OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

Tuesday 16 May 2023

Session 6

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Tuesday 16 May 2023

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EQUALITIES, HUMAN RIGHTS AND CIVIL JUSTICE COMMITTEE
12th Meeting 2023, Session 6

CONVENER

*Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
*Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con)
*Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
*Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
*Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP) (Commitee Substitute)
Caroline O'Connor (Migrant Help)
John Taylor (Mears Housing Management)

LOCATION

The James Clerk Maxwell Room (CR4)

Scottish Parliament

Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

Tuesday 16 May 2023

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:45]

Interests

The Convener (Kaukab Stewart): Good morning, and welcome to the 12th meeting in 2023 of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee in session 6. We have received apologies this morning from Karen Adam. I welcome Ben Macpherson, who is attending as Karen's substitute.

Our first agenda item is an invitation to Ben Macpherson to declare any relevant interests.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, which includes the fact that I am on the roll of Scottish solicitors.

Decision on Taking Business in Private

09:45

The Convener: Our next agenda item is a decision on whether to take in private agenda item 4, which is consideration of today's evidence. Do we agree to take that item in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Asylum Seekers in Scotland

09:45

The Convener: Agenda item 3 is consideration of further evidence as part of our inquiry into asylum seekers in Scotland. We will hear from John Taylor, the chief operating officer at Mears Housing Management, who joins us in person. Good morning, John. We will also hear from Caroline O'Connor, who is the chief executive officer of Migrant Help and who joins us virtually. Welcome, Caroline.

I refer members to papers 1 and 2. I invite each of our witnesses to make short opening remarks, starting with John Taylor.

John Taylor (Mears Housing Management): Good morning, and thank you very much for inviting us to give evidence. I will start by explaining a wee bit about Mears Group. It is a housing company, and we employ more than 1,300 people across Scotland. Our care teams run combined care-at-home and housing support services for adults with disabilities or mental health needs. Our facilities management team supports 16 schools across Inverness and West Lothian, two housing associations in Glasgow and healthcare settings in St Andrews community hospital in the national health service. In the past year, we completed nearly 120,000 repairs and maintenance jobs in council homes in North Lanarkshire, employing 480 people, including through the direct provision of 195 craft apprenticeships.

In Scotland, Mears Group operates to its responsible business charter, which outlines a series of pledges to its staff, partners, contractors and service users. Mears is committed to pay all staff and regular contracted workers the Scottish real living wage. We have also signed the Scottish business pledge. Our new independent customer scrutiny board was set up to strengthen tenant rights for our customers. The board is chaired independently and is made up of residents and tenants from across our services, including asylum seekers.

For each Mears employee, we deliver an average of £2,500 of social value per annum. That is decided by using a recognised model to calculate the value to wellbeing. We will encourage the involvement of the local supply chain in our projects by seeking to work collaboratively across Scotland's housing management sector. We will publicise the revenue and profit that we make each year as a group. Overall, we do not expect to achieve a profit margin from our public sector work of more than 5 per cent to ensure value for money.

In January 2019, Mears was awarded the asylum contracts for the three contract regions of Scotland, Northern Ireland and north-east Yorkshire and Humber. Following a transition period, we became the provider in September 2019. Mears is an experienced provider of housing across the United Kingdom, providing much-needed homes for homeless households through our England-based UK housing association as well as for the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Justice. We have approached the contract committed to treating all our service users with dignity and respect.

It is important to say that ours is a specific role around asylum and support while people are in our accommodation. We have no role in the processing of claims or other services such as the provision of healthcare and education, in relation to which we signpost to the relevant appropriate agencies instead of providing services directly.

Our role is operational. Policy is set by the UK Home Office, to which we refer policy questions. I hope that the committee will understand that there is an important distinction between what we can do and what we can affect. Operationally, Mears has supported many thousands of people in asylum accommodation in Scotland. In general, direct feedback from service users has been very positive about the way that our staff treat them and about the quality of our housing provision. Where there are issues, we do our best to resolve them through our welfare and safeguarding teams in order to support our service users.

We are committed to ensuring that asylum accommodation is safe, habitable and fit for purpose and that it meets contractual and regulatory standards. Mears understands the importance of supporting each person while they are living in its accommodation and ensures that, as a company, it works with the communities in which it operates.

We work in very close partnership with local statutory agencies, including the NHS, councils—Glasgow City Council, in particular—and the police. We have excellent partnerships in the community with local organisations, non-governmental organisations, charities, support groups, sports clubs, faith groups and many more. If the committee would like to see more of what we do, I can provide details of the many projects that we support, fund and organise.

Asylum accommodation and support provision is complex and, at the moment, very controversial. There are many challenges, but we are proud of our dedicated staff and the work that they do every day across Scotland.

Caroline O'Connor (Migrant Help): I thank the committee for the opportunity to share our

experience. I am the chief executive of Migrant Help, which is a UK-wide charity that provides support to victims of displacement and exploitation. This is our charity's 60th year.

Migrant Help is one of two providers that offer support to survivors of trafficking in Scotland; the other is Trafficking Awareness Raising Alliance—TARA—which gave evidence at an earlier evidence session. TARA supports female victims of commercial sexual exploitation, and Migrant Help supports all other adult survivors in Scotland.

The work is funded through the Scottish Government's victim-centred approach fund, and we deliver similar services to survivors in Northern Ireland and parts of England.

Migrant Help also provides support to asylum seekers across the UK through the Home Office's advice, issue reporting and eligibility contract—known as AIRE—which we are now in the fourth year of delivering. We provide face-to-face and remote services in Scotland with a team of advisers who are based in Glasgow, and we are supported by outreach and community liaison staff as well as our 24/7 call centre.

In other parts of the UK, we deliver services under the UK resettlement scheme; we support Afghan and Ukrainian refugees in hotels, the Hong Kong national employability scheme and the European Union settlement scheme.

I look forward to providing you with more information about our work.

The Convener: Thank you for those opening statements. We will go straight to questions. I intend to allow around 75 minutes for the session but will grant some flexibility. We have many areas to explore, so I would welcome succinct questions and answers as far as possible.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): Good morning. The committee recognises that asylum and immigration are reserved matters, but we are particularly interested in the devolved areas, especially the Scottish Government's work to address many of the issues about which we have already heard this morning and throughout our evidence taking.

Will you share with us what involvement you have had with the Scottish Government's strategies, particularly the new Scots and ending destitution together strategies?

John Taylor: Since mobilising the contract, in 2019, we have worked closely and had direct conversations with the Scottish Government, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Glasgow City Council partnership board. We meet the Scottish Government once a month to ensure that it is fully informed of the accommodation contracts and the issues that we are facing. We met more regularly during the Covid period because of the pressure on numbers and the fact that Scotland was not a routing area in Covid times.

At the moment, we are looking to meet the relevant ministers to discuss a number of issues that we are facing in relation to next year's asylum contracts. The issues are around the impact of wide dispersal on local authorities across Scotland—particularly on health, education and social services—and how wide dispersal can be supported and managed while not conflicting with other projects, such as the Ukrainian, Afghan and Syrian refugee and unaccompanied children programmes, all of which require accommodation. We are very concerned that we end up chasing the same properties.

The other issue that we want to discuss in more detail with Scottish ministers is that of homelessness. Many more people in the asylum system will have decisions made about them—decisions that were stopped during Covid—and the number of positive decisions will cause more pressure and a homelessness issue. It is about how we can work together to ensure that a balance exists and that we do not create another problem as people come out of the asylum system.

We will always work closely with the Scottish Government. I hope that we will work ever closer, because the next couple of years could be very challenging on a number of levels. Wide dispersal changes the landscape significantly.

Caroline O'Connor: Migrant Help is closely involved in delivering towards the five principles of the new Scots strategy, from supporting integration from day 1 and building on a rights-based approach through initial induction information and through the 24/7 helpline. We provide induction on arrival, including giving out translated induction booklets followed by verbal induction briefings with interpreters. Through our lived-experience advisory panel, we involve asylum seekers and victims of modern slavery in developing and improving our services.

We have a community liaison co-ordinator and we have regional managers for both of our services. Our head of regional services and our head of business support services have worked and lived in Scotland for many years.

We collaborate and are on working groups with other charities and with COSLA. We work with other charities that have given evidence to the committee, such as the Scottish Refugee Council. We work very closely with Refuweegee. We work with TARA on behalf of the Scottish Government.

Paul O'Kane: John Taylor, you mentioned the current challenges with regard to interaction with

local authorities, particularly around housing supply, and you said that wider dispersal will exacerbate those issues. Is the challenge with local authorities about what is available, or is it about how Mears chooses to interact with them? There have been a number of high-profile cases, which I think we would all recognise and which have been particularly concerning. Is it your view that the problem is with the interaction with local authorities?

John Taylor: Not at all. The interaction with local authorities in Scotland has been positive. Through COSLA, we have been discussing wide dispersal since the autumn. We have taken time to ensure that there is an agreement about how wide dispersal can be managed in a planned and strategic way. We have also been trying to demonstrate some fairness in the system by not having more asylum seekers in one area than in others. All 33 councils have looked to participate, and we are trying to work through the acquisition process to ensure that we have fair dispersal across Scotland.

I would say that every council has entered into those conversations with a good deal of openness and willingness to participate and to understand the system. Glasgow City Council has been particularly strong in explaining how well we work with Glasgow, how dispersal works and what the support needs are for dispersal accommodation.

I do not think that the problem is with interaction with local authorities. We have some very good relationships with them, and COSLA is very good at managing that in a formal governance structure.

The issue is more around supply. There is a limited supply of accommodation in the private housing market and, as I have said, a lot of programmes are looking to access that market. For example, Glasgow has a particular challenge around homelessness at the moment. The council takes the brunt, if you like, of the challenge of housing people who have the right to remain in Scotland, because, when they get that right, they look to the Glasgow homelessness service.

The issue for our programme is how to get the number of properties that we require to get people into their own homes. Where do we procure them? Where will it be safe? Where can we get the right services to people and ensure that they will not be isolated and that we can deal with community cohesion issues? Where can our service users access legal services and local community and faith groups? It is a huge operation to make sure that, as we go into new areas, our service users are supported and our acquisition of property will not conflict with the programmes to find accommodation for Ukrainians or Afghans or with local homelessness services.

There is quite a complex network of issues, but our conversations with big Scottish councils have been incredibly positive and very welcome.

Paul O'Kane: I have one more question on local authorities before I move on to the human rights approach. Caroline O'Connor, in your interaction with local authorities, where do you see the gaps or challenges in terms of wider support provision?

Caroline O'Connor: The wide dispersal area and the short timeframe in which to stand up properties mean that it is difficult to find accommodation for asylum seekers very quickly once a need to place people has been identified.

The lead time for bringing in support is difficult. We are also seeing around the country a huge risk that support for asylum seekers is focused on specific regions where there has historically been a great deal of dispersal and opening up new regions means that there is a limited amount of support functions in those regions and not enough time for charities to stand up that support. There is nowhere near enough funding to reach 400 hotels across the UK; that is where the real risk is. I accept that the problem is that we need to find accommodation for people and we are following that up with support later than is ideal.

10:00

Paul O'Kane: We have had a conversation about resource and how such decisions often become very resource driven because of the pressures that local authorities and other agencies face. The evidence that the committee has heard thus far from people such as the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland is that we need to refocus on the issue and look at it through a human rights lens, because there are serious concerns about dignity. John Taylor spoke about dignity and respect in his opening statement, and there is a lack of dignity and respect for people who are seeking such support. In a previous question, I referred to high-profile cases of people being housed inadequately or in inappropriate settings and the challenges that people who are being left destitute face.

Do you think that Mears takes a human rights approach? What more do you think that you could do in your contracts to achieve the dignity and respect that you spoke about?

John Taylor: I think that we do take that approach. The feedback that we have received through independent surveys of tenants has been positive about how they feel that they have been treated by our staff and the property that we have provided them with.

There are difficulties with getting enough properties. We are not happy that we have to house people in hotels. That is the single biggest challenge for us. When we started the contract, no one was living in a hotel, and we did not operate in hotels at the beginning of the Covid period. Because of Covid and the cessation of decisions, the system became locked, and that is when the use of hotels became a main issue.

It is very challenging to make a hotel a good place to live. Our staff are on site five days a week and we have a seven-days-a-week service. We have welfare support officers, and we work closely with the asylum health bridging team from the national health service to make sure that support is on site, but no one would say that a hotel is where people would ideally be housed for any period of time. That is our biggest single challenge.

We have clear contractual standards for our dispersal accommodation, and they are constantly checked by the Home Office compliance teams who visit. We are very transparent about the service that we provide, the number of repairs that we do and the visits that we make to every property to try to ensure that the properties are well maintained and looked after and that the people are supported while they are in the system and in dispersal accommodation. As we look towards wider dispersal, we need to make sure that, if we take properties on in Perth, Aberdeen or Dundee, we are able to provide that service to support people while they are in dispersal accommodation and waiting for a decision on their asylum application. The quicker those decisions are made, the better.

I would say that we are transparent. We welcome people who want to come and see our properties. We are quite clear that, in our dispersal accommodation, our staff behave and provide a good-quality service that looks to put the interests of the service user at the heart of what we do.

As I say, a hotel is a very challenging place in which to live. If someone has to live in a hotel for three weeks, that is one thing, but, if they have to live there for months, it becomes a difficult place to be. We try to make sure that families are not in hotels for long periods of time because a hotel is clearly not the right place for a child to be living. We try to manage that as best we can until we get wider dispersal moving and get the large volume of accommodation that is needed so that we can end the use of hotels. It is not in anyone's interest to maintain hotels for any longer than is necessary.

Paul O'Kane: Are you cognisant of the criticisms that have been voiced by people such as the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland of the circumstances in which pregnant women, in particular, have found themselves and of the issues around how hotels are managed and supported by Mears? How do you react to that criticism, take it on board and make changes? Much of the evidence that we have heard thus far has suggested that that does not always happen—or, at least, there is a real feeling that it does not always happen.

John Taylor: It is a very emotional area, and I appreciate that everyone has their views. We have talked to the children's commissioner on multiple occasions. One of the issues that he was probably referring to is that we established a mother and baby building in Glasgow. That is a use of accommodation that has been made elsewhere in the UK—we have a number of mother and baby buildings in the north-east Yorkshire and the Humber area—and they have worked very effectively to support single mothers.

We found a building that we agreed with Glasgow City Council was appropriate and would potentially offer that support, so we established it. That was during the Covid period, and the children's commissioner was concerned that the building did not meet the needs of mothers and babies in the way that it should. We took that on board, ended its use and used it for something different. We listen, we learn, and we do things for the best reasons. That type of unit has been very successful elsewhere, but it was not successful in this circumstance, so we ended its use.

The feedback that we get from the children's commissioner and any support group—I regularly talk to the Scottish Refugee Council—feeds into our service. We are constantly looking to improve our service and change it on the basis of feedback—empirical objective feedback. We will always look at what we can do to improve. It is an area on which people have strong opinions, and we try to work on an evidence base. We have invited many people to come to see our properties and the hotels to see what they are like and what we can do differently.

In the hotels, for example, we talk to service users about menus. We change the menus regularly, and we try to ensure that dietary requirements and people's views are taken into account. Nothing is perfect, but we listen and evolve and change our services to try to meet the pressures and criticisms that might be made.

I genuinely think that our staff are committed to that. Everything that I have seen when visiting the buildings and properties, talking to staff and reviewing our services and feedback shows that that is at the heart of what we do.

Caroline O'Connor: I want to add that we are concerned about mother and baby units, because there has been limited testing of their use and

there is limited evidence, so more needs to be done to understand and evidence the impact on mothers and babies. We are funding a pilot programme, at a cost of £165,000, with the Happy Baby Community in London, where there are some mother and baby units, to explore exactly that. The outputs will be included in a report from the Institute of Health Visiting on improving maternal mental health. We are also working with a steering group, which includes the institute and the Royal College of Midwives. The pilot programme started earlier this year, and we are working to get evidence around what best practice is to support mothers and babies.

Paul O'Kane: Obviously, the committee is cognisant of the Illegal Migration Bill and has been looking at its impacts. Caroline O'Connor, it has been suggested that a broader humanitarian strategy that would pull lots of different Scottish Government strategies together might be a better way to respond to that. Do you have a view on that?

Caroline O'Connor: I do have a view on that. I agree that such a strategy would be welcome, but I am very concerned about the urgency of the Illegal Migration Bill as it proceeds rapidly, so I think that it would be best for us to rely on the existing strategies, which are excellent in Scotland, and to do what we can to push towards those strategies rather than developing a new one.

The Convener: As we are on the theme of housing, now is an appropriate time to bring in the deputy convener, Maggie Chapman.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Good morning to the panel, and thank you for joining us and for the information that you have provided so far.

I want to drill down into the use of hotels and get a little more detail. John Taylor, I will come to you first. How does Mears go about selecting hotels, which are being used in more and more places in Scotland? How do you go about looking at and selecting hotels for use? What do you take into account?

John Taylor: The process has evolved over the two or three years for which hotels have been used. We have a lot more hotels in Northern Ireland and north-east Yorkshire than we have in Scotland. We look for town centre settings, so that people are not remote and they can leave the hotel and be part of the community, because it is clear that being isolated is a massive issue. We try to make sure that there are facilities such as adequate dining facilities on site and that there are areas where we can operate projects such as English lessons and play sessions for children if there are children at the hotel. We also try to make sure that there are sports activities for residents, so that they can be active, and that there are offices that health services can use to visit the site.

We try to make sure that the hotels that we use have those basic facilities. We look for en suite rooms so that people can have some privacy. We look to make sure that the hotels have at least 30 rooms, because that creates communities where people can make friendship groups and not feel too isolated in their own lives, because they are likely to be there for a number of months.

We are constrained by the market in relation to how many hotels are available and want to be involved in this type of process. As I said earlier, there is a lot of competition for the hotels; the Ukrainian programme also uses a lot of hotels, and, in some cities, the homelessness teams do as well.

We need to work on the art of the possible and what is available, and we need to make sure that there is value for money but also that we have a clear standard for the size of rooms, the facilities and the quality of the hotel to make sure that it is a decent place to stay, albeit that it might not be ideal.

The process is very much led by the market, then by our quality standards and location. Unfortunately, it is not always possible to get all that right, because of the limited supply.

Maggie Chapman: I will explore that a bit further. On the operation of the hotels, you talked about the need for culturally sensitive food and that kind of thing. What direct operational involvement do you have in the running and maintenance of the hotels once asylum seekers are accommodated there?

John Taylor: We are responsible for that hotel, so we have direct involvement. The hotel operator will provide the cleaning, laundry and reception staff 24 hours a day, so someone is always on site. We have a welfare officer on site.

Maggie Chapman: I am sorry to interrupt you. The hotel staff who do the cleaning and catering and so on will not necessarily have had trauma training or have expertise in dealing with people who have been through traumatic situations. Is that correct?

John Taylor: We provide training for the staff on site, and our welfare officer is on site. Someone from Mears who is fully trained as a welfare officer is on site, and we work with the hotels to make sure that their staff are supported.

The same goes for the security staff—we will have a security guard on site. That is as much to maintain order in the hotel as anything else. Sometimes people try to get into the hotel. Unfortunately, we sometimes have protesters. The security guards are not necessarily there because

of any issues in the hotel; their presence is more about making sure that people feel safe on site. Those security staff are trained and suitably qualified.

The people on site are trained and supported by us. We are responsible for their behaviour. If the behaviour of hotel staff falls below the standards that we set, we can deal with that with the hotel operator to make sure that staff treat residents in the way that we would expect and with the dignity and respect that would be expected of any operation.

We make sure that the hotel is cleaned daily and that people have the services that you would want. The food is very important, and we work very closely with caterers in the hotel to make sure that the menus are varied, that they change and that they adapt to the residents' personal requirements. Each hotel will have a different cohort of people, so we want to make sure that the food meets with what they would expect where they come from. That is really important to us.

We have a lot of input, and we have ultimate responsibility for what happens at the hotel.

Maggie Chapman: You mentioned welfare officers and security staff, who are Mears staff, and you said that they are trained. Can you tell me what training they have in engaging with potentially traumatised people and dealing with the complex issues that you have spoken about? What training do the staff who are on site all the time get?

10:15

John Taylor: Welfare officers go through a series of training sessions around dealing with trauma and vulnerabilities. I can email you a schedule of what training every welfare officer will have with us, because I will probably miss out a few of the courses if I try to do it from memory. They are fully trained.

The security guards are employed through accredited security companies and are fully trained, and we make sure that they go through some of our training sessions as well, so that they understand why they are in that hotel and that they understand cultural differences and sensitivities. The guards understand why they are in that hotel, why the hotel operates and who is living there. They go through that training with us, but they are accredited security guards.

Maggie Chapman: You talked about the locations that you look for—you said that you look for town centres and connections with other facilities. What engagement do you have with the local community, either prior to hotel selection or once a hotel has been identified? What engagement do you have with neighbouring residents and with the third sector? They will obviously be keen to provide some support that Mears and Migrant Help do not provide; we have heard about other third sector organisations coming in. How do you do that prior to asylum seekers being moved into the hotel?

The Convener: I interject to say that my colleague Pam Gosal will drill down into the issue of the third sector. Feel free to answer the question, John, but perhaps you could leave the part of it about the third sector, because we have a separate line of questioning on that.

John Taylor: Okay. Thank you.

In the lead-up to our putting forward a hotel as potentially available—the Home Office is ultimately responsible for deciding whether that hotel is booked and comes into occupation—there is substantial consultation with the local authority around services, including education, if any children will be in the hotel, which is not often the case, health services and the police. A lot of conversations go on with all those statutory agencies, as well as with the third sector, which, as the convener said, we will come on to.

When we set the hotel up, the police will often come in and talk to the residents about community safety and understanding of cultural differences. We work very closely with the local authority—in Perth and Kinross, for example, we have weekly meetings with the council—to discuss how we will support the hotel users and how we will buy extra services to make sure that they are well and that their wellbeing is protected.

I would say that the engagement that we have from Scottish councils is very positive when compared with that in other areas of the UK. The councils look to make sure that we have those networks with the police, health services and support groups, so that we can create projects and activities that keep people as busy, fit and healthy as possible. The engagement is as positive as anywhere, and we really welcome the way that the local authorities approach that with us.

Maggie Chapman: I have a couple more questions for John Taylor, after which I will come to Caroline O'Connor. On wider engagement with local residents, if there are local residents who want to come in to speak to and welcome the asylum seekers who are accommodated in hotels, how do the welfare officers and security personnel that you have on site manage that?

John Taylor: We have to be very careful. With anyone who comes on site, we have to know their reasons for doing so. Down in north-east Yorkshire and the Humber, we discovered that some people who wanted to come on site had other motives. There are a lot of far-right

protesters, so we have to be very careful about who is allowed in.

We ask that people come to us through voluntary organisations, so that we can agree access and make sure that people are safe and that there is no poor behaviour, which is more than possible. The security and safety of the residents must come first. If there are community resident groups that want to engage with us, we absolutely do engage, but we need to make sure that it is done in a supportive and positive way and that access to the hotel is safe.

Maggie Chapman: In Scotland, what is the average length of time for which people stay in hotels? We have already heard about the availability of dispersal accommodation and hotels being more and more institutionalised, which is problematic, but what is the average length of stay in hotels?

John Taylor: It is really hard to give an average, because, until very recently, we had only a small number of hotels, which were in Glasgow. It has been only within the past nine months that we have got to 11 or 12 hotels. Some people have been in a hotel in Glasgow for more than a year—some have been there for approaching two years. That is due to how long they have been in the system.

We will move people out of a hotel only when the Home Office asks us to, because that person has reached the point where section 98 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 applies to them, rather than section 95, and we can move them to dispersal accommodation. Therefore, the pace at which we move people out is dictated by the Home Office.

If we feel that someone needs to be prioritised, we will petition through Migrant Help, asking that the person be moved sooner for their wellbeing. Some people move on within weeks or months; it is to do with their priorities and where they are in the system. Therefore, there is no rule of thumb other than that we would all say that people are living in hotels for far too long and that the quicker we can get dispersal accommodation for those in hotels, the better.

Maggie Chapman: I have one final—

The Convener: Before you proceed, Rachael Hamilton has indicated that she would like to follow up on that.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Why are there challenges in moving people to dispersal accommodation? You stated that some individuals could become institutionalised in hotel accommodation.

John Taylor: It is down to the availability of accommodation. Last year, there was agreement to wide dispersal across Scotland, out of Glasgow, and we work closely with COSLA, the 32 councils and the Scottish Government to agree what dispersal should look like. Rather than just starting without good consultation, we spent a number of months agreeing a plan on dispersal with COSLA and the local authorities.

Consequently, it is only over the past couple of months that we have been trying to acquire properties on the scale that is needed to ensure that people can move out—so that people are not staying in hotels for too long. Therefore, there is a timing issue with regard to getting the dispersal accommodation across the country so that we have the volume that we need in order to move people out.

The decision on how people move out and are prioritised rests with the Home Office. Caroline O'Connor is part of that process, so I am sure that she can offer some insight into how the inspection and test plan process works.

At the moment, the issue for us is a dearth of property. We are not acquiring any more properties in Glasgow. We have more than 5,000 service users in Glasgow, which is far too many for one city, so we are trying to procure property across greater Glasgow, the central belt, up the east coast to Dundee and Aberdeen, the Lothians and, eventually, in all 32 councils. We hope that will mean that supply can catch up with demand and we can end the use of hotels so that people will not stay in hotels for the period that they are there at the moment.

Rachael Hamilton: Are asylum seekers comfortable with the process of—

The Convener: We seemed to lose you for a moment, Rachael. Do you want to repeat your last sentence?

Rachael Hamilton: Yes. Thank you, convener. Are asylum seekers comfortable with being moved from a city to a rural area, if that is their only option?

John Taylor: I would not say that they are comfortable with it; it is very challenging. Generally, people who go into the hotels are newly arrived in the country. Often, they are coming from the south of England to Scotland or, probably most commonly, people have claimed asylum in Scotland. We will place them where we have a hotel room. It is fair to say that, generally, people would like to be in Glasgow, because they know that there are lots of networks in Glasgow. We do not have hotels in rural settings, but we have them in smaller towns—Perth, Aberdeen, Dundee and Erskine in Renfrewshire. There are a number of different hotel settings, which are generally urban settings.

People would prefer to be in Glasgow, but we have made the commitment that we will have no more hotels in Glasgow due to the overwhelming demand on that accommodation. I do not think that anyone is comfortable with moving to a hotel unless they are going to be there for only a few weeks. We try to ensure that they are well informed about what is happening. However, generally, people in hotels are newly arrived in the country, they come through that system and we will place them as best we can.

The Convener: I will return to Maggie to finish her line of questioning.

Maggie Chapman: John Taylor spoke about selecting dispersal accommodation, and I get your point about availability, but a traumatised family was recently placed in a boarded-up block of flats on the edge of a derelict and abandoned estate in Port Glasgow. How on earth was that allowed to happen? There is nobody else in the block, or only one or two other residents. How was that deemed to be an appropriate place to put a traumatised family?

John Taylor: That clearly was not right. That is probably part of the learning process around wide dispersal. There was a process of talking to the local authority and getting approval for that property, but it is a new process for the authority, too. Many local authorities do not have in place the resource to work with us to make sure that we are taking properties in the right place.

The property that you are referring to is in Port Glasgow, I believe. That clearly was not appropriate; therefore, we moved the family and we no longer manage that property. We learned and we got rid of it.

As we go to wide dispersal, we need to learn from those instances to make sure that there are more checks on whether we have got the right area. We know Glasgow incredibly well, and the authority is well resourced to work with us and to advise us on what is appropriate. With all the local authorities that we are now working with, we are learning how to make sure that we get it right. If we get it wrong, we will put it right and we will end that arrangement. That is an absolute commitment.

Maggie Chapman: Thank you for waiting, Caroline O'Connor. I am curious to hear a little bit more about whether you feel that you have the facilities and the access that you would want in order to engage with the individuals and communities in hotels to provide the support that you spoke of earlier. What challenges do you find in engaging with those in hotel accommodation?

Caroline O'Connor: It is a lot more complex than it used to be. We used to have clients based in the Glasgow area and they could come into our offices and see our staff face to face. I have 432 employees, the subcontractors have 250 more and there are 400 hotels around the UK, so we cannot be everywhere. However, when a new hotel is set up, we tend to send a team in and work with Mears staff on site to ensure that those communication channels exist.

We give posters and leaflets in translated form to clients so that they know who to contact. We run a 24/7 telephone line with interpretation. We do around 20,000 hours of interpretation in Scotland alone, over the telephone and face to face, so there is good access and language support in that work. Last month, across the UK, we provided 2,000 devices for communication, which comprised 1,500 SIM cards as well as some telephones, laptops and tablets, to try to make access better. However, it is incredibly difficult; it is really difficult to reach people in the hotels.

We work with Mears staff in hotels to set up appointments with clients, and our staff make attempts to contact people who do not necessarily want to be sitting in the hotel and waiting. They share phones among them; not everyone has a phone or some have lost their phones on their journeys to the UK.

It is very fruitful to make contact with people in hotels. Ideally, we would be in a situation in which people would pass through Glasgow initially, where staff and support services are concentrated, and then they would be dispersed in the wide dispersal after they have had that initial contact. In that way, they would be familiar with working with us and the other charities in the sector. That would be the best of both worlds.

It worked incredibly well in Scotland—probably the best that I have seen in the UK—for people in the flats, who had the independence to buy what they needed to care for themselves and to make contact and get support, but we recognise that the population is so huge at the moment that that is not practical.

Maggie Chapman: I suppose that, because of the difficulties that you raise, you would have concerns about hotel accommodation being used extensively and about the periods that people are in hotels for becoming longer because of the lack of dispersal accommodation or the time that it takes to process all of that. Are there things that you think that we, collectively, could do better to get people out of hotels more quickly? What would be your silver bullet if you had one?

Caroline O'Connor: There are two parts to that. First, there should be quicker decision making, and I know that the Home Office is employing more decision makers to help because the system has been slowed down by decision making.

Secondly, affordable housing is also needed. When people receive a positive decision, they potentially need to move on to UK benefits or into employment, so they will need affordable housing. Between asylum support, homelessness support, the Ukrainian scheme and the Afghan scheme, the rental market is incredibly tight. A solution needs to be found with regard to accommodation that people can afford. That is a UK-wide problem.

10:30

I know that, in earlier sessions with the committee, people mentioned solutions involving modular buildings. One person who gave evidence said that that would be fine as long as there are not camps of asylum seekers in modular buildings; people must be in the communities. I think that that sort of support for asylum seekers is really important, as long as that community embedding is still going on.

Maggie Chapman: Thank you. I will leave it there, convener.

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): Good morning, Caroline O'Connor and John Taylor. Thank you for your opening statements.

This question is for John. Our committee papers state that Mears has an obligation to keep a daily attendance record of people in initial accommodation. What data do you collect and record, and how is that data used? Do you think that better information sharing between your organisation and the Home Office and local authorities would be helpful?

John Taylor: We keep an attendance log, because it is important that we know who is in the building, for purposes of safety and safeguarding. We record on our central system—it is a very secure information technology system—who is allocated to which bedroom. We need to be able to report back to the Home Office, at the end of every week or on a named day, that the people it placed in a hotel are still there, that they are well and that they are receiving the support that is being paid for.

The hotels have free access; people can come and go. If they want to be away for a night or two to visit people, that is absolutely fine; they just let us know about that and it is recorded. It is more a matter of safeguarding, because some people disappear, and we therefore need to ensure that that room is reused by someone else. We are alive to the risk of trafficking as well, so recording that information is a safeguard to ensure that we are aware that people are where they should be and are getting the support that they need.

The Home Office has that data. It knows where everyone is housed. In our regular calls to local authorities, we update them on how many people are in the hotels and whether they will access general practitioner services. We show what data we can in accordance with general data protection regulation, so local authorities should be aware of how many people we house in the hotels at any one time.

Pam Gosal: I will come back to the issue of vulnerable people and traffickers a bit later on. Last week, representatives of COSLA and local authorities spoke to the committee about the work that Mears does with them, and they said that they had a great working relationship with you. However, we have heard lots of concerns from the third sector, which delivers many of the key services that asylum seekers rely on. Would you say that there has to be a good working relationship between Mears and the third sector? How do you feel that that relationship should be improved?

John Taylor: I think that we have a good relationship with many third sector organisations. I will share with the committee a summary of all the projects that we run with the hotel residents that go over and above the normal accommodation service in order to bring in the third sector to give the residents support.

We work very closely with TARA, for example, and with a lot of local charities that provide additional support, such as to mothers who are on their own and to vulnerable people. We have an incredibly rich network of contacts with third sector organisations. There are also local football clubs that run regular football sessions for young men and women in the hotels who need exercise. We try to have a vast array of people in that network.

There is no organisation that we will not talk to in order to see whether we can bring in its assistance. We make sure that the support that is provided is safe, well managed and productive so that people's time in the hotels is as comfortable and as good as it possibly can be, given the shortcomings of living in a hotel.

Pam Gosal: You said earlier that you signpost. In other words, you work with the third sector to bring in whatever is needed for an asylum seeker. Is that right?

John Taylor: We try to, yes.

Pam Gosal: Okay. On the issue of trafficking, we have heard from witnesses over the weeks that, typically, hotels are targeted by traffickers in order to exploit vulnerable individuals in that accommodation. It was great to hear from TARA and Police Scotland about the work that is being undertaken to safeguard asylum seekers and refugees. How has your working relationship with TARA and Migrant Help changed your operation to

help protect individuals who might be vulnerable to traffickers?

John Taylor: Safeguarding is at the heart of what we do. We recognise that people who come into the system and come to hotels are only newly arrived in the country and that it is a disorientating time for them. As a result, we work very closely with Migrant Help and other bodies to ensure that we get the induction right and that people are aware of whom they can come to for help. If they are concerned, worried or have issues, they know whom to talk to, whether it be Migrant Help or a welfare officer.

We work very closely with the local police, who will come on site and talk to people about their concerns. Moreover, as people said at previous committee meetings, we work very well with TARA to ensure that its information and services are available.

That is an issue that we are all alive to, and it is one that has been well managed in Scotland with regard to protecting people. It is a priority for us. I think that the relationships and the systems that we have in place with the statutory and voluntary organisations have proved to be very strong, but no one is going to be complacent about what is clearly a massive risk and a concern for everybody.

Pam Gosal: Caroline O'Connor, do you have anything to say on the issue?

Caroline O'Connor: Yes. We work with TARA and Police Scotland to provide support to victims and potential victims, and we meet to discuss operational matters relating to people who are accessing our services as well as specific cases.

We talk to people about people in the trafficking service who might be moving and are aware of risk. We also take reports both through our Glasgow office and on the telephone of concerns about people in the hotels who might be traffickers and, if necessary, we will flag any such risk up to the police, to the Home Office and to Mears.

It is worth noting that risks can arise equally in initial asylum accommodation as they can in hotels, so they have always been present in the system, and it is really important that accommodation providers have good staff who are alert to such things and can flag up any risks, say, from people they see hanging around the hotels. Having eyes on the ground makes the biggest difference. The asylum seekers we support often provide the first chance for us to hear about something, and we are really quick to flag that sort of thing up.

Pam Gosal: Could Mears make any improvements to ensure that vulnerable people are protected from traffickers?

Caroline O'Connor: It is something that we, Mears, the Home Office and, indeed, the whole sector need to work on. We need to work on flagging up risk. For example, when Ukrainians came to the UK, we worked with Unseen UK to send text messages to the phones of people coming from Ukraine, saying, "There is a risk of traffickers. When you arrive at the airport, watch out for that."

As a nation and a community, we want to support asylum seekers by telling them what trafficking looks like. In fact, our translation subsidiary became aware that some languages do not even have a word for trafficking, so knowledge of the people who are at the greatest risk is where we will make a difference.

Pam Gosal: I have just one more question, which is on religious settings. John Taylor said earlier that, sometimes, you will have to go out of the city centres and provide accommodation in hotels in rural areas, but what we have heard in evidence is that, for people coming from a foreign country, where they feel at home is in their religious settings—their mosques, their gurdwaras, their synagogues, their churches or anywhere else they feel that sort of comfort. As we know, a lot of rural areas do not have many such places of community. Do you take that into account when you move people around? Moreover, does the data that you collect on people's backgrounds tell you what they require with regard to community settings and houses of prayer?

John Taylor: When we are offered or identify a hotel, one of the things that we look at is its setting. We try to avoid rural settings completely, but some are on the edge of town, which is a bit more challenging.

We look at where there are places of worship, and if we establish a hotel, we talk to those places of worship to enable our residents to go to that place of worship or the place of worship to come to them. We work very closely with local mosques in particular. During periods such as Eid or Ramadan, we do a lot of work to make sure that our residents can observe correctly and get the support that they need from the mosques.

That network with faith groups is really important, and it is established when we open up a hotel. It is always difficult to do, but it is one of the priorities, because, as you say, if you are new in a country and are not able to access your faith, it is completely disorientating and leaves people feeling vulnerable and cut off.

Interacting with those faith groups is important to us, so yes, absolutely, that is one of the priorities when we establish a hotel.

Pam Gosal: Is it a tailored service, or do you tell people when they come where the mosques,

gurdwaras and churches are as part of the induction? Do you identify someone from a Muslim background and say, “This is what is available for your faith”? Is it individual, or do you just provide the information in group settings?

John Taylor: It is a bit of both. It depends on the size of the hotel and what is nearby. It depends on how close the nearest mosque is and how that mosque interacts with us. Most of them interact positively and reach out to create those networks. If there is a need for transport, we will help to establish transport and so forth to make sure that people can access those services. It is not a one-size-fits-all approach.

However, equally, we do not know who will be placed in each hotel. The faiths will change, so we need to adapt, as you say, to the cohort of people who live in that hotel to make sure that we adjust as that changes over time. One of the key things is to ensure that we get the food menu right and that it respects people’s faith requirements.

Pam Gosal: To go back to trafficking, we have heard evidence that women—and certain individuals—may not always go to the police but will sometimes trust third sector organisations and go there first. The police also identified that. That may be because, in the countries where those women come from, the police have a different system. I will not say what kind of system, but it is perhaps not trustworthy for those women, so, when they come here, they are scared to go to the police. Do you find that, sometimes, those women come to Mears for help before going to the police?

John Taylor: One hundred per cent. There is often, quite rightly, a fear of authority. People in uniform can be very intimidating, based on the person’s past experience and why they have come to this country for sanctuary. Our welfare officers do a huge amount of work on that first point of contact. The welfare officer on site will be that first point of contact, and they will contact Migrant Help on site or by phone.

Last week, I was with welfare officers in Glasgow and we talked about the impact that those issues have on them. They hear some very disturbing stories about what happens to people in their country of origin. That is quite traumatic for our staff, and we need provide them with support. However, they are very aware of those pressures and the need to ensure that the people who come to them get the support that they need and access the services that they need through the police in a way that is supportive and not intimidating.

Pam Gosal: Caroline O’Connor, do you want to add anything before I hand back to the convener?

Caroline O’Connor: We speak to every asylum seeker when they enter the system and they complete the asylum support form. We ask that question of them. We ask about their experience, and we try to explain what trafficking is. Both men and women are given that opportunity.

We are a first responder across the UK, because we recognise that people do not always go to the police if they feel uncomfortable. They can then enter the national referral mechanism, and we support them in their application to that. We work very closely with Police Scotland to give people the opportunity to tell their story.

One of the key concerns around the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 is the need under the act for people to declare that they are a victim of trafficking early, because it is a frightening thing to admit to. We take a very trauma-informed approach and try to help people disclose any trafficking in their history.

The Convener: In previous sessions, we have heard a lot of evidence on the experiences of children in the system. I want to kick off by talking about unaccompanied children. Caroline, will you give us a quick overview of unaccompanied children’s experience of the system here?

10:45

Caroline O’Connor: In Scotland, we tend to deal with unaccompanied children who have been assessed as adults. They are dispersed into accommodation as adults. We have supported other asylum seekers in their families but, if we are concerned that someone looks like a child, or they self-identify as being under 18, we employ an age dispute adviser, through our resources, to work with that young person—our staff are trained in that.

We refer the young person to the local authority social services and explain the system for disputing their age. We advise the accommodation provider, so that they can make them safe in new accommodation and move them to a location where they are not housed with adults. We also give them signposting and support in getting the legal advice that they need. We follow up on that—because we know that it is a lot for a young person to cope with—to make sure that they get legal advice on changing their status within the system.

Our services do not support people who are placed as unaccompanied minors. That is a contract that the Refugee Council holds with the Home Office.

The Convener: Reference has been made to the Scottish Government’s pilot of independent child trafficking guardians, the aim of which is to tackle child trafficking. Anyone who is under 18 who is suspected of being a victim, and

unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, will be given a guardian. What is your experience of that?

Caroline O'Connor: We do not cross into that work at all, but we really support the pilot and agree that there is a need for it, because there is a great risk. We know that a huge number of young people are coming across the channel in small boats, and the traffickers are taking advantage of that.

The Convener: John, in your opening statement, you mentioned that you support 16 schools. What is the nature of that support?

John Taylor: That is our facilities management service. We provide the facilities management to those schools—we do the cleaning, the caretaking and the mechanical engineering system. It is not support of the pupils; we make sure that those schools are fit and safe places to learn.

The Convener: Oh, right.

John Taylor: That has extended the services that Mears has across Scotland; that was what I was trying to explain.

The Convener: So, it is not specifically for—

John Taylor: It is not for asylum seekers, no. I was trying to explain the breadth of the services that Mears has in Scotland.

The Convener: Okay—I am glad that we have got that cleared up.

You talked a little about the mother and baby unit that Mears used in Glasgow and the lessons that were learned there. However, recently, another hotel has been mentioned in the press where about 10 rooms are being used for mothers—and mothers-to-be, I suppose. I will not name the hotel, but I am aware of it. I know that the size is quite limiting and that there are no kitchen facilities for mothers to have some kind of autonomy. Can you give us a bit of insight into why that particular hotel was chosen? I am bearing in mind that you have already said that it is not ideal to have mothers and babies in hotels.

John Taylor: The mother and baby unit in Glasgow had its own kitchen, so they could make their own food. Unfortunately, there are a small number of mothers and babies in the hotels. That is purely down to supply. We had to find capacity so that, when a mother and baby arrived in the country, we could make sure that they had a room to live in. They are prioritised with the Home Office to move on to dispersal accommodation as soon as possible.

We make sure that mothers have access to food, powdered milk and baby equipment—nappies and everything else that they need—while they are in the hotel, and the hotel is charged with making sure that the food is appropriate for a nursing mother. As I say, that situation is far from ideal, and we try to minimise the time that they are there.

That hotel was the one that was available at the time to meet the housing need, because those people needed somewhere to live. It is not ideal. I would much rather that we did not have children in the hotels but, for the short period of time that they need to be there, we try to make it as comfortable and well designed as possible to make life easy for them.

The Convener: However, you get the fact that a hotel room with, say, a double bed in it, will not necessarily have space for a crib and all the equipment that a newborn baby would require. It is a very vulnerable time for any mother, but especially for a mother who is fleeing from trauma and needs additional support services. What is the availability of the health and social care services that that mother and child will need?

John Taylor: Yes, it is far from ideal. We try to ensure that the room can take a cot, and we can give them the equipment that they need. Space is limited and, as you rightly say, it is not where a young child and mother should be—it absolutely is not. All that we can do is try to move them on as quickly as possible. We work closely with health and social care partnerships in all the authorities to ensure that those mothers have a GP service and that the asylum health bridging team, which is excellent, is available to those mothers daily. I cannot speak highly enough of the bridging teams that provide that service to the mothers in our hotels.

The priority for us is to ensure that they stay in a hotel for the least possible time, if at all, and that we get them into dispersed accommodation, so that they have their own space and their own home.

The Convener: With regard to slightly older children—I am thinking of primary school-age children but, actually, this applies all the way through the system—children need to be with other children. What facilities or provisions do you put in place so that people, and children in particular, can be connected to each other? I am thinking of playrooms and places where they can have access to toys and books.

John Taylor: We do that where the hotel has sufficient space. As I said, when we take on a hotel, we try to ensure that it has communal areas where we can create playrooms. We can and do work with voluntary organisations to ensure that toys, play spaces and books in various languages are available. We also work closely with education authorities to ensure that the children have access to a school place—if they are going to be there for some time, the children will access school.

If we then move them into dispersal accommodation, we try to ensure that we minimise the possibility of the need for a move to another school. That is one of the key aspects. In the north-east Yorkshire and the Humber area, we try to ensure that school places are maintained and that we disperse people in the same catchment area so that there is the least disruption possible to a child's education.

It is a far from ideal situation, but it is about doing the best that we can to provide the environment that a child needs, and a hotel clearly is not that. We work with Glasgow City Council, and we learn from how it operates its homelessness system and how it supports children in that system and the education, health and social services systems to ensure that we follow best practice in looking after the wellbeing of young children who, as you say, are growing and developing.

The Convener: Thank you for your answers. The evidence that I have heard—it is anecdotal and has been gathered through chats, but it is people's lived experience, so it is entirely valid—is that, when there are tensions in the system and things are not working or go wrong, very vulnerable people have to rely on third-sector organisations or advocates to defend their case and fight their corner. You have given us a good outline of what you technically provide, and I am sure that you do provide that, but a common phrase that I have heard is, "Mears gets there in the end, but you have to fight for it."

You are clearly very experienced at this—you run lots of outlets and do lots of things—so why are people still asking why you are not getting it right the first time? I am sure that that is what you want to do, so why is that not happening?

John Taylor: Of course, that is what we want to do, and I would suggest that we get it right first time the majority of the time. The scale of what we are operating and the speed at which it operates mean that there will be times when we get it wrong. I believe that we try to rectify those problems as quickly as we can. I completely understand the position whereby an NGO or advocating organisation might feel that, in this system, they are banging their heads against a wall when waiting for us to respond. I believe that we respond, but we have to go through a process.

We work closely with Migrant Help, because it is there to take those issues on board for the service user, and then we go to the Home Office to say that we need to move somebody or do something in particular. When a problem is just for us to solve, I hope that we solve it as soon as possible, within the confines of the situation.

At the moment, in the hotel population, the vast majority of the service users—492 out of 585—are single males. We have 10 single females in the hotel and 83 family cases. We try to keep families right down to a minimum, and it is the case that they flow through.

I believe that we learn and that we put problems right as soon as possible, but I completely understand why, from the outside, some NGOs and voluntary groups think that the system is frustrating and wonder why it takes us two or three days to respond when they think that it should be that day. Maybe it should be, and we are trying to make sure that we are responsive to those needs.

I will always take on board any cases that you want to send to me personally and I will advocate for them, because I am personally responsible for the contracts. Across the three contract areas in three countries, we are currently looking after 30,000 people. The welfare of 30,000 people means a lot, and we want to confront and deal with anything that happens that is not right.

If someone in your position comes to me with a case and says that they have heard that a person is struggling and asks why, I would always prefer to give them chapter and verse and make sure that they understand the issues and what we have tried to do. We will put our hands up and say that we could have done something quicker, and we will try to find out why something went wrong and put it right.

On the whole, I am close enough to the system and to the staff to know that we approach everything with the best possible intention of centring the service users—the residents—at the heart of what we do. There is no point in looking after 30,000 people—

The Convener: I think that my colleague Ben Macpherson would like to come in.

Ben Macpherson: I have a general point, but I do not know whether this is the right juncture and whether you are content for me to come in, convener.

The Convener: I am content.

Ben Macpherson: Thank you.

I want to ask about the evidence that has been given thus far. I note the point from my colleague Mr O'Kane about immigration law being a reserved matter, but all the evidence that I have seen over several years is that migrants make a net contribution and that there is not just a wider social benefit but an economic one. Most of the areas in which asylum seekers are placed in Scotland are experiencing labour shortages.

I appreciate that Caroline O'Connor might be able to say more about this than John Taylor but,

where you can comment, I would be interested to hear your reflections on how much benefit it would bring if we took a sensible approach that allowed asylum seekers to work and to participate in the economy. They could then begin to make their net contribution at an earlier stage. They could access resource, build their skills and help themselves to get housing, and they could contribute to society as much as those who successfully make their way through the asylum system.

John Taylor: As you said, it is difficult. I am here to represent Mears, which is a service provider and not a political or campaigning organisation, so I would rather not comment on policy. However, although we have talked about the vulnerability of some of the people we look after, we know that most if not all of the people we accommodate want to be involved in the community. They want to have jobs and to be productive. They have come here for a reason, and anything that we can do to support them to become part of the community, we will do.

If we look at the migration that has taken place during the past 500 years, we see that the country is a richer place in many ways because of it. I do not want to make a political comment, but I recognise the rich backgrounds of the people whom we accommodate. Some of them are professional skilled people, but they are going through the system, and we hope that, when they get a positive decision, they will go on to make a productive contribution to society.

Caroline O'Connor: I thank Ben Macpherson for raising that point. Employability is an issue that is really close to the heart of Migrant Help. This year, we are providing around £200,000 towards projects to help people to access employability. That helps with community cohesion and it helps people to appreciate the benefits that asylum seekers bring to the system. There are labour shortages not only in Scotland but across the UK, and we also have a group of people who desperately want to work.

The majority of the asylum seekers we see are typically young men who will become institutionalised through sitting in hotels or asylum accommodation, and because they are unable to work, unable to access enough ESOL—English for speakers of other languages—lessons and unable to put their skills to use.

Giving them the chance to make a contribution would be much more effective. It would move them much more quickly through the system, and the cost of the asylum system could be driven down. At the moment, people wait until they have a decision and move on to benefits before they have the opportunity to find work. If that opportunity was there earlier, it would release pressure across the system.

11:00

The Convener: Caroline O'Connor, I want to ask you again about the children's situation. I do not think that you got a chance to respond to the question about when there are tensions in the system and things have not worked out well. How well do you think things are resolved at the moment? Are children listened to empathetically? How quickly are things resolved? What could be done to support either your organisation or Mears? Obviously, we will be making recommendations at the end of this inquiry, so how can things be improved?

Caroline O'Connor: One of the issues is tensions resulting from the volume. Reducing the volume in the system by quicker decision making, by providing accommodation and by helping people to move on and start their lives will make a big difference.

When Migrant Help tendered for this contract four years ago, there was around one third of the volume that we currently see in the system. The systems across the charity sector are stretched to breaking point. Covid decimated some of the charities' funds and their ability to work. More funding directed towards third sector groups that help people—particularly people who have completed the asylum journey, whether they have no recourse to public funds or have just received a decision—will make a big difference in helping with the pressures on the system. Engaging people in communities—putting them into properties rather than hotels as soon as possible, so they can stay in a community once they have received their decisions—will help tremendously.

All the things in the new Scots refugee integration strategy are more important than ever in the situation that we are facing and will make a real difference to the services. In this meeting, we have talked about interpretation and the access to language resources and ESOL. For people who are entering the asylum system and spending two years looking for something to do, funding of ESOL from the Scottish Government would be really welcome. It would help employability and it would help access to services.

Continuing to push the Scottish strategy forward and seeing what the central Government is willing to fund or can push to help solve some of these problems would also make a big difference. I recognise that asylum seekers are coming to Scotland because they feel that the services and support here are better. It would be fantastic if those lessons about what is working and what people are coming for could be taken to the UK Government.

The Convener: Thanks. I will bring in my colleague Fulton MacGregor.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): Good morning. First, I offer my apologies for attending most of the meeting remotely, via an online connection. The reason for that was significant delays on the Airdrie-Bathgate train line today, which I am sure will be reported on, given the extent of them.

I have a few questions, convener. I hope that you will have some sympathy with my travel woes and allow me to ask them. Will that be all right?

The Convener: I can give you a little bit of leeway, Fulton.

Fulton MacGregor: I really appreciate that, convener. I apologise if I missed anything and my questions have been answered. If that is the case, please just say so.

My first question is for John Taylor. I know that Mears has been looking at forming a housing association. Are you able to update on any progress around that? How might that impact the work that you do with asylum seekers?

John Taylor: That is something that is very important to us. As I said in my opening remarks, in England, we have a housing association with registered providers and we provide 3,500 homes for homeless families on behalf of local authorities. We are very keen to have a housing association in Scotland through which we could work with local authorities to provide move-in accommodation for asylum seekers who get a positive decision. We are acutely aware that that is going to become a massive problem for local authorities. Part of wide dispersal is about where the people who receive positive decisions go. Certainly, Glasgow has a huge challenge.

We have been working with the Scottish Housing Regulator for the past five years to see whether we can register, showing the extent of our services not just on homelessness but around special needs housing and elderly housing. We showed the regulator the models that we work in England, which are viable and successful. The feedback that we have had this year is that the regulator has concerns about registering a housing association where the ultimate parent is a private company.

If it was registered, the housing association would be a charity—it would be a stand-alone limited company. It would be linked to our English housing association, which is a not-for-profit body that is owned by Mears. We have been talking with Glasgow about operating a scheme to acquire hundreds of properties for homeless households, to alleviate the pressure directly for asylum seekers who get a positive decision, so that they can stay in Glasgow and go into employment and the children can stay in their schools. We have the funding to be able to buy those properties, and we would love to be able to secure them. However, to operate that scheme, we need that registered social landlord status in Scotland and, at the moment, the regulator is not minded to register us.

I am looking to see whether we can pursue a similar course of funding without RSL status. It is harder, because giving a homeless family an RSL tenancy is quite powerful. It gives them security after years of insecurity in the asylum system. To have a secure tenancy and know that they can settle without the uncertainty that they have been living under would be brilliant. We have been, and are, committed to setting up an RSL, but it would be the first of its kind in Scotland and there are clearly some challenges. However, it is something that we would really like to do.

Fulton MacGregor: Thanks for that update. I know from the presence that you have in North Lanarkshire, where my constituency is, that that is something that you have been working on for a period of time.

I am sorry if my line of questioning is a bit disjointed and does not join up exactly, but please bear with me. This is probably for Caroline O'Connor and John Taylor. What are your thoughts on the issue of interpreters, which has come up in the various committee sessions that we have had on this subject? What is the service provision like around interpreters? A lot of people have told us that there are real concerns in that area. Are there difficulties with it, and how might those be overcome?

Caroline O'Connor: We are lucky in that we do not have any issues with interpreters. We have a subsidiary company that provides interpretation and translation for Migrant Help, on our telephone lines and for every meeting with a client where it is required. We get an interpreter on the line within two minutes 90 per cent of the time. Even with difficult languages, we have processes in place to work with other agencies and we have good information about the languages that clients speak. There is really good resourcing around interpretation.

We provide translation for some other organisations, and our subsidiary has a project called InPower that trains interpreters. We try to identify people who have received refugee status who may want to work as interpreters, and we fund the training for them with no comeback—they are not required to come and work for us. We are trying to populate those more difficult languages with interpreters.

It is important that other agencies have access to interpreters, as well. Our subsidiary provides small grants to small charities so that they are able to get interpreters, but it is really important that the Government has those facilities in place as well. I

know that the NHS does and that the subcontractors that we use when people get move-on support have that provision.

We work with Mears and the other accommodation providers to translate their information, and people call our helpline when they get a letter in English that they do not understand. We will get an interpreter on the line to read it to them. It is really important that people understand where they can get interpreters and what their rights are and that organisations that do not have that provision look to put it in place.

Fulton MacGregor: John Taylor, do you have anything to add to that? How does your team access interpreters? Is there any difficulty with that or do you feel that you have that provision?

John Taylor: There is no particular difficulty. As Caroline O'Connor has said, all of our information has now been translated into the 12 most common languages, and that covers just about everybody in our system. The induction and information packs have all the information on the AIRE contract that Caroline O'Connor runs and that is where the issues reporting goes.

All of our staff have an app on their tablets that links straight into LanguageLine, which means that, when they are in a property with one of our residents—or wherever they might be—they can immediately access an interpreter so that they can have a three-way conversation. That is available at the hotel, and it means that we can always access an interpreter. We use local interpreters, too, so if we need someone on site, we can arrange that.

It is not one of the biggest problems that we have. The systems are in place.

Fulton MacGregor: I have just one final question, convener, if that is okay.

The Convener: It will have to be a very small question, with very succinct answers.

Fulton MacGregor: It will be small, and it might already have been answered. Given what the convener has said, panel, if that is the case, please say so.

This is probably for John Taylor, although Caroline O'Connor might be able to respond, too. A question that has come to mind during these evidence sessions is how you actually manage a situation in which asylum seekers are coming from different countries or different regions. Is Mears, or are other organisations, aware of any difficulties in that respect, and how are they managed? I realise that that is a very general question.

John Taylor: We have people coming from multiple countries, but I think that the vast majority of asylum seekers come from 12 countries in total. After four years of running the contract, we have good experience of understanding where people have come from and some of the issues that they have been fleeing. Obviously, that is what our translation services are aimed at.

With hotel settings, it is important that we get the integration and cohesion right and ensure that the various nationalities can live together well. It is all just part of the process. The hotels are more of a challenge, but, with such accommodation, it is all about understanding people's social needs and ensuring that they have access to services. There are, especially in Glasgow, a lot of groups that deal with and support Afghans, Somalis or Eritreans. For example, in Scotland, Glasgow Afghan United has been fantastic in reaching out to and helping us work with those communities. It does some superb work with us.

Fulton MacGregor: Do you have anything to add, Caroline?

Caroline O'Connor: It is worth adding that we take through our telephone line reports of racial tensions or such concerns arising between different groups in accommodation or in any of the hotels and we will escalate those matters to the Home Office and Mears and, indeed, to the police, if there is any real risk of trouble starting. We recognise that different factions in a country can end up in the same place, and we are very alert to such risks.

The Convener: Just before we conclude our formal business, I should say that members have indicated other lines of questioning. Are our witnesses content for us to write with any further questions?

Witnesses: Yes.

The Convener: Thank you for that.

John Taylor: Also, if anyone would like to come and visit any of our hotels or buildings, we will be absolutely happy to accommodate that.

The Convener: Thank you.

That concludes our formal business this morning, and I thank our witnesses for attending. We now move into private session to consider the remaining item on our agenda.

11:13

Meeting continued in private until 12:05.

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