

Q&A

1) How many people have Mears transitioned?

There are c.11,300 Service Users in NEYH. On 8 August Mears transitioned c.7,500 Service Users and associated accommodation and support services to the new contracts without any disruption.

2) How many people have to physically move?

Following recent positive negotiations, Mears have secured a self-delivery subcontractor agreement with Jomast. Mears have agreed with Jomast that whilst some of their properties will not be used in the longer term, service users can remain in properties to ensure a managed and measured transfer to service users to new properties. Due to this arrangement the scale of service users who have to move is reduced and further details will be provided. Mears are committed to engage with LA to ensure that they are informed of planned service user moves and longer-term procurement activity.

3) Are any families or individuals being moved a significant distance from their current accommodation?

The Home Office and Mears officials are working closely to minimise the disruption of any necessary moves. Any moves will be within the North East area.

4) What are you doing to ensure children can continue to attend the same school?

Mears are working to a strategy of housing Service Users near to their current accommodation and supporting infrastructure. Where this is not possible, Mears will work closely with Local Authorities and the Home Office to minimise disruption.

5) Will you pay additional transport costs for those who have further to travel to their schools?

Mears' intention is keep families with school-age children in their current school catchment area. If, in exceptional circumstances, school-age children are placed outside of their school catchment area, Mears will cover transport costs.

6) Will you or Mears be meeting the relocation costs of those in asylum accommodation?

The cost associated with relocating Service Users will be borne by Mears.

7) What are you doing to support Mears to find properties as soon as possible?

The recent agreement with Jomast means that the transition of service users can be delivered in a much more measured and considered way. The Home Office continues to work closely with Mears to support them during the transition.

8) How are you making sure the newly acquired properties are up to standard?

Providers are contractually obligated to provide accommodation that meets AASC standards. The Statement of Requirements (SoR) sets out the accommodation standards that will be required. The SoR can be found at <http://data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/Files/DEP2018-1112/AASC - Schedule 2 - Statement of Requirements.pdf>

9) How will you ensure property standards are maintained?

*AIRE has been designed to ensure that there is an independent record of issues that Service Users raise in relation to their accommodation, and a log of their resolution. Should a Service Users have any issues with their accommodation they should ring Migrant Help on **0808 801 0503** who will raise it directly with the accommodation provider for rectification. Both the Provider and Home Office will undertake regular inspections and other forms of compliance to ensure accommodation meets requirements. Where a contractor is found to be falling short of these standards, we will work with them to ensure issues are quickly addressed. Where standards are consistently breached, the performance management framework will be applied.*

10) Will any individuals be put into hotels?

The recent agreement with Jomast means that the transition of service users can be delivered in a much more measured and considered way. The Home Office continues to work closely with Mears to support them during the transition. At this time, it is not planned for service users to have to be placed on hotels as part of the transition process.

11) In the NEYH, what contingency is in place should the provider be unable to source appropriate levels of accommodation for the Service Users within this region?

Sudden and unpredicted peaks in demand occasionally results in Providers exceeding the number of bed spaces immediately available to accommodate Service Users. When this occurs contingency arrangements such as hostels and hotels will continue to be allowed under AASC. The Home Office has always been clear with Providers that the use of hotels is only acceptable as a

short-term contingency arrangement and we continue to support all measures being pursued by Providers to increase procurement to meet demand.

12) In the event of a relocation, what does an 'impact assessment' consist of? Will the VCS be able to contribute to assessments?

The main components of an impact assessment are:

- 1. Service user data (Identify religion, language spoken, LGBT+);*
- 2. School details, any specific requirements;*
- 3. Disability, or adaptation requirements;*
- 4. Support workers and planned meetings;*
- 5. Planned activities or appointments;*
- 6. Dietary requirements; and*
- 7. Medical or medicinal information related to property allocation and storage of medicines.*

Mears are moving Service Users according to their identified needs and this assessment is being undertaken with the support of Home Office teams. Due to the pace at which we are working, VCS will not be able to contribute to this assessment at this time. On a case-by-case basis, VCS are encouraged to utilise the freephone number if they are aware of any additional Service User needs.

13) Should partners understand 'vulnerable' as the definition set out in Annexe G of Schedule 2 of the SoR?

Yes. The Contract provides a list of indicators that might identify a Service User as having specific needs. Indicators are not limited to this list and nor do these indicators always mean that the Service User is at risk or has specific needs, and therefore in need of a specific response by the Provider.

14) When will the Mears free phone line for Service Users go live, to enable Service Users and NGO representatives to contact regarding the relocation process?

*The Freephone Number is available now. Mears have noticed a significant increase in calls this week as the first moves take place and so from next week a larger team will be implemented with improved script and FAQ's to manage communications going forward. Mears Helpline **0800 1693 757** for issues around transition moves and relocations. This number has changed from previous correspondence to ensure it is free for all, thanks to VCS feedback.*

15) How will Mears support those vulnerable individuals who are no longer in receipt of asylum support, or newly recognised refugees?

Mears will liaise with the AIRE Provider once a Service User receives their asylum decision, to help the AIRE Provider to coordinate move-on support to Service Users. The AIRE provider shall provide information on options following the cessation of support, including assistance with booking DWP interviews for positive outcomes and providing information on the Voluntary Return Service for negative outcomes.

16) What is the VCS SU comms strategy?

There is a Freephone Line, VCS have already been given a briefing note with letters being sent. This document supplements those communications and we encourage you to disseminate throughout your network. As we move into BAU, Mears will seek to develop a VCS comms strategy with your collaboration.

17) How will the second letter be delivered - will it be posted and then followed up with the visit from Mears staff? Will SUs be notified in advance of the visit - if so, how will they be contacted?

Once contact details are confirmed during the pre-visit, Service Users will be called or written to regarding any subsequent visits. The only time Mears will turn up unannounced is in response to an emergency or a risk being flagged to Mears by the Authority or medical professionals.

18) Should SUs call the freephone line and notify of all extra items and pieces of luggage? Will electrical equipment be permitted? In the event that an SU does not pre-arrange for extra pieces of luggage, will they have to leave their belongings behind, and what will happen to them?

No one will have to leave belongings behind unless that pose a health and safety risk. During the pre-visit we note down all large items that will require moving so we can allocate the correct size van to move all belongings.

19) Will any new dispersal at all be sent to Jomast between 8.8.19 and 1.10.19, either in Tees Valley or Tyneside? Can Mears confirm they have management responsibility for new dispersals only and those for which new leases have been agreed from 8.8.19 or is this a progressive thing with G4S? What role will G4S have between 8.8.19 and 1.10.19 and what will they still need to be contacted for?

Mears took operational responsibility for the whole IA and DA estate on 1 September, therefore are now in control of dispersals across the region. Dispersal will continue in the North East to Mears' supply chain. G4S no longer have a role in Asylum Accommodation provision.

20) To what extent will TUPE apply?

Mears have extensive experience of carrying out and managing the TUPE process; it is a legal process governed by legislation and is applicable to the

AASC contract. At present it is unknown to what extent with all parties, as it is still being finalised

21) Can representative groups meet regularly with Mears as part of a stakeholder strategy?

The Home Office will embed new regular forums with regional Strategic Migration Partnerships (SMP) focused on asylum dispersal once the transition to the new contracts is complete. In addition, the AASC and AIRE Providers shall, during the normal course of its operations, liaise and co-operate with these support organisations including LAs, NGOs, NHS and the Police, so that the interests of the Service Users are best served.

22) What processes are in place to ensure that the Home Office and Mears identify vulnerable Service Users, and that this information is shared between the HO and Mears as necessary?

The Provider shall in delivering the services comply with the Authority's policies and guidance relating to the Safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults. This includes recognising the indicators of a vulnerable or at risk person with specific needs, and responding appropriately to their needs. The Provider shall report the safeguarding of children or vulnerable adults to the Home Office within one working day. Where the Authority is aware of a Service User who may have specific needs or be at risk, the Authority shall notify the Provider and provide instructions on any specific Accommodation or support requirements.

23) What standards apply to all accommodation used under the contract?

The Provider is required to ensure that all Accommodation used to accommodate Service Users at all times meets the required standards set out in Schedule 2. The Provider shall ensure that the Accommodation for Service Users meets any statutory housing standards which are applicable in the Specified Contract Region.

24) Is it possible that Service Users could be temporarily housed in non-dispersal areas?

Mears do not intend to use contingency accommodation in non-dispersal areas at the present time. Any proposal of contingency accommodation in non-dispersal areas will require pre-approval from the Home Office.

25) When Mears call at asylum seekers homes, will they have identification?

All staff are issued with ID and a lanyard.

26)Concerns arising that a member of Mears staff arrived at an asylum seekers home to take personal details. They had ID but the asylum seeker did not receive a letter prior to this.

Mears have sent a letter to all Service Users to explain that a Mears Housing Manager will be visiting them; the purpose is to ensure that Mears understand their accommodation needs and ensure that they can be supported during the move.

27)Confusion around whether/when Migrant Help phone line should be used.

*All service in North East should now use **0808 801 0503** to call Migrant Help who are responsible for all AIRE contracted services. Should a Service User have a query in relation to a move from their Jomast accommodation during the period of transition they should call Mears on **0800 1693 757**.*

28)Concerns regarding moving people out of the area who have been given leave to remain and are on a 28 day notice and the implications of this on accessing housing etc.

The interim agreement with Jomast should allow for all Service Users to remain in the Local Authority that they are currently housed in and therefore should not disrupt access to onward support.

29)Will new dispersals continue given the current situation?

Dispersals to this region have not been halted, there is a temporary arrangement to cease dispersal in Stockton and Newcastle. NEMP has requested that it is halted and has written to this effect to the relevant parties. The Home Office cannot guarantee a halt on dispersal to North East but Mears will want to make sensible decisions to ensure all Service Users are properly accommodated and supported. There is capacity and stability within the wider region, as this includes Yorkshire and Humber and the provider has the flexibility to disperse across the wider region, now that they are operationally responsible for initial accommodation and dispersed accommodation.

30)Will dispersal continue in Sunderland?

Sunderland has requested to cease dispersal to a particular postcode. Mears are working with the council to look beyond the wards which are currently used, therefore will look to disperse the asylum population more broadly in the city and avoid local clusters.

31)What is Mears policy around smoking and drug taking in properties?

Drug taking is illegal and is therefore prohibited. Smoking is also not allowed in properties; Housing Managers will address this appropriately where it is found in properties.

32) Will room sharing happen under Mears?

Mears has a policy of no room sharing, over the course of transition they will work to reduce the current rate of room sharing in the region.

33) When developing welcome packs, can voluntary returns page be removed? Also can VCS get involved in the development of the packs?

Information on voluntary returns will be included within the pack as it is a contractual requirement. Mears would be happy for VCS to be involved in Welcome Pack development to ensure local services are reflected. This will be embedded within the next 6-12 months and will be more localised at the end of the 12 months. It was agreed Local Multi-agency meetings would be useful forums for Mears to take welcome packs to try and ensure local services are included.

34) Can Mears provide more detail about how they intend to ensure communication with people who don't speak English?

All letters and induction material that Mears use is available in the top 10 languages. On visits Housing Managers have access to a telephone translation service should it be required.

35) How will Mears ensure post gets forwarded?

Jomast will be informed of the new addresses and asked to forward the post on. Housing manager will discuss if GP's, schools etc. need to be informed of new addresses – they will follow the induction they would for a new person/property.

36) What will Mears approach be to people who have a negative decision?

Mears have contractual obligations, this is process driven but willing to discuss outside of the meeting about the approach housing managers could take. Migrant Help EAGLE team will call Service Users to ask if they need advice. This would cover things such like appeals, fresh claims etc.

37) Will Mears housing staff enter properties without notice?

Mears will only enter if notice has been given, they may enter without notice but only if they have a health and safety concern. If Mears want to inspect a property then SU will be notified.

38) Can you clarify what age is considered as school age children?

Mears are considering 4-18 as school age however any child with a nurse's place will be considered during assessment.

39) Concern regarding only being allowed to take 2 pieces of luggage.

Luggage and furniture is logged at time of the assessment visit and boxes and bags are provided. Contractually, SU can only take 2 pieces of luggage, however Mears have confirmed they will take more as long as it is logged and is safe to do so.

40) GP's are being asked for medical letters to support moves, are they of any use?

During the pre-move visits Mears are capturing the accommodation needs of Service Users. Where there seems to be a particular need Mears are raising these cases with the Home Office Safeguarding Team for review. Should a Service User feel that they require a relocation on medical grounds the Home Office may request medical evidence from the Service User which will be referred to the Home Office's medical advisor for guidance.

41) Concern regarding taking asylum seekers wishes into consideration when planning moves, some want to move with current members of the household, and others don't.

Mears will endeavor to take Service User wishes into consideration when relocating unrelated adults.

42) Asylum seekers are not told their address until on the day they move.

Mears advised they should be told their postcode seven days in advance.

43) Some people within some properties have letters and some don't.

Mears advised anyone who is concerned they have not had a letter to phone Mears helpline and let them know. However, if not, it will be picked up by Housing Officers when they visit the property.

44) Concern about asylum seekers with mental health issues.

Support needs should be captured at assessment visit by Housing Officers. Mears will seek to work with LA's to ensure continuity of care for those people have care needs etc. and with Home Office Safeguarding team.

45) Will adaptations to properties be done for people with disabilities?

This is a contractual requirement, Mears will note needs at visit and this will be taken into consideration when planning moves.

46) Migrant Help phone lines indicating your position in the queue has been taken off, could this be reinstated?

The new Migrant Help line has been fully resigned and did not include an update on the position in the queue. Migrant Help have agreed to review this requirement on the helpline following feedback from the VCS.