Office grants permission, then they can only take on jobs from the shortage occupation list. Most asylum seekers are not permitted to work
- *Do asylum seekers have restricted movement?*
People are free to move around the country, but the Home Office needs to be aware of when they are living. People in hotels are not restricted in terms of movement
- *Will crime or risk increase in Westhill?*
You can never fully predict anyone's behaviour, but there is no evidence that having an asylum hotel in a community increases risk, criminality or threat to residents. Asylum seekers tend to be nervous on arrival and keep a low profile while awaiting the outcome of their claim
- *Will there be other guests in hotels?*
Hotels are single use only and are not accommodating any other guests
- *Do asylum seekers get extra or special benefits?*
No, they have [No Recourse to Public Funds](#) (NRPF), and are not entitled to receive any public funds or benefits. Most asylum projects are run by volunteers using donated time, goods and resources

- *Does my councillor, MP or MSP know about the hotel?*
Yes, all receive regular updates and are in regular communication with Aberdeenshire Council and Mears
- *Will people have access to Wi-Fi?*
Yes, the hotel will provide free WIFI. Having access to data is essential for people claiming asylum. It will allow them to liaise with the Home Office, progress their application, attend legal meetings and most importantly stay in touch with family around the world
- *Who is responsible for asylum seekers welfare in hotels?*
Mears are responsible for the day to day running of the hotels and the welfare of the individuals being accommodated [Statement of Requirements](#)
- *If asylum seekers receive £9.10 per week, how will they buy essential goods and clothes?*
Mears will ensure that people's basic needs are met. They will also work in partnership with charities, the council and local community to source essential donations i.e., warm jackets and shoes
- *Having 173 people, some distressed and from different countries arriving may make local people feel unsure?*
Mears will work closely with all partners to ensure that the safety of the community and of the men is paramount. Police Scotland are in contact with the hotel and partners and will make regular visits. Police statistics show that people seeking asylum are more likely to be victims of crime than perpetrators of crime
- *Are all asylum seekers Muslim and if so, where will they pray?*
We won't know people's faiths and if they practice until they arrive. Mears will ensure that they have access to the faith support required. There is no Mosque in Westhill, but a small prayer room can be established in the hotel if needed. All faith groups and organisations will all be invited to provide support as required
- *What percentage of people seeking asylum are given refugee status and permission to stay in the UK?*
75% of people who claim asylum are granted refugee status (95% for Syrians, Afghans, Libyans, Yemeni and Eritreans)
- *How can I help?*
If you have questions or concerns, please talk to us – it is important that we are all accurately informed and any grey areas or concerns are raised and addressed by the Home Office, Mears or the council
- *How can I find out more information ask questions or donate my time or goods?*
You can email: Asylum@aberdeenshire.gov.uk

If you require further information about asylum, please visit the UK Government's website:
<https://www.gov.uk/browse/visas-immigration/asylum>

If you wish to further comment on the Home Office decision to use the hotel in Westhill for accommodation, please contact your local MP
<https://www.writetothem.com/who?pc=AB32+6FA>