



UK Visas
& Immigration

Audit into asylum seeker accommodation in Middlesbrough

Introduction

On 20 January 2016, the Times newspaper reported that asylum seekers in Middlesbrough were accommodated in houses with red doors. It was suggested that this made asylum seeker housing more readily identifiable and, therefore, the housing more susceptible to attacks or criminal damage. In statements to the newspaper, the Home Office's housing provider G4S and its sub-contractor Jomast made it clear that it was not a deliberate policy to identify asylum seeker accommodation in this way, but was the consequence of many of Jomast's properties in Middlesbrough having red doors.¹

2. In a statement to the House of Commons on the same day, the Immigration Minister, the Rt Hon James Brokenshire MP, said the following:

“As right hon. and hon. Members will have seen from my response published in *The Times* this morning, I am deeply concerned about the issues raised and the painting of doors of asylum seeker accommodation in a single colour. Anything that identifies asylum seeker accommodation to those who may wish to harm those accommodated in the properties must be avoided.

..... I have asked Home Office officials to look into this issue as a matter of urgency, and to report to me and the Permanent Secretary.

I expect the audit to be completed from the Home Office side quickly, at the latest by the end of this month.”

Hansard - 20 January 2016

Terms of Reference

3. The terms of reference for this audit were to:

- Investigate the circumstances leading up to the situation whereby the majority of the doors of houses accommodating asylum seekers in Middlesbrough were painted red and whether this had been raised as an issue previously;
- Inspect the standard of asylum seeker accommodation in Middlesbrough and whether it was compliant with the COMPASS contract; and
- Consider whether the Home Office's inspection and compliance regime, even if it is consistent with the terms of the contract, is sufficiently robust and identifies issues of this nature, including looking at customer contact and complaints; and
- Recommend any future improvements.

The audit was to be completed by the end of January 2016, at the latest.

¹ The Times Newspaper Wednesday 20 2016, 'Apartheid on streets of Britain, Andrew Norfolk'

Methodology

4. The audit began work immediately on 20 January 2016. As of that date, there were 298 properties in Middlesbrough which accommodated asylum seekers.
5. Inspections had already taken place in Middlesbrough during the reporting year April 2015 – March 2016 (in June, July, September and October 2015). During this previous inspection work, 84 successful inspections took place, with 72 properties accommodating asylum seekers (24% of the total) being initially inspected and 12 properties subsequently re-inspected.
6. In addition to this work, a further round of inspections was initiated following the announcement of the audit, commencing on 21 January and running until 29 January. Although we would normally inspect properties jointly with G4S, in order to maximise access to properties and speed up defect resolution, on this occasion we chose to conduct unannounced inspections across Middlesbrough. This has seen a further 76 properties visited, meaning that, in total, we will have inspected 148 properties in Middlesbrough this reporting year to date (around 50% of the total number of properties housing asylum seekers).
7. As the Times article reported that asylum seekers had previously raised this issue with G4S and Jomast, an audit was also completed of complaints received by G4S. This included an audit of G4S records of all complaints received from 2013-5, with two members of our Compliance and Assurance Team attending the G4S offices in Worksop. In addition, they also examined the reports of the monthly inspection conducted by Jomast.
8. The audit was led by Tyson Hepple, the Director of Asylum Operations. It was undertaken by four members of the Compliance and Assurance Team, which is part of the Asylum Operations Directorate, alongside colleagues from the Asylum Support Compliance Team.

Background to the Inspection and Compliance Regime

9. The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 introduced the policy of national dispersal, which was designed to share the impact of asylum seekers across the whole United Kingdom. Under that arrangement, asylum seekers are accommodated across the UK under voluntary agreements between national Government and local authorities. Those arrangements have been in place since 2000. Under current arrangements—the commercial and operating managers procuring asylum support services, or COMPASS, contracts—three companies provide asylum seeker accommodation, transport and related services. In Middlesbrough those services are provided by G4S and their sub-contractor Jomast.
10. The COMPASS Project Schedule 2, the contract statement of requirements, specify that the general accommodation requirement is that the “Provider shall provide safe, habitable, fit for purpose and correctly equipped accommodation”² The Property standards, or more specifically the timescales in which defects must be rectified, under COMPASS are primarily monitored using four key performance indicators (KPIs):

- KPI 4 Accommodation is safe.
- KPI 5 Accommodation is habitable.

² COMPASS PROJECT, Schedule 2, ACCOMMODATION & TRANSPORT- STATEMENT OF REQUIREMENTS

- KPI 6 Accommodation is fit for purpose.
- KPI 7 Complaints.

11. Following a report by the National Audit Office in 2014³, the Home Office has worked closely with its housing providers to improve property standards. This has included:

- Conducting joint accommodation inspections.
- Home Office staff mentoring the providers' housing inspection staff to ensure consistency in monitoring activities.
- Providers restructuring their operations and improving their maintenance service, whilst increasing the numbers of Housing Officers.
- Improvements in the quality of accommodation by investment in existing stock and replacement of those properties that did not meet quality standards.

12. These actions resulted in improvements to accommodation standards, evidenced by a reduction in the level of service credits recovered.

13. The Home Office has a contract compliance regime in place to ensure the required performance standards expected of all providers as defined in the contracts. To ensure that accommodation standards are maintained, the Home Office's contract compliance teams inspect properties regularly, across the providers' portfolio, on an intelligence led basis.

14. The Home Office manages the performance of COMPASS providers through formal Executive Oversight Boards, monthly contract management and quarterly strategic review meetings as well as regular day to day discussions between operational and commercial managers and the supplier, about the management and execution of the contract.

15. Where a contractor is found to be falling short of the contractual standards, we work with them to ensure that issues are quickly addressed. Where they are not we can, and do, impose sanctions. This has been the case across more than one COMPASS contract. In 2014/15, according to Home Office management information, £158,000 of service credits has been deducted from suppliers' invoices, as a result of performance failures.

16. In addition to this, the contracts require providers to ensure that their housing inspectors visit each property at least once per month, and when asylum seekers first arrive at or depart a property.

Fieldwork undertaken

(i) Recent inspection activity in Middlesbrough prior to the audit

17. During the 2015/16 reporting year, the Home Office had planned inspections for 94 properties in Middlesbrough (31% of all properties). By 20 January when this audit began, 84 inspections had been successfully completed.

18. The 84 inspections completed consist of 72 properties (24% of total properties), 12 of the inspections were re-inspections of properties we felt it would be appropriate to visit again. Once a property has been inspected it is categorised based on the severity of any defects encountered. The results of the 84 property inspections were as follows:

³ <https://www.nao.org.uk/report/compass-contracts-provision-accommodation-asylum-seekers/>

- Six properties with defects categorised as Emergency which required resolution within 24hrs (for example: no operational hot water supply, heating system or complete loss of mains services).
- 47 properties with defects categorised as Urgent which required resolution within seven days (for example: taps requiring new washers, minor blockages and leaks in roof drainage).
- 19 properties with defects categorised as Routine which required resolution within 28 days (for example: external repairs or a requirement for cleaning).

19. G4S were notified of these defects and the need for their resolution. All defects were remedied within the required timescales and, as a result, up to the commencement of the audit, there have been no failures under KPI 4, 5 or 6 in relation to properties in Middlesbrough during this period.

(ii) Fieldwork undertaken as a result of this audit

20. As a result of the Minister's announcement of an audit of the G4S properties in Middlesbrough, two members of the North East Yorkshire and Humber (NEYH) Compliance and Assurance Team were deployed to Middlesbrough immediately to expand on previous inspections. This took place with two members of the Asylum Support Compliance Team as support, to investigate any allegations or reports of anti-social behaviour.

21. Over the course of six days, the team inspected a further 76 properties, meaning that in total we have inspected 148 properties in Middlesbrough (around 50% of the total properties) so far this reporting year. As above, the properties were categorised based on the severity of the defects encountered.

22. The results of these inspections were as follows:

- Seven properties with defects categorised as Emergency which require resolution within 24hrs (for example: no operational hot water supply, heating system or loss of mains services)
- 69 properties with defects categorised as Urgent which required resolution within seven days (for example: taps requiring new washers, minor blockages and leaks in roof drainage)

Broadly speaking the inspections team encountered issues, categorised as Emergency or Urgent, such as:

- Missing door bells/door knockers.
- Door closures fitted on family properties being wedged open.
- Door closures that had been disabled in some Houses of Multiple Occupation.
- Ground floor windows that could not be locked, window restrictors missing and handles damaged.

There were also numerous decoration issues.

23. G4S have been notified of the outcome of these inspections and we will be conducting re-visits to ensure that the defects are resolved within contractual timescales.

24. In addition to inspecting property standards the inspections team also discussed incidents of anti-social behaviour and verbal and physical abuse with approximately 60 asylum seekers. These discussions identified:

- One property had damage to the front door from being kicked approximately four weeks before the inspection. A similar incident occurred approximately two weeks later. The incidents were reported to the police, but the asylum seekers who were resident in the property did not want the police to visit and did not want to take a crime reference number.
- One property reported that eggs had been thrown at the window a year ago but that this was not reported at the time.
- A further property reported a number of incidents with their neighbours involving eggs, stones and a wad of clay being thrown at the windows. In addition, bags of dog faeces and other refuse had been thrown into the back garden over the last few weeks. The asylum seekers resident in this property allege that these incidents were carried out by neighbours. Both Jomast and the Police have been contacted and are investigating.

(iii) Audit of complaints received by G4S in relation to Middlesbrough

25. In addition to inspecting property standards we also conducted an audit of all complaints received by G4S in relation to Middlesbrough, from 2013 to 2015. Two members of the Midlands COMPASS Compliance and Assurance Team attended the G4S offices in Worksop on 26 January to access and review documented records of customer inquiries and complaints.

26. In total there were 54 complaints received by G4S during this period which related to asylum seekers and properties in Middlesbrough, 24 of which related to anti-social behaviour or violence (either perpetrated by an asylum seeker or where the asylum seeker was the victim). Having investigated all 24, none of the complaints raise the colour of the front door of the property as the cause or aggravating factor in these incidents and there are no complaints solely about the colour of the front door. The Home Office Compliance and Assurance Team have concluded that G4S investigated and resolved all these issues and there have been no failures under KPI 7 (Complaints) in relation to Middlesbrough.

(iv) Audit of G4S/Jomast monthly inspection reports

27. Contractually, in addition to the inspections conducted by the Home Office, providers must inspect their properties on a monthly basis. Therefore, in addition to our inspections we have audited the last six months' worth of G4S monthly inspection reports, carried out by Jomast in relation to properties in Middlesbrough.

28. Having initially reviewed the inspections, we can confirm that there are 1605 reports from the last six months, which show the number of inspections and type of defects found as follows:

Month	Inspections	Routine	Urgent	Emergency
July	275	4	19	1
August	283	43	57	0
September	278	20	41	1
October	290	34	43	1
November	286	40	41	0
December	193	8	19	1

29. The review showed that there is a standard template used by the Provider and the audits we have received meet the contractual requirement to inspect properties every month.

30. There was no reference in any of the inspections to concerns raised over the colour of doors, nor to any resulting anti-social behaviour or attacks. However, there is a lack of evidence from the reports submitted that issues of anti-social behaviour or violence are routinely discussed or monitored through the monthly inspections. Further work is needed and discussions should take place with G4S and Jomast around this issue with the aim of improving the monthly inspection process so that it better picks up such issues. This should also look to ensure that all the data available from monthly inspections and complaints made to the G4S customer centre is fed back to the Home Office to inform its intelligence based inspection process.

(v) Discussions with the Police

31. As part of this audit, we also met with the police (ACC Ciaron Irvine, Superintendent John Lyons and Inspector Dave Sunderland). It was their view that attacks on asylum seeker property had not featured in the reporting done by the Force Analysis Unit as a particular problem, although they are going to do some wider analysis and investigation to see if there were any issues that had not been brought to the attention of the police previously.

32. The Police indicated that they wanted to work with established NGOs to ensure that they could get full access to, and co-operation from, the asylum seeker population in Middlesbrough as they understood the importance of third party reporting. The Home Office committed to facilitating contact with Migrant Help and the NGO sub group that feeds into the wider Strategic Migration Partnership, which the police have committed to attend. The Home Office will also review the data it provides to the police about its inspections, in order to inform their risk assessments.

Results of the audit

33. The results of the audit are set out below.

Investigate the circumstances leading up to the situation whereby the majority of houses accommodating asylum seekers in Middlesbrough had doors that were painted red and whether this had been raised as an issue previously.

34. It was not a deliberate policy for asylum seeker accommodation to be identifiable by the colour of the doors. This was a consequence of the sub-contractor Jomast painting the doors of many of their properties red, a practice going back 20 years, according to the evidence which Stuart Monk the Owner and Managing Director of Jomast gave to the Home Affairs Select Committee on 26 January. During this evidence session he also confirmed that steps are now being taken to repaint all of the doors in a variety of colours.

35. In terms of whether this issue has been raised before, in an answer to a written Parliamentary Question by Dan Jarvis MP, the Immigration Minister said the following:

"I was first made aware of this issue when The Times contacted the Home Office in mid-January. G4S has investigated correspondence and discussions on the issue of external door colour in the North East and has confirmed it was raised in 2012 by a Middlesbrough local councillor and was considered by the G4S audit and assurance team, no complaints from asylum seekers relating to this matter were found and a response was issued."

Hansard – 2 February 2016

36. We have also looked through the transcripts of relevant hearings of the Home Affairs Select Committee and the Public Accounts Committee. We have found that this issue was referred to during a Public Accounts Committee review – "COMPASS: Provision of asylum accommodation" as part of their 2013-14 Session. During a hearing on 5 February 2014, Mr Ian Swales, the then MP for Redcar, asked Mr Stephen Small, the then G4S Managing Director for Immigration and Borders:

"whether he thought that painting the doors a different colour - in this case, red - so that the whole neighbourhood knows who the asylum seekers are is likely to make that accommodation more safe? Is that a good idea?"

37. In his response Mr Small said:

"I cannot comment on the doors being painted red, but I will take the point away".

38. John Whitwam, Managing Director, Borders and Immigration for G4S also told the Home Affairs Select Committee that Ms Suzanne Fletcher, Chair of Liberal Democrats for Seekers of Sanctuary, had raised the issue of red doors in 2012 and 2014 and then G4S looked into the matter.

39. We have found no evidence that concerns about red doors in Middlesbrough had been raised by, or with, the Home Office before the article in the Times newspaper on 20 January 2016. Clearly the Home Office has inspected asylum seeker properties in Middlesbrough over many years, including under the previous Target contract where Jomast were a contractor. Many of those properties would have had red doors, but this does not seem to have triggered any concerns about this issue at the time of any of these inspections. This is borne out by the audit of complaints detailed above.

Inspect the standard of asylum seeker accommodation in Middlesbrough and whether it was compliant with the COMPASS contract.

40. 148 properties have been inspected during the 2015/16 reporting year. In the inspections that were carried out prior to this audit, all defects were remedied in compliance with the contract.

41. The inspections that have taken place most recently have revealed a slightly larger proportion of Urgent defects than those previously conducted. There were no Immediate defects that needed repairing and only seven that needed repair within 24 hours. If the defects are remedied in time, as they have tended to be in Middlesbrough, then no KPIs will be failed or service credits recovered. Re-inspections will take place to monitor this, as would normally be the case.

Consider whether the Home Office's inspection and compliance regime, even if it is consistent with the terms of the contract, is sufficiently robust and identifies issues of this nature, including looking at customer contact and complaints.

42. This audit has shown that the work of the Home Office inspection regime is consistent with the terms of the contract and has ensured that appropriate accommodation is available for asylum seekers in Middlesbrough. In this instance, the work of the Home Office Contract Compliance teams has been supplemented by Asylum Support Compliance Officers. This has ensured that there has not only been a focus upon physical property standards but also on issues such as anti-social behaviour management, safeguarding and the wellbeing of the asylum seekers. This is a model that the Home Office should look to adopt more widely going forward.

43. This picture of contract compliance is borne out by the number of complaints - 54 that have been resolved over the last three years, with just about half relating to property standards. This is within the normal range for an area with this concentration of asylum seekers. Whilst the provision of asylum seeker housing in Middlesbrough is consistent with the contract, as reported by the Times newspaper, there are a small number of properties accommodating asylum seekers which are situated on roads where many of the other houses are derelict or boarded up. Providers should take care to understand the environments in which asylum seekers are housed and must, in consultation with the Strategic Migration Partnership and the Local Authority, keep this under regular review.

Recommend any future improvements

44. This audit makes the following recommendations:

- (i) Housing providers should ensure that the properties used to accommodate asylum seekers cannot be easily identified, either as a deliberate policy or inadvertently.
- (ii) Providers should take care to understand the environments in which asylum seekers are housed and must, in consultation with the Strategic Migration Partnership and the Local Authority, keep this under regular review. This is consistent with the clause in the COMPASS contracts which says that providers should take care when housing asylum seekers.
- (iii) The housing providers and the Home Office should review their respective contract inspection, compliance and complaints regimes to see if the recording and monitoring of harassment and anti-social behaviour could be improved.
- (iv) The Home Office compliance and assurance processes used to monitor the standard of services being delivered should place greater emphasis on the welfare and safety of asylum seekers and, as part of the Home Office contract inspection

and asylum support compliance regime there should be greater interaction with asylum seekers to enquire about their wellbeing.

- (v) The Home Office should ensure that any relevant information that is gathered as part of the current inspection, compliance and complaints regime is shared with the police to inform their risk assessments.
- (vi) All of the parties engaged in the housing of asylum seekers need to do more to ensure that their voices are heard and they feel confident to report complaints about their accommodation or any concerns they are having about their safety. This may be by way of a community forum involving local agencies, the Home Office and NGOs who support accommodated asylum seekers.
- (vii) The Home Office should review the findings of this audit within its wider strategy for safeguarding those in the immigration system