

August 2021

Lessons Learnt Report - Hosting Asylum Seekers in a York hotel

Between June 2020 and June 2021, York supported the Home Office (HO) in their accommodation of asylum seekers at a temporarily repurposed hotel in York (as part of the Initial Accommodation programme). This was needed due to unprecedented pressures on the asylum accommodation system due to Covid. This report provides an overview of the project and opportunities to improve where needed in future.

Overview

1. The Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent national lockdown lead to initial accommodation (IA) for asylum seekers quickly reaching maximum capacity nationally. The Home Office were unable to move the asylum seekers to dispersed accommodation due to the pause in the national housing market. As a result, hotels in cities across the country were asked to house asylum seekers until the housing market resumed and Mears could procure dispersal properties. In April 2020, City of York Council (CYC) were approached by the Home Office to use the Mercure Fairfield Manor Hotel in York. The hotel would host approx. 90 (at maximum capacity) asylum seeking adult males until further notice.
2. City of York Council worked collaboratively with a number of stakeholders including: Refugee Action York; York City of Sanctuary; York Learning; Nimbus Care; Migration Yorkshire; Migrant Help; North Yorkshire Police; Mears; and the Home Office. Feedback was received from all stakeholders in regards to the successes, challenges, and future learnings of the project.
3. Following the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions on hotels on May 17th 2021 all remaining residents ('residents' refers to the asylum seeking males staying

at the hotel) were moved out of the hotel on 23rd June 2021 and the contract between Mercure Hotel and Mears was terminated.

4. This report is split into two sections: Variables we could control; and variables we could not control. ('We' refers to the group of stakeholders listed in paragraph 2.) The two sections form an evaluation of the success or otherwise of the project and considers lessons that could be taken forward.

5. Variables we could not control

a. Successes

The quality of existing services in the city and their readiness to support the request was central to the success of the project. Services who had not previously dealt with large asylum seeker populations quickly put in place plans and support and rose to the challenge. Refugee Action York were the prime example of this, quickly rising to the unprecedented challenge of supporting over 150 asylum seekers during the course of the hotel.

York residents were generous with donated items such as mobile phones, clothes, and games to Refugee Action York (RAY) which was vital in ensuring the residents had a better quality of life. Without the support of our residents the hotel residents would not have been provided with spare clothes, entertainment, or in some cases, a means to communicate with their family and friends.

Focus Groups hosted by Mears were held at the hotel with CYC, RAY, North Yorkshire Police, and at least 3 residents in attendance. The focus groups allowed the residents to share their lived experience at the hotel and raise any issues they had. This led to improvements being made to the food, and further advice and assistance given on the asylum process.

Migration Yorkshire supported CYC and the wider team throughout the duration of the men's stay. They acknowledged that York is not a dispersal city and therefore has a limited knowledge and resource pool. Migration Yorkshire took

the time to provide context to the asylum process and current situation which was invaluable.

During this time COVID-19 infection rates remained low amongst residents in the hotel. When a resident contracted the virus they were asked to isolate in their room for 14 days which helped minimise any further transmission of the virus to other residents. Meanwhile all other residents were monitored closely for symptoms.

b. Challenges

In hindsight, the working relationship and communication between Mears and Mercure could have been improved upon. The hotel manager at Mercure was changed at a similar time to the management change within Mears. The timing of both of these management replacements caused subsequent issues in the communication between Mercure and Mears regarding the residents of the hotel. As both senior staff members were changed within a short timeframe relationship between both parties was not as seamless as anticipated. Both managers were new to the role and therefore had little first-hand context of the history within the hotel.

Mercure's new manager did not have the same keen interest in the project ('project' refers to the hotel being used as IA for asylum seekers) as their predecessor. Due to this they stopped attending the weekly multi-agency meeting which in turn made communication and the dispersal of key information between Mears and Mercure more difficult and less frequent. The contractual structure of the accommodation between the Home Office, Mears and the hotel made resolving matters more difficult to resolve.

The lack of timescale parameters for the project proved challenging for those involved and made it difficult for any long term planning to take place. This resulted in the team—having to take reactionary rather than precautionary measures due being unable to successfully create future plans. The voluntary sector, (VCS) in particular, would have benefited from knowing the true timescales of the project as it would have allowed RAY to apply for funding to employ extra support.

Once early Covid restrictions were lifted, individuals began moving through the accommodation system, so there was flux in the people living there. The frequent impromptu movement of residents in and out of the hotel resulted in inconsistency for the VCS, York Learning, and health sector. These decisions regarding the residents were decided by the HO and Mears only received 24hrs notice before the residents were due to be dispersed. The short time frame and lack of information resulted in the VCS being unable to ensure adequate services were set up in the dispersal area.

Another area for potential improvement was the technology within the hotel. The Wi-Fi supplied at the hotel was weak and the signal was not strong enough to reach the individual rooms of residents. Mercure were slow to source an engineer to fix this issue. Mears could have actively pursued this issue and in doing so Mercure may have arranged a resolution quicker. It became apparent that the lack of internet connection was having a negative impact on the resident's mental wellbeing as a connection was crucial to allow them to learn and communicate with friends and family outside of the hotel.

Anti-migration protesters entered and filmed the hotel and residents of which shortly after their arrival. The initial security measures put in place were not adequate and were improved after the incident.

Residents have little formal activity provided for them and are unable to work due to their asylum status. This leads to boredom, frustration and low mood for people in the setting. Covid was restrictive in terms of opportunities to put events on at the hotel or have people volunteer outside of the premises but in future this should be encouraged where possible.

The logistical and bureaucratic framework of seeking asylum within the United Kingdom is complicated and often fraught with difficulty and frustration for many. The guidelines of this process are often unclear which meant all those involved in the project had to read between the lines to understand what was happening nationally and regionally. The system also meant that residents were left uncertain about their situation, causing them distress.

Experience on regional and national calls during this period indicate that communication from central government will aim to minimise problems and this need to be taken into consideration when receiving updates.

c. Learnings

Below are recommendations to ensure a more successful project.

- If key staff are replaced ensure a separate meeting is held to update them on the context and history of the project
- Focus groups should be implemented with the user group from the beginning
- In future the council should do a greater examination of the existing infrastructure before agreeing the use, particularly internet coverage.
- The council should confirm that security arrangements are in place from the beginning of the use
- Ensure a good level of security is provided at the location
- Additional classes and volunteering opportunities would be welcome without Covid restrictions.

6. Variables we could control

a. Successes

The speed at which the multi-agency team came together resulted in a quick start to the project. All sectors were ready and willing to share their knowledge with one another to ensure all were equipped for the task at hand. The direct input of portfolio holders in the project helped drive decisions, particularly in the early stages.

Weekly multi-agency meetings were implemented following the request from the Home Office. These were found to be helpful for all sectors to check-in and ask for support or advice when needed. The consistency of these meetings ensured stakeholders had frequent and continuous contact with each other.

York Learning (City of York Council's adult education service) set up weekly English (ESOL) classes for the residents which were very well received. These were later bolstered by support from York St John University. As well as skills

the classes provided vital structure to the resident's days. One student wrote a letter of thanks saying "I have always been shy especially when speaking English but with your help I am more confident now".

Nimbus Care's service to the residents was excellent. Initial health checks were completed for all residents entering the hotel and ongoing care was provided continuously. Nimbus and York Learning worked collaboratively to ensure all residents staying at the hotel were aware of the Covid-19 vaccine and understood the benefit of being vaccinated and the potential risks. Upwards of 50 residents were administered their first vaccination whilst at the hotel.

All organisations involved were flexible with their time and roles despite the lack of timescale. Without the flexibility the project would not have ran as smoothly as it did and may have left gaps in resources and knowledge.

The relationship between the VCS and Mears' Resident Welfare Manager was good and enabled the VCS to operate efficiently and effectively.

CYC liaised with the local community to inform them of the resident's arrival and keep them up to date where necessary.

North Yorkshire Police made the decision to provide an introductory talk and have later drop in visits. This helped build confidence with the individuals who can be suspicious of authority due to experiences with police in other countries. The early interaction with the residents was beneficial as it provided an understanding of the difficulties the residents faced and what the residents could expect from interactions with the Police during their stay.

b. Challenges

Communication between Mears/Hotel to the VCS was lacking at times, particularly in regards to entertainment donations. Mears confiscated a number of donated items but did not inform the VCS leading to confusion and complaints from the residents. Often the reasoning behind the confiscation were contradictory to other Mears actions which became frustrating.

Some issues were slow to be resolved on site, particularly resolution of internet issues and access for VCS groups. These could have been resolved quicker had the council acted faster to escalate formerly with the Home Office and Mears. In future the council should play a stronger role in resolving issues, including using existing formal complaints procedures.

Nimbus Care initially rotated the assigned GP surgeries on a weekly basis but quickly learnt that this method was not serving the residents effectively.

The local parish council were not included in the initial consultation, which led to unnecessary frustration from the local community. This relationship was well repaired but this could have been avoided by including them initially.

A safeguarding issue with one of the residents was not escalated as quickly as the situation demanded, resulting in a delayed resolution and extended potential risk.

No expectations were set out at the beginning of the project in regards to the roles of the Home Office and Mears with regard to the asylum process.

c. Learnings

Below are recommendations to ensure a more successful project.

- Have at least one representative from the host hotel at weekly multi-agency meetings, and a Home Office representative once a month
- Communicate with existing dispersal cities to learn from their processes/mistakes
- A nominated Migration Lead at CYC who has existing experience with similar projects
- Request NHS numbers for the residents when blood tests are arranged. A number of residents did not receive their NHS numbers in time because they had been dispersed.
- Upskill health staff on communicable diseases that are uncommon in the UK
- Rotate GP Surgeries on a monthly basis to share provision of care

7. Conclusion

Overall the temporary provision in York was a success and the city was highlighted for praise by the Home Office and Mears. The strength of York's existing services and VCS groups were central to this. These working relationships should be maintained and supported to assist with the remaining Syrian Refugee programme and the ACRS and ARAP schemes.