

New contracts for Asylum Accommodation, Support and Advice

What do refugee and asylum support projects need to know?

For the last 7 years, asylum accommodation in the UK has been governed by a contract known as COMPASS. On 8 January 2019, the Home Office announced that it had awarded the next generation of asylum accommodation and support contracts following a procurement exercise. These contracts are known as **AASC (Asylum Accommodation and Support Services Contract)** and **AIRE (Advice, Information and Eligibility Assistance Services)**.

Who is responsible for the AASC and AIRE contracts?

There are three private accommodation providers, responsible for meeting the terms of the AASC contracts in different regions / nations of the UK. In some regions / nations, the accommodation provider is changing following the procurement exercise. The accommodation providers under the new (AASC) arrangements are as follows:

Midlands and East of England: Serco (a change in provider from G4S)

North East England, Yorkshire and Humberside: Mears Group (a change in provider from G4S)

North West England : Serco (no change in provider)

Southern England: Clearsprings Ready Homes (no change in provider)

Northern Ireland: Mears Group (a change in provider from Serco)

Scotland: Mears Group (a change in provider from Serco)

Wales: Clearsprings Ready Homes (no change in provider)

Responsibility for providing **Advice, Information and Eligibility Assistance Services (the AIRE contract)** rests with **Migrant Help**, although the requirements under the new contract are expanding. Migrant Help was previously provided with grant funding on a national level to provide

At present, there is an ongoing 'transition' period between the old and the new contractual arrangements in both accommodation and support and advice, whilst providers ready themselves to be able to implement the new contracts. The timescale for implementing different parts of the transition between the old and new contracts differs in different regions / nations of the country.

The transition period is due to end on **1st September 2019**, when the new contracts are due to become fully operational.

What is changing?

As part of the new **asylum accommodation** contracts, the three asylum accommodation providers (Serco, Mears and Clearsprings) must have proactive maintenance plans, and have a continued obligation to ensure that there are regular property inspections and that the outcome of these are disclosed to the Home Office within agreed timescales. The contracts also place an increased requirement on the accommodation providers to engage with local authorities and NGOs throughout the lifetime of the contracts.

Provision of **advice and support services** for people seeking asylum stays with Migrant Help. Migrant Help are already providing a national telephone helpline, but their services are due to expand under the AIRE contract. All calls, no matter what the issue, will go to one single number to be assessed, where interpretation should be accessible.

An important new aspect of the service will be **issue reporting**, which will mean that **problems with asylum accommodation should be reported to Migrant Help**. Migrant Help should then liaise with the accommodation provider to address maintenance issues within agreed timeframes.

Other new areas covered by issue reporting:

- **Requests for assistance** (for example, if there is a risk to a person's health or wellbeing);
- **Issues with payment of asylum support** (e.g. lost or stolen card, incorrect payment received, PIN forgotten).

People seeking asylum can also contact Migrant Help for advice on: how to claim asylum, navigating the asylum process, applying for asylum support (including accommodation), finding legal representation, accessing healthcare, and other asylum and post-asylum claim related matters. Under the new contract, Migrant Help will also be responsible for making arrangements to work with vulnerable people in the asylum process through face-to-face appointments.

Post decision: Migrant Help are to work with a number of providers (Reed in Partnership / Migrant Help in England, the Welsh Refugee Council in Wales, the Scottish Refugee Council in Scotland and Bryson Intercultural in Northern Ireland) to provide support following a positive decision in the 28 day period before asylum support and accommodation ends. Migrant Help themselves are to provide assistance post negative decision, either through telephone contact or face-to-face support.

Complaints about the new service should also go to Migrant Help – whether the complaint relates to accommodation providers, the asylum support provider (Sodexo), the Home Office or to Migrant Help itself. The complaints process should be available through their website, telephone, email or post, in different languages.

Other feedback about the service should also be provided to Migrant Help. The accommodation providers' obligations in liaising with Migrant Help about the new arrangements for feedback, maintenance issues, safety issues and complaints are set out in Annex H of the [Statement of Requirements](#) for the AASC contract.

How will it work? Spotlight on Yorkshire & Humberside

For the purpose of the asylum accommodation contracts, the Yorkshire & Humberside region combines with the North East of England to form one wider region, **the North East and Yorkshire & Humberside region (YENH)**, governed by the same AASC contract and delivered by the same accommodation provider, Mears. This means that the North East and Yorkshire & Humberside regions are going through the transition process simultaneously; following the same timeline of implementation.

In Yorkshire & Humberside, as well as in the North East, **the transition for all people seeking asylum to the new arrangements is scheduled to take place on 1st September 2019**. From this date, and not before, there will be a new Migrant Help helpline to call for any queries regarding the support of people living in Yorkshire & Humberside- the new number will be **0808 8010 503**. Any queries before September 1st should be directed to the current Migrant Help number (which can be found on their website).

Calls made to Migrant Help after 1st September will be routed to a 'First Response Centre' to be assessed and triaged by Migrant Help staff, and either dealt with immediately or passed on to an OISC registered advisor employed by Migrant Help. Any complaints about the Migrant Help service can also be routed to the Migrant Help helpline to be acted upon, as well as via the online methods detailed below.

Relocation to new properties

Mears have confirmed that the procurement and updating of properties in the Yorkshire & Humberside region to fit the new service standards laid out in the AASC contract has been largely successful and **therefore they are not anticipating many service users to be moved from their current asylum accommodation**.

Once Mears are ready to operate (with a Bridging Permit to Operate issued from the Home Office), they will begin writing letters to all service users in asylum accommodation in Yorkshire & Humberside within 5-7 days informing them of the upcoming change of contract and the possibility of moves.

Those that will be required to relocate will be notified by an additional letter and Mears representatives will also visit any service user required to relocate to explain the move process, answer any questions and identify any additional accommodation needs not already known.

There will be a dedicated freephone number on this letter that service users or their representatives can call with any enquiries about the move, or **to highlight information that may be relevant to the relocation process** (for example, if a service user is accessing a specialist service that would be difficult to access from a different location within the town/city they are dispersed to).

Once an appropriate, alternative property has been confirmed, Mears will issue a further letter to the service user providing them with at least 7 days notice of the move.

Concerns about the accommodation and advice contracts – what can you do?

During the process leading to the awards of the new accommodation and advice contracts, concerns were repeatedly raised by Local Authorities, Parliamentarians, and frontline organisations about the arrangements currently in place and the need for genuine improvement under the new contracts. Well-documented concerns under COMPASS primarily related to poor property standards, a lack of genuine oversight, and the need for fairer resourcing for Local Authorities and communities. We at Asylum Matters are concerned that there are substantial risks associated with the transition from one accommodation provider to another and think it is more important than ever that frontline organisations engage with the process of transition to ensure that evidence of how the new arrangements are impacting on people seeking asylum is fed back effectively to decision-makers. As a frontline agency/project you can:

- **Use the official complaints process!** If you have a complaint, contact Migrant Help to ensure that data is captured and fed back to the Home Office on the performance of all of the providers as the new arrangements come into force. Call the helpline or see <https://www.migranthelpuk.org/contact> or <https://www.migranthelpuk.org/feedback-form>
- **Engage with your local multi-agency forum.** In many areas across Yorkshire & Humberside there are multi-agency meetings or forums, often council-led, where people who are providing services to people seeking asylum come together to be briefed on new arrangements and raise concerns. These groups serve as a conduit between local practitioners and Regional Strategic Migration Partnership, Migration Yorkshire, who is playing an important role in transition. You can contact Migration Yorkshire for details about these meetings.
- **Contact your elected representatives** [Your MPs](#) and local councillors have an interest in knowing how transition of the contracts is impacting on people seeking asylum in your communities. Keep a record of your experience of how things are changing under transition and keep them informed as and when appropriate.
- **Let us know how it's going!** We would like to receive information/ case studies from our partner organisations on how the transition is affecting your work, to inform our advocacy on the accommodation and advice contracts going forward. Do contact Mary Brandon at mary@asylummatters.org to let us know what's going on as the process moves forward and how it's impacting on you and your community.