



# Lessons Learned?

How government contracts failed people seeking asylum, again.

November 2021

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We would also like to thank the InfoHub team at Refugee Action, and all those that contributed to the survey.

# asylum matters



# Background

Government contracts in the asylum system have lurched from one crisis to another over several years. While the multi-billion pound companies that run them make a profit, people in the asylum system are left in severely substandard accommodation, treated without dignity or respect and left in poverty or even homelessness while charities and the voluntary sector pick up the pieces and in essence subsidise these contracts.

The most recent example of this was at the end of May 2021. With much of the UK still under significant coronavirus restrictions, a series of decisions made by the Home Office resulted in thousands of people being left without access to their only source of income.

A mishandled contract transition - this time related to the prepaid cash cards people seeking asylum rely on to survive - resulted in more than 16,000 families and individuals having no money to buy essentials for their families. Even in July, two months on from the initial transition, an estimated 3,000 people seeking asylum were still suffering as a result of this botched transition.

Unfortunately, this scandal was entirely predictable. The Home Office was warned - time and time again - about the potential impact of this transition. In 2019, [a similar contract transition](#) within the asylum support system left thousands of people in completely inadequate and inappropriate accommodation.

Civil society, independent institutions, and parliamentary committees have all passed harsh judgement on the Home Office for its mishandling of this contract transition and made a number of strong recommendations for change. [A joint report from 42 frontline organisations](#) exposed how people seeking asylum were left without basic support; and warned that unless the department recognised the systemic problems at root and took action to correct them, we would see a crisis like this again.

What happened with the ASPEN scandal shows that ministers and officials have not learnt lessons from the transition of support contracts in 2019. Instead, they have repeated mistakes, leaving people seeking asylum to once again pay the price.

Looking ahead, the provisions within the Government's Nationality and Borders Bill will inevitably create further new contracts, whether running offshore asylum processing centres or warehouse-like "reception" accommodation centres. These profoundly damaging measures, coupled with further botched implementation, will lead to further harm being inflicted on some of the most vulnerable people within our society.

After the ASPEN contract transition this year the Home Office and its contracted providers indicated that despite a few teething issues, the transition broadly went to plan. Yet if this is the case, why were thousands of families left with no means of income for weeks on end? We worked with frontline organisations across the UK to document what was really happening on the ground.

This short report aims to bring together this evidence and put on record what happened during the ASPEN scandal, the impact it had on people seeking asylum and those that support them, and what Home Office ministers and officials must do to stop this from ever happening again.

## Asylum Support and Accommodation

People seeking asylum do not have the right to work and cannot access mainstream benefits. If they have no other means of supporting themselves, they may only apply for Home Office housing and support. People have no choice over where or how they are housed, and are provided with £39.63 a week.

The Home Office contracts three private companies - Serco, Mears and Clearsprings - to manage asylum accommodation (Asylum Support and Accommodation Contracts - AASC); and contracts Migrant Help to provide advice and support (Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility Contract - AIRE).

## ASPEN cards

People seeking asylum receive their asylum support payments on a pre-paid card called an ASPEN card. Up until May 2021, the Home Office contracted Sodexo to provide and manage ASPEN cards. Currently, the contract to provide the ASPEN card is held by Pre-Paid Financial Services (also known as EML).



# What really happened during the ASPEN transition?

The change in contract provider for the ASPEN cards had been due to take place in 2020, but was delayed due to Covid-19. In February 2021, Home Office officials notified stakeholders that the transition between providers was set for the end of May 2021.

Detailed information about the contract transition and the operational impacts were not shared with the voluntary sector or other stakeholders until early May 2021, despite repeated requests. The late engagement by the department with stakeholders meant that there were incredibly limited opportunities for the voluntary sector to propose any meaningful changes to the transition process.

According to the department, “the Home Office tested technologies and infrastructures to assess the viability for dual processing and phased roll out of the new cards, but neither option was supported on our platforms.” Therefore, the approach taken by the Home Office resulted in a blackout period where neither the previous, or new, ASPEN

cards would work. Between 5pm on Friday 21st May, and 9am on Monday 24th May, people seeking asylum had no way of accessing their asylum support payments. This generated real concerns within the voluntary sector that this approach would cause hardship during a period when most support services and charities would be closed.

It soon became clear that thousands of people seeking asylum had either not received their new ASPEN cards in time for the transition, or that they were unable to activate them when the new service went live on Monday 24th May. People were left unable to access their asylum support payments for far longer than a weekend. This was exacerbated by the fact that the following weekend was a bank holiday.

*One of the families supported by Learn for Life Enterprise in Sheffield received eight cards addressed to people not living at their address before the blackout period; and then a further eight arrived the following week, again for people not living at the address.*

- According to the Home Office’s own figures, a week on from the transition (28th May), 27% of people seeking asylum did not have access to a functioning ASPEN card. That equates to **16,353 families and individuals who were without any asylum support for a week.**<sup>1</sup>
- **Two weeks on (4th June)**, 13% of people seeking asylum didn’t have access to a functioning ASPEN card - **roughly 7,900 people.**
- **Four weeks on (22nd June)**, 7% of people seeking asylum didn’t have access to a functioning ASPEN card - **roughly 4,200 people.**
- **And almost six weeks after the transition (9th July)**, 5% still didn’t have access to a functioning ASPEN card - **roughly 3,000 people.**

Put simply, the failure of the contract transition left thousands of people seeking asylum without any access to money to support themselves and their families. The minimal safeguards put in place by the Home Office and other providers proved insufficient to protect against this, leaving people seeking asylum paying the price.

*“It was good to get a ... card but we had to wait for a month with no money to buy food. We have 2 children aged 11 years and 11 months. It wasn’t easy.”*

## **(Family of four) North East**

What could have been a smooth, straightforward contract change ended up causing serious harm for people seeking asylum. Families with children, pregnant and nursing mothers, the elderly, and young adults were left in absolute poverty, with many going without for far longer than the 48 hour black out period.

We worked with frontline organisations to gather evidence of what really happened during the botched transition of the ASPEN cards, and the impact that had on people seeking asylum and the organisations that work to support them. Thirty three frontline organisations shared their experiences with us, and a further 23 contributed evidence to the 12th InfoHub survey run by Refugee Action. These organisations represent communities across England, Wales and Scotland.

<sup>1</sup> Percentage figures and dates have been provided by the Home Office in answers to written parliamentary questions (see: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-07-16/34481>). Actual numbers of people affected have been estimated by using current Home Office data on the numbers of people in receipt of asylum support. As of 31st March 2021, 61,241 are in receipt of some form of asylum support (inclusive of S95, S4 and S98).

## Receiving, activating and troubleshooting faulty ASPEN cards

During the transition, it quickly became clear that a large number of people seeking asylum did not receive their ASPEN cards in time for the transition at the end of May.

87% of respondents to the InfoHub survey said that most or at least some of their clients had not received new cards in time. 56% said that all, most or at least some of their clients' ASPEN cards had been sent to the wrong address. Others reiterated that even when replacement cards were reissued, there were delays in receiving them.

**Helen Bamber Foundation** spoke to 72 of their clients on the Tuesday after the transition; 20 (29%) had not still not received new ASPEN cards. Of those that had received their new cards, a number had issues with activation - either because the card they had been sent was wrong and needed replacing, or they were unable to activate it on the phonenumber.

**SHARE Knowsley** reported that on the Wednesday following the transition, they had 24 reports from people they support that they had either not received their cards (21), or had received cards that were faulty (3).

**MAP Middlesbrough** reported that on 24th May, they were supporting a large number of people who hadn't received their ASPEN cards. This situation continued on into June, with other organisations reporting that - despite efforts from advocates - people were left without cards entirely. Even by 4th June, re-issued ASPEN cards were not being delivered swiftly, with MAP Middlesbrough reporting that 50% of those requested had taken more than 6 days to arrive.

**St Peter's Church, Stockton on Tees** reported that at least 14 people that attended their ESOL class on the 2nd June were still waiting on new ASPEN cards.

Even once cards were received, people seeking asylum were often unable to activate their ASPEN cards, or had actually received faulty cards that needed to be replaced. 83% of respondents to the InfoHub survey said that all, most or at least some of their clients could not activate their cards; and 57% said that all, most or at least some of their clients received faulty cards.

The new ASPEN cards needed to be activated by calling a specific number to an automated phone line provided by PFS and inputting the individual's date of birth. However, often the date of birth of the individual did not match the date of birth on the Home Office's own systems. This would result in the new cards not being activated.

**Maryam has three children, and did not receive her new ASPEN by the 24th May. Although she received an emergency cash payment on the same day, she did not receive her ASPEN card until the 11th June. When the card was received, Maryam was unable to activate the card because the system did not recognise her date of birth. Baobab caseworkers had to contact PFS with the correct date of birth and card details in order to activate the card. [Baobab Women's Project, pseudonym]**

Another organisation - Rainbow Home in the North East - told us about the impact of faulty cards on one individual:

**One person said that the new card worked on Monday to withdraw cash from the cash machine. They went to Aldi where they usually do their biggest food shop and the card was declined, so she was really embarrassed and ashamed. They could not pay for anything anymore. All cash machines keep spitting the card out and it keeps getting declined in stores.**





## Contacting Migrant Help

Migrant Help's advice line is designed as a single point of contact for all issues relating to asylum support and accommodation. During the transition, people were told to register any issues with the cards via the advice line.

Whilst Migrant Help is not contractually responsible for fixing issues with ASPEN payments, it is responsible for logging issues and notifying relevant stakeholders (in this case the Home Office and PFS) of the issue that needs resolving. If people are unable to log issues with Migrant Help, this can be a significant block to resolving problems. PFS does have a phone line people can use to check their balance and activate their cards, but this is automated, so is not an effective channel to resolve issues.

Throughout the ASPEN transition, organisations and individuals reported severe difficulties getting through to Migrant Help to either log or rectify issues with ASPEN cards.

Following requests from the voluntary sector, the Home Office finally agreed to provide an escalation email for the agencies supporting people in the asylum system, two weeks before the transition. However, this escalation route was not made available for people seeking asylum themselves; they - and organisations who were unaware of the escalation email - had to rely on Migrant Help.

90% of respondents to the InfoHub survey said that all, most or at least some of their clients or own services' staff had not been able to get through to Migrant Help when they had problems with their cards. 30% of respondents said that all their clients or services had this issue.

A number of organisations told us that waiting times on the Migrant Help phone line became unreasonably long immediately after the transition.

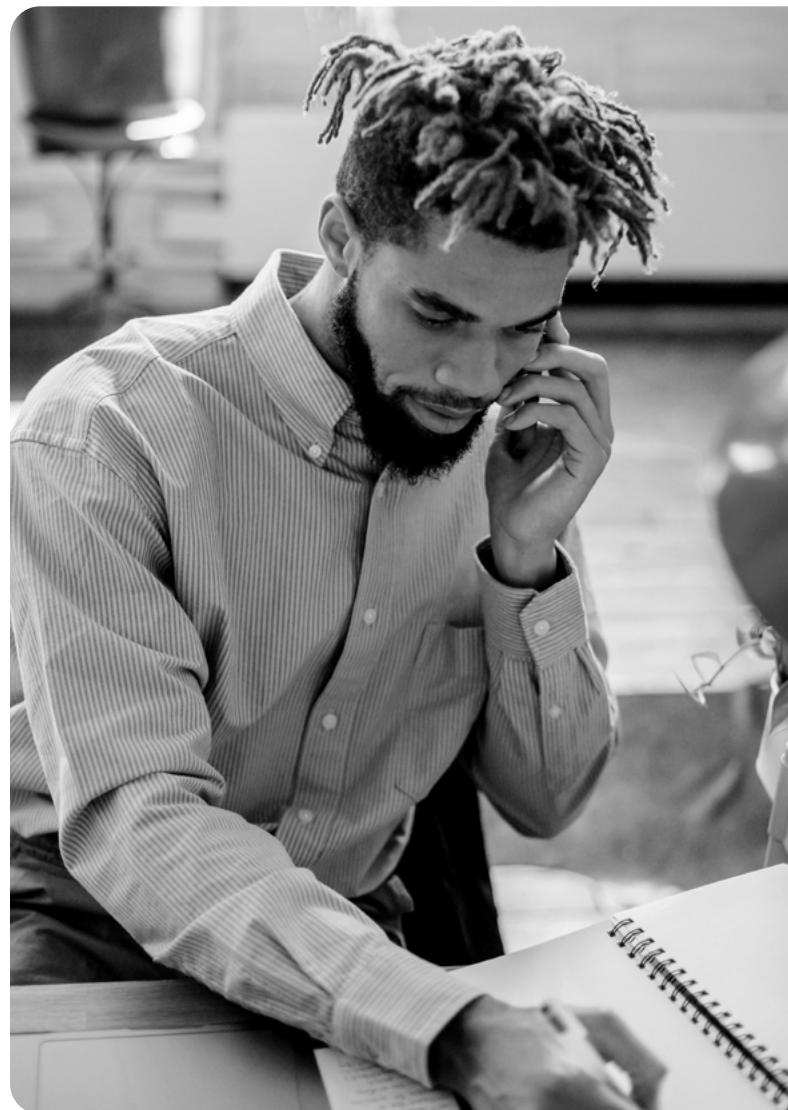
One organisation in the North East [MAP Middlesbrough] said that on the 24th and 25th May, their workers experienced: more than 1 hour waits on the phone for the helpline to be answered; webchats taking 40 minutes or more to connect to a handler; and the phone line seemingly going down completely on the Monday afternoon following the weekend of the contract transition and service blackout.

Another organisation in Birmingham reported that they struggled to get through to Migrant Help to report missing or faulty cards:

***Jamal [pseudonym] tried to contact Migrant Help on the Monday after the transition [24th May] to report that he hadn't received a new ASPEN card. He had to wait two hours on hold before reaching an advisor, who told him there was something wrong with his details and that if he hadn't received a card by next Monday he should ring again. Following ongoing advocacy from a number of organisations, Jamal finally received an emergency support payment on the 22nd June, and his ASPEN card finally arrived on the 23rd June.***

Even though issues with getting through to Migrant Help were most acute in the first week following the transition, organisations were still reporting difficulties getting issues resolved via Migrant Help after several weeks. MAP Middlesbrough reported one instance of being on hold to Migrant Help for 1 hour and 55 minutes. The client had initially tried to call Migrant Help themselves, but their phone had run out of battery after more than an hour on hold. Gloucestershire Action for Refugees and Asylum Seekers reported another instance where a member of their team was on the phone to Migrant Help for 1 hour and 26 minutes before connecting with advisors.

The Home Office has since stated that the department and Migrant Help provided "an increased out-of-hours service" during the transition weekend. However, Migrant Help themselves have said that they experienced incredibly high levels of demand on its advice line during the transition. Recently published limited transparency data has shown that Migrant Help was unable to meet its Key Performance Indicator on call waiting times, with performance for that quarter listed as 'inadequate.'



## Emergency Cash Payments

Prior to, and during, the contract transition it was clear that limited safeguards put in place by the Home Office and providers were woefully inadequate. In the weeks preceding the blackout weekend period, the Home Office advised people seeking asylum to withdraw cash so they weren't left without money during the transition. Beyond that, the only other contingency arrangements in place were 'emergency cash payments (ECPs)'.

ECPs are a standard safeguard put in place by the Home Office and providers for people when there are issues with asylum support payments. These are one-off cash payments provided in lieu of asylum support, which are administered by the housing providers (Mears, Serco or Clearsprings).

As people were left without access to cash for weeks on end, emergency cash payments were a critical lifeline. The Home Office has claimed that "the emergency cash payment provision with our accommodation providers was bolstered to ensure that everyone needing emergency cash support over that weekend and beyond could access it." However, frontline organisations reported that the reality on the ground was very different.

82% of respondents to the InfoHub survey said that all, most or at least some of their clients did not receive ECPs when left without access to asylum support. 30% of respondents said that all their clients had this issue.

The process of authorising emergency payments was obtuse, with some housing providers claiming that they could not issue emergency payments without the authorisation of the Home Office, particularly on the first days following the transition. Instead, individuals were told that they must contact Migrant Help first to register the issue and request an ECP.

*Asylum Link Merseyside were supporting one family with three children with disabilities, and a mother with severe mental health difficulties. They received a new ASPEN card, successfully activated it, but it had a zero balance. The mother called Migrant Help multiple times on Monday, and after several attempts when the call was dropped, she got through to an advisor and requested an ECP. The Migrant Help advisor said that they did not handle ECPs and that the woman needed to contact her housing manager directly. The woman attempted to explain that the only way to contact Serco was through Migrant Help, but the advisor maintained that she could not help. Asylum Link Merseyside went on to contact Serco directly, who said they couldn't issue an ECP without Migrant Help triggering the request.*

This issue was not confined to one particular part of the UK. A number of other organisations reported ongoing confusion between the Home Office, Migrant Help and the accommodation providers as to who had the authority to issue ECPs. This resulted in a huge amount of confusion and anxiety amongst individuals and support organisations, as well as critical delays in the delivery of emergency support.

*Citizens Advice Staffordshire North and Stoke (CASNS) supported a mother with 4 children during this period. She did not receive a new ASPEN card pre-transition. Even though the accommodation provider, Migrant Help and the Home Office were notified of this it took 3-and-a-half weeks for an ECP to be delivered. CASNS supported the family during this time to buy food and essentials as well as corresponding on numerous occasions with the housing provider and Migrant Help. The woman finally received her card on 24th June - nearly 5 weeks after the transition.*





During the attempts by the voluntary sector to reconcile the issues relating to the ECP process we experienced inconsistencies in the communication between accommodation providers, the voluntary sector and their residents. Mears makes regular welfare checks and has ongoing channels of communication with its welfare officers; Serco does not and any communication must be made through Migrant Help. In the lead up to the transition Mears was able to check whether people had new ASPEN cards through its regular welfare checks, where Serco only made phone calls. Once the chaos of the transition ensued, Mears' already established lines of communication enabled more effective means to request ECPs.

Due to pressures on the Migrant Help advice line, organisations and individuals struggled to get through to report the issue - leaving many people both unable to record their missing or faulty ASPEN card, and without any ECP.

Some organisations also raised concerns that Migrant Help advisors were not proactively offering people ECPs when they called up to register issues with their ASPEN cards. One organisation in the West Midlands told us that one of their service users had prepared for the blackout weekend, but was concerned that she'd not yet received a new card. When she called Migrant Help, they told her on Monday that her card would arrive in 5-6 days, at which point she began to panic about not having enough money to feed herself and her daughter the coming week. It appears that Migrant

Help did not offer or mention an ECP when speaking to this individual.

***A woman with a faulty ASPEN card, supported by Helen Bamber Foundation, was even told by a Migrant Help advisor on the webchat that she was not eligible for an emergency payment because she technically had the card, even though it didn't work.***

Another ongoing issue with ECPs was the amount provided. Initially, emergency payments were only £20 per person; although this was later increased to £40 per person. Many organisations noted that for people with protracted issues with their ASPEN cards, £20 payments would only last a few days before another had to be requested, resulting in additional stress for individuals and adding to the workload of voluntary organisations. Serco and Mears did provide cash ECPs but Clearsprings was providing vouchers instead, which meant people had to travel to a specific supermarket, creating an extra barrier to accessing essential items.

Other organisations reported that their clients were terrified that the Home Office would go on to deduct any emergency payments from future asylum support payments - Rainbow Home North East told us of one young mother who was worried that if the Home Office recouped emergency payments, she would be left unable to provide for herself and her child in the future.





## Impact on people seeking asylum

In simple terms, the botched transition of the ASPEN contracts left people seeking asylum without access to their only form of financial support, in some cases for over a month.

74% of respondents to the InfoHub survey stated that all, many or at least some of their clients who had faced issues with the transition had gone without basic essentials, including food, medicine or mobile data. 61% stated that all, many or at least some of their clients were referred to food banks.

Families were particularly hard hit by the botched transition. 48% of respondents to the InfoHub survey stated that children in families impacted by the ASPEN transition went without essentials - such as food and medicine.

People seeking asylum were left in poverty, without access to adequate emergency support. This was unacceptable for everyone in this situation, but some particularly vulnerable people experienced the botched transition even more acutely.

*Asylum Link Merseyside was supporting a single man with significant mental health needs. He had been prescribed complex medications, was under the care of mental and physical health services and had a social worker. Some of his medications had to be taken with food. On the Wednesday following the transition, he had not received a new ASPEN card and was left without food or funds. He had tried to call Migrant Help, but could not get through. He then called his Social Worker, who said they were unable to help, but signposted him to Asylum Link. At this point, Asylum Link Merseyside were able to provide him with an emergency food parcel, and advocate on his behalf with Migrant Help for a new card and emergency support payment.*

*“Every time I tried to pay for our weekly shopping and it got declined everywhere, I felt so humiliated and embarrassed...it is already hard to go and pay with an ASPEN card because of the stigma of being an asylum seeker... but then the humiliation and the worry was really too much.”*

**(Single parent with young child)  
North East**



## Impact on the voluntary sector

For many frontline service providers, the botched ASPEN transition had a serious impact on their ability to provide their core services to their client group. When individuals struggled to rectify problems with their cards, could not get through to Migrant Help, or did not receive an emergency cash payment, they turned to frontline charities for help. It was also reported that Migrant Help were actively signposting people to voluntary sector organisations for support, without those organisations' knowledge or approval.

77% of respondents to the InfoHub survey stated that the botched ASPEN transition put pressure on their capacity.

Some organisations reported that resolving ongoing issues became a singular priority for their organisation for weeks, often due to the length of time it took to resolve some cases. Teams reported high levels of stress, staff burnout and anxiety.

Cases were often complicated to resolve, taking huge amounts of staff capacity, time and energy. Support from organisations across the country was critical in preventing people seeking asylum being forced into absolute poverty during the botched transition.

# Case Study: West End Refugee Service (WERS)

*Fatima [pseudonym] is a single mum with two children. She received the card late - on the Thursday after the weekend when transition was supposed to take place - and when it arrived the PIN didn't work. Fatima contacted WERS to ask whether any support was available as she had no money or food and [one of their workers] advised that she come into WERS to pick up some food and access a foodbank through WERS for ongoing support.*

*Fatima's befriender was able to support her by calling round with some items for her while she waited for her card to be activated. She ended up receiving some emergency cash support from Mears and talked with WERS about calling Migrant Help two days in a row. She was on hold with Migrant Help for over an hour each time and had to give up. She was left at least two weeks without money or a card.*

In practical terms, many frontline organisations have been forced to redirect their own limited funds to pay for food parcels and emergency provisions for those left without funds due to the ASPEN transition. Organisations have provided food packs, vouchers, cash payments, toiletries, clothing, phone and data top ups, and travel costs.

11 of the organisations that responded to the InfoHub survey said they had spent significant funds supporting clients during the ASPEN transition; averaging at £600 per organisation, and totalling £6600. Of the 8 organisations who said they had provided food parcels, between them, they provided over 1237 parcels during the botched transition.

Individual organisations - like Gloucestershire Action for Refugees and Asylum Seekers - were forced to increase their food distribution and emergency support to help those left with nothing. By July, this small organisation had given away £450 to those without cash.

# Case Study: Govan Community Project

*Govan Community Project (GCP) is a small charity working in Glasgow, providing casework and support to people seeking asylum. When they heard about the upcoming transition, GCP put aside a small amount of money in anticipation of problems that might arise. However, within hours of opening their helpline on Monday 24th May, their money for supermarket vouchers was used up.*

*The organisation spent a huge amount of time and staff capacity escalating ASPEN issues through the Home Office and Migrant Help, requesting ECPs and referring to local food banks. Their resources had to be diverted away from working with their usual client base of destitute people seeking asylum who are not in receipt of Home Office support.*



# Recommendations

People were trapped by a labyrinthine system, pushed from pillar to post looking for support. Frontline organisations and charities were left to pick up the pieces, often providing emergency support to those who had been left with nothing.

What happened with the ASPEN scandal tells us that the Home Office remains as dysfunctional as ever. And this dysfunction is causing harm to people seeking asylum, thus damaging prospects for a fair, compassionate and effective asylum system.

*“I had a very difficult and bad experience with the Aspen card transition. I had to go for sometime without food because there was no money on my card. I had to borrow money from friends because for three weeks the card did not have any funds... And then paying back the money to my friends was time and energy consuming, as well as embarrassing because I had to go with my friends and wait for them to buy their groceries which I would then pay with my Aspen card as I could not hand it to them”.*

**West Mids**



*The Home Office must publish the results of its “lessons learned” review of what went wrong with the ASPEN transition, including an action plan setting out how it will apply these learnings to ensure the asylum support system consistently meets the needs of the vulnerable people within it. As part of this, the Department must set out how it will improve the monitoring, transparency and accountability of the asylum support contracts and meet its own obligations to prevent the destitution of those who are entitled to support.*

**In addition, the Home Office must:**

- *Ensure accommodation providers are more consistently involved in their residents’ welfare; and that residents are able to contact their housing provider directly.*
- *Review the decision to have Migrant Help as the single point of contact.*
- *Review and update the data held by the Department and by accommodation providers, notably the addresses of residents must be kept up-to-date.*
- *Improve its engagement with the voluntary sector and with service users; and ensure that engagement is early and meaningful, particularly in cases like this involving transformation of significant aspects of the system.*

**November 2021**