

Asylum Matters
c/o Human Rights Action Centre
17-25 New Inn Yard
London EC2A 3EA

Victoria Atkins MP
Minister for Safeguarding and Vulnerability
Home Office
2 Marsham Street
London SW1P 4DF

30th October 2019

Dear Ms. Atkins,

As representatives of 120 UK organisations working to welcome, support and advocate for people in the asylum system, we are writing to you to raise severe failures in the new Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility Assistance (AIRE) contract, which is being delivered by Migrant Help.

The AIRE service should provide advice and guidance to service users on the asylum process, their rights and the support available to them. It is also meant to be a single point of contact, independent from the accommodation providers and the Home Office, to report issues relating to housing. The new contracting arrangements, introduced for both AIRE and the Asylum Accommodation and Support Services Contracts (AASC), were meant to offer improvements to the publicly recognised problems with the previous system.¹

However, the transition to the new contracts, which took place during Summer 2019 has instead resulted in drastically increased waiting times for asylum support applicants. Vulnerable people are waiting for hours to be connected to Migrant Help staff, despite the Statement of Requirements for the AIRE contract stipulating that all calls should be answered in one minute. The phonenumber is the single point of contact and often the only avenue available to people in the asylum system to seek help with many issues, including critical matters such as destitution, safeguarding and unsafe or degrading accommodation. Insofar as people cannot access these central service points, the system is failing vulnerable people and exposing them to suffering and harm.

People dispersed without subsistence support already set up have reported difficulties in resolving the issue through Migrant Help, leaving destitute people unable to access emergency support in order to meet their basic living needs. We are also aware of cases where people have been unable to report urgent safeguarding issues to Migrant Help, including around abuse, which has left them exposed to risk and feeling unsafe in their homes. In addition, accommodation providers have been unable to promptly address issues reported relating to housing, which in more serious cases has left people living in unsafe and uninhabitable conditions, including in homes without electricity, with no functioning toilet,² or with flooding leading to structural collapse.³

¹ These have been documented extensively including by the [National Audit Office](#), [Public Accounts Committee](#), [Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration](#), and the [Home Affairs Select Committee](#).

² <https://www.thenational.scot/news/17949667.home-office-improvements-leave-asylum-seekers-without-water/>

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-49717879>

Other aspects of the Migrant Help service have also experienced unacceptable delays. There have been reports of support applications which are processed via Migrant Help's inbox before being passed on to UKVI for a decision being delayed by weeks. The direct consequence of these delays is that vulnerable people are being forced into situations of destitution and homelessness. It is not acceptable that those who are fully entitled to support are being left penniless and without anywhere to sleep, for days and weeks at a time. This is a potential breach of the rights of those affected under the Human Rights Act 1998.

With ultimate responsibility for the management and oversight of this contract, it is clear that the Home Office has failed in correctly anticipating demand and working with the Provider to ensure adequate numbers of trained staff were in place before transition. We recognise that there has been an increase in asylum applicants in the last few months but fluctuations in arrivals are to be expected and planned for accordingly and do not justify the severe problems that people are facing.

We are calling on you to take urgent action to address this situation, including:

1. Make public your assessment of the AIRE service, including an analysis of the factors that have contributed to the current situation and the actions you propose to take to address the gaps identified;
2. Take urgent action to ensure that central service points are consistently accessible, in line with the standards set out in the Statement of Requirements for the AIRE contract. This will involve effective monitoring of the FRC and EAGL, and responsive measures to ensure the service works for people, including by providing adequate provision for face-to-face support and community outreach with service users;
3. Put in place a clear and effective process and decision timescale for emergency homelessness and support applications, notably s4(2). This process must be properly resourced, with barriers to escalation to Home Office support decision makers removed. This process should be effectively communicated to all stakeholders and its results routinely published;
4. Ensure regular communications with the voluntary sector relating to the action plan and timeline for ensuring that AIRE provision is up to contractual standards, including setting up a regular forum with key stakeholders to identify and address ongoing problems and prevent them from worsening;
5. Commit to publish data relating to all aspects of the Government's performance on asylum support, including the performance of the AIRE and AASC contract providers, so that standards are subject to independent scrutiny and can be monitored by relevant agencies and regulators.

The delivery of asylum support and accommodation is a public service delivered through public funds. They are the responsibility of the Home Office, derived from its obligations under UK and international law on refugee protection and reception standards. The dignity and wellbeing of people in the asylum system should be at the centre of this public service. Currently, too many people are failed by that system, causing very significant and needless suffering among those it is meant to protect.

Given the urgency of the situation, we look forward to a prompt reply and note that we will be sharing this letter with interested stakeholders.

Yours Sincerely,

Will Sutcliffe, Trustee, Abigail Housing

Rosie Gunn, Co-Founder, Action for Refugees

Julian Prior, CEO, Action Foundation

Saida Soge, Project Manager, ARC Project, Blackburn

Lynn Evans, Manager, ASIRT

Richard Chessum, Co-chair of Trustees, ASSIST Sheffield

Ewan Roberts, Centre Manager, Asylum Link Merseyside

Andrea Vukovic, Project Director, Asylum Matters

Sheila Arthur, Manager, Asylum Seeker Housing Project

Alice Webb, Director, Asylum Support Appeals Project (ASAP)

Sarah Taal, Director, Baobab Womans Project

Alan Curtis, Chair, Barnsley Town of Sanctuary

Sarah Jemison, Chair of Trustees, BEACON (Bradford Ecumenical Asylum Concern)

Josh Evans, Vice Chair, Bearwood Action for Refugees

Gina Rowlands, Managing Director, Bevan Healthcare CIC

Andy Jolly, Trustee, Birmingham Community Hosting Network (BIRCH)

Ros Holland, Chief Executive Officer, Boaz Trust

Will Sutcliffe, Chair, Bradford City of Sanctuary

Sue Balcomb, Co-organiser, Bradford Immigration and Asylum Seekers Support and Advice Network (BIASAN)

Rachael Bee, Director, Bristol Hospitality Network

Beth Wilson, Director, Bristol Refugee Rights

Dave Newall, Project Manager, Brushstrokes

Sue Bent, CEO, Central England Law Centre

Simon Harris, CEO, Citizens advice Staffordshire North and Stoke

Sian Summers-Rees, Chief Officer, City of Sanctuary

Abdul Bary Malik, Integration Key Worker, Connecting Opportunities at Halifax Opportunities Trust

Lorraine Masiya Mponela, Chairperson, Coventry Asylum and Refugee Action Group

Toni Soni, Centre Director, Coventry Refugee & Migrant Centre

Fran Wood, Chair, Darlington Assistance for Refugees

John East, Coordinator, Darwen Asylum Refugee Enterprise (DARE)

Janet Fuller, Manager, Derby Refugee Forum

Jane Fowden, Trustee, Destitute Asylum Seekers Huddersfield (DASH)

Paul Martin, Chair, Destitution Project, Bolton

Janice Foster, Trustee and Co-organiser, Doncaster Conversation Club

Sue Arnall, Hon. Treasurer, Eagles Wing Support Group, Bury

David Jackson, Coordinator, East Glasgow Integration Network

Giulia Pizzolini, Manager, Entraide

Shingai Mabhungo, Group Facilitator, Equity Partnership

Rocio Cifuentes, Chief Executive, Ethnic Minorities & Youth Support Team Wales (EYST Wales)

Jennie Geddes, Director / Senior Counsellor, Family Refugee Support Project, Liverpool

Mauricio D'Silva, Coordinator, Fatima House

Dr Pamela Wortley, Volunteer Friend, Friends of the Drop-In, Sunderland

Annika Joy, Project Director, Glasgow Night Shelter for Destitute Asylum Seekers

Vie Clerc, Chair, Global Bradford

Denise McDowell, Director, Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit

Kerry Smith, Chief Executive, Helen Bamber Foundation

Helen Syrop, Manager, Hope Housing

Phil Davis, Manager, Hope Projects

Housing4All, Northern Ireland

Paul Bridges, Manager, Huddersfield Mission

Bini Araia, Regional Projects Manager, Investing in People and Culture

Barbara Hungin, Chair, Justice First

Lucy Gunn, Treasurer, Kings Heath Action for Refugees

Bill Dennis, Chair, Kirklees Multi-agency Group

Jon Beech, Director, Leeds Asylum Seekers Support Network (LASSN)

Ali Maghoub, Director, Leeds Refugee Forum

Clive Sneddon, Chair, Liberal Democrats for Seekers of Sanctuary

Belay Kahsay, Manager, Manchester Refugee Support Network

Dr Pete Widlinksi, Chair, Mary Thompson Fund

Remzije Sherifi, Director, Maryhill Integration Network

Rosalind Bragg, Director, Maternity Action

Emma Crossley, Project Manager, Meeting Point Leeds

Seána Roberts, Operations Manager, Merseyside Refugee Support Network

Zrinka Bralo, Chief Executive, Migrants Organise

Furaha Mussanzi, Centre Manager, Millside Centre

Leonie Hart, Co-Director, Mothership

Hazel Williams, Director, NACCOM Network

Pat Bond, Steering Group Member, New to the UK, North Shields

Clare Hurst, Senior Solicitor, North East Law Centre

Ben Hopkinson, Trustee, Northumberland County of Sanctuary

Caron Boulghassoul, CEO, Nottingham Aramathea Trust

Rob Hooper, Church Leader, Oasis Church

Rev Helen Hayes, Chair of Trustees, One Roof Leicester

Anna Lewis, CEO, Open Door North East

Bashir Siraj, Project Coordinator, Open Doors Hull

Revd Bill Braviner and Ruth Hicks, Asylum Seekers Lead, Parish of Stockton St Peter & Elton St John

Karen Pearce, Director, Positive Action for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (PAFRAS)

Robina Qureshi, Executive Director, Positive Action in Housing

Liz Frost, Manager, Premier Learning Rotherham

Kate Percival, Manager, Rainbow Haven, Manchester

Peter J Chapman, Coordinator for RAS Development, RAS Management Group, Stockton Baptist Church

Frances Groves, Coordinator, RASPs

Revd Ernie Whalley, Chair, REACH Project at New North Road Baptist Church

Stephen Hale, Chief Executive, Refugee Action

Arten Llazari, CEO, Refugee and Migrant Centre

Fidelis Chebe, Operations and Development Manager, Refugee Education Training Advice Service (RETAS)

Alison Phipps, UNESCO Chair, Refugee Integration through Languages and the Arts

Cath McGee, DASS Project Manager, Refugee Survival Trust

Alison Moore, Chief Executive Officer, Refugee Women Connect

Jeremy Thompson, Manager, Restore

Uchenna Odenigbo, Manager, Revive UK, Salford

Azizzum Akhtar, Chief Executive, Rotherham Ethnic Minority Alliance (REMA)

Tessa Willow, Chief Executive, Sahir House, Merseyside

Sally Smith, Reverend, Sanctus St. Marks

Chair, Scottish Asylum Seeker Residents' Association

Thomas Martin, Director, Sheffield City of Sanctuary

Sarah Hinton, CEO, Shine (West Bowling)

Veeca Smith Uka, Chair and Co-founder, Sisters United

Stuart Crosthwaite, Co-Secretary, South Yorkshire Migration and Asylum Action Group (SYMAAG)

Becky Hellewell, Senior Caseworker, St Augustine's Centre Halifax

Peter Gowland, Trustee, St Joseph's Asylum Seeker and Refugee Drop-In Hartlepool

Anne Shand, Advice Contract and Admin Manager, St Vincent de Paul Society (Bradford)

Abi Martin, Project Manager, St. Chad's Sanctuary

Geoff Holt, Churchwarden, St. Johns Church

Mick Taylor, Project Coordinator, SWAP (Support for Wigan Arrivals Project)

Satinder Collins, Chair, Tees Valley of Sanctuary

Sarah Durrant, Director of Advocacy Services, TGP Cymru

Indi Elcock, Project Coordinator, The Anchor Project

Jacky Knowles, Project Manager, The Birth Project

Mark Seymour, Project Manager, The Sanctuary Refugee Welcome Group Newport

Lara Bundock, CEO, The Snowdrop Project

Leila Zadeh, Executive Director, UK Lesbian & Gay Immigration Group

Andrew Jackson, Chief Executive, Upbeat Communities

Marie Allainguillaume, Project Coordinator, Volunteers Together, Huddersfield

David McKenzie, Chair, Walking With, North Tyneside

Andrew Harwood, Project Manager and Chairman, Welcome Group Halesowen

Sean Gladwin, Director, West End Refugee Service

Andrew Rathbone, Chair of Trustees, West Yorkshire Destitute Asylum Network (WYDAN)

Dr. Kate Smith, Practitioner Manager, Women Centre Kirklees