

Refugee Council briefing for Westminster Hall debate on Home Affairs Select Committee report on Asylum Accommodation – 1.30pm, 14 December 2017

Summary

- The Home Affairs Select Committee's January 2017 report on Asylum Accommodation raised a number of well-founded concerns with the current system.
- In addition to concerns about the standard of accommodation and treatment of people seeking asylum the report also highlighted the difficulties individuals face in moving on from asylum support after being granted refugee status.
- The Refugee Council recommends that the Government:
 - Introduce better independent oversight of new asylum accommodation contracts.
 - Publish the results of its pilot project supporting refugees to transition from asylum support to mainstream welfare support.
 - Make changes to policy to ensure that refugees do not lose asylum support until they have another source of income.
 - Release further information about local authorities' role in designing the next generation of asylum accommodation contracts.

Overview of report

In January 2017, the Home Affairs Select Committee (HASC) published a report on Asylum Accommodation¹, following an extensive inquiry conducted over the course of 2016. The inquiry examined the provision of accommodation for asylum seekers via six regional Commercial and Operational Managers Procuring Asylum Support Services contracts, known as COMPASS.

In particular, the inquiry sought to assess whether COMPASS contracts have been an effective means of providing accommodation and related support to those seeking asylum; examine concerns raised about the quality of accommodation being used by Providers and reports of poor treatment of the asylum seekers that they house; and look at concerns that Providers were finding it difficult to make suitable and sufficient accommodation available within the constraints of the COMPASS contracts². As part of its examination of the wellbeing of people in asylum

¹ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmhaff/637/63702.htm>

² https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmhaff/637/63703.htm#_idTextAnchor007

accommodation, the inquiry also considered the transition period from individuals receiving asylum support to accessing mainstream welfare support.

The inquiry took evidence from all three COMPASS Providers and some of their sub-contractors; from the Local Government Association and organisations representing asylum seekers and refugees (including the Refugee Council); and from Home Office Ministers.

The HASC report made a series of recommendations to the Government, summarised below:

- Increase capacity to process asylum applications and implement measures to reduce incorrect initial decisions.
- Improve support and protection for residents, particularly potentially vulnerable residents such as pregnant women, young children, those living with mental health needs and victims of trafficking, rape and torture.
- More support for, and engagement with, local authorities accommodating asylum seekers.
- Regular inspections of asylum accommodation to ensure requisite standards are met.
- Increase transparency of Providers' performance in meeting contractual obligations.
- Inspection of asylum accommodation to be transferred from the Home Office to local authorities.
- Extension of the 28-day period of transition from asylum seeker to refugee status.
- Support provided under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme (VPRS) to be extended to refugees from other nations.

The Government's response to the HASC report, published in November 2017, can be found [here](#). The Refugee Council [was disappointed by the response](#), which failed to engage sufficiently with the Committee's recommendations.

Key Refugee Council asks and recommendations

The HASC report raised concerns about the COMPASS contracts. Tenders for new COMPASS contracts have since been published (in November 2017) and concern has been raised by stakeholders at the length and resulting cost of these contracts. **The Refugee Council would like assurance that the Government will introduce better independent oversight of the new COMPASS contracts, preferably by local authorities, supported by appropriate funding.**

The Government's response to the HASC report cited a pilot project trialling a new system to ease the transition from asylum support to mainstream welfare support, which took place in the North East and Yorkshire & Humberside between December 2016 and March 2017. The Government concluded that the pilot was a success and has subsequently rolled out implementation of the scheme across the country. **Whilst the Refugee Council welcomes this development, we would like to see the Government publish the results of the pilot project, to aid understanding of how the reported positive results were achieved.**

The Refugee Council remains unconvinced that the efforts made so far will completely avoid destitution and homelessness amongst new refugees. Particularly in areas where Universal Credit

has been rolled out, there are significant barriers to ensuring that refugees receive payments before their asylum support ends, and much more needs to be done to enable refugees to secure housing in the private sector. **We urge the government to make the necessary changes to policy to ensure that refugees do not lose asylum support until they have another source of income.**

In response to HASC's recommendation for increased local authority involvement in asylum accommodation, the Government stated:

"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."

It is unclear from the recently-released tender³ how the Government plans to implement this measure. **The Refugee Council would like to see the release of further information about local authorities' role in designing the next generation of asylum accommodation contracts, including the level of funding they will be provided with to carry out inspections of asylum accommodation in their area.**

About the Refugee Council

The Refugee Council is one of the leading organisations in the UK working with asylum seekers and refugees. We give help and support to asylum seekers and refugees, and also work with them to ensure their needs and concerns are addressed by decision-makers.

For further information, please contact Aidan Rylatt, Interim Parliamentary Manager, at parliament@refugeecouncil.org.uk or Judith Dennis, Policy Manager, on 020 7346 1170.

³ http://ted.europa.eu/TED/notice/udl?uri=TED:NOTICE:461664-2017:TEXT:EN:HTML&WT.mc_id=RSS-Feed&WT.rss_f=Transport+and+Related+Services&WT.rss_a=461664-2017&WT.rss_ev=a#id10869435-III