

Kevin Foster MP
Minister for Future Borders and Immigration
Home Office

31 March 2020

Dear Kevin,

Refugee protections

We are writing on behalf of organisations in Sheffield working with refugees and asylum seekers about urgent protections needed during this national crisis.

As MPs representing Sheffield, the first established City of Sanctuary, we are asking the Home Office to prevent the accommodation provider, Mears, from evicting people seeking asylum until the coronavirus crisis is over.

With no services available, these incredibly vulnerable people will, undoubtedly, be left homeless and destitute at the worst possible time.

Asylum seekers facing eviction from NASS accommodation will not have the wraparound care the SPRING project currently provides if their application is successful, or access to emergency support and accommodation if their application is unsuccessful. In normal circumstances those being evicted from Mears' accommodation face difficulty regardless of whether they get a positive or negative decision. **In current circumstances, both groups would be faced with a complete lack of services and would almost certainly end up destitute and homeless.**

Sheffield Reporting Centre has told asylum seekers whose mobile numbers they hold that reporting is suspended for one month. However, Asylum seekers required to report to Sheffield Reporting Centre, Millsands, who have not yet been informed of recent changes face the impossible choice of either following government advice, self-isolating and jeopardising their immigration application or leaving the house to report and putting themselves and others at risk.

Destitute asylum seekers not supported by the Home Office and EU nationals not exercising their treaty rights are at risk of homelessness and would find it impossible to self-isolate as a response to an onset of symptoms of the coronavirus. They risk transmitting the virus to other members of the community and being scapegoated and stigmatised for it.

On behalf of some of the most vulnerable and at-risk during these unprecedented times, we are asking you to take the following action to minimise the impact of the outbreak:

1. ***All evictions from NASS accommodation of people who get a negative decision and are appeals rights exhausted should be suspended.*** It must be recognised that forcing people to leave accommodation directly into street homelessness presents a significant risk to both an individuals' health and to wider public health.
2. ***The 28-day move-on period for people who receive a positive decision and are new refugees should be extended and evictions halted.*** People should not be asked to leave their NASS accommodation until secure accommodation is confirmed and Universal Credit has started payments.
3. ***The Home Office should suspend all reporting requirements for all individuals until normal services are resumed and the requirement for self-isolation is removed.*** This should be clearly communicated and published so all individuals are aware, and a commitment should be made to tell them when they will next be required to report.
4. ***Everyone should be able to access self-contained accommodation and self-isolate safely if needed.***
 - a. Hotel spaces should be block booked so that people who are rough sleeping or sofa surfing are able to self-isolate.
 - b. No one recovering from Covid-19 should be discharged from NHS care to rough sleep, sofa surf or to stay in accommodation in which maintaining self-isolation and good hygiene is not possible.

It is vital that we move quickly on this to prevent people seeking asylum being exposed to risks that can and should be avoided and, to that end, we look forward to your early response.