



Liberal Democrats for Seekers of Sanctuary

23 Lincoln Road, Hindley, Wigan. WN2 3QY

johnskipworth038@btinternet.com (correspondence)

info@ld4sos.org.uk

www.ld4sos.org.uk

facebook.com/ld4sos

twitter.com/ld4sos

President Lord Roger Roberts of Llandudno

HOUSING ISSUES FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS

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THE PROCESS

After an initial assessment by Home Office officials, the responsibility for housing newly arrived asylum seekers in the UK is with a contractor for the area, such as G4S covering the NE of England and Yorkshire. They usually subcontract out the actual housing provision to a housing provider. In the NE that is Jomast. The contract between the Home Office and contractor is referred to as the Compass Contract. This has just been extended to 2019, but a new contract is currently being finalised by the Home Office (not yet seen in full by the voluntary, and is now being put out to tender).

A house or flat is provided for a family with children; single people and couples live in a house which is divided into bedrooms with a shared kitchen and bathroom. Women and young children can be in a hostel with shared kitchens and bathrooms. The rent, Council Tax, and utilities are all paid by the Home Office. Basic furnishings and equipment are provided.

DESTITUTION

Asylum seekers who have exhausted their appeal rights but are still pursuing ways of appealing, or cannot be returned to their own country through no fault of their own, have no housing provided. They have no benefits, are not allowed to work, and are destitute and homeless.

Their only hope is that a friend who is settled here, a church or other organisation, puts them up.

Some areas have hosting schemes where people volunteer to put them up within that framework, and with the support of the organization which created the scheme.

See our document on Hosting.

NACCOM has more information on projects providing accommodation and support to those facing destitution across the U.K. at <http://nacom.org.uk/>

NEW CONTRACT

We are angry and disappointed by what we know so far about the new contract, and how the process is being handled. You can read more here, <http://libdemfocus.co.uk/ld4sos/archives/1264>. And on our separate, briefing sheet: "Asylum Accommodation, news on the new contract"

HOUSING PROBLEMS.

There have been a number of issues in the Teesside area with the Jomast contractor, not resolved by G4S. Some groups of asylum seekers had been working with a community organising group, Thrive, and Tees Valley of Sanctuary, to try to resolve those issues. Suzanne Fletcher, LD4SOS chair up to September 2016, has been involved with this from 2012, working with asylum seekers to try to improve conditions, have proper routes for reporting problems, and give them a voice that is heard to the contractors and providers. A number of issues have been resolved, including an end to employees of the provider walking into accommodation unannounced and poor conditions in the hostel, but some remain. More recently a housing issues group has been set up as part of the local City of Sanctuary movement.

RED DOORS. This is the issue that has hit the headlines in 2015, but is by no means the biggest problem. All the doors of the asylum housing were painted red and there would have been nothing wrong in that, except that it made them an easy target for harassment and abuse. When the problems they were causing asylum seekers were raised, they were ignored time and time again, even after Ian Swales then an MP raised them

at a Parliamentary Select Committee. It was only when a Times Reporter did some real door knocking work that the issue hit the press, and as we all now know became a national scandal, with the result that most of the doors are now painted different colours. The other issues, behind those doors, remain.

SHARED ROOMS. Many asylum seekers who are single are in their own rooms, but where a room can accommodate it, there are 2 beds to be occupied. Those in these rooms are allocated at random, so that people sharing often do not even have a common language to talk about differences and problems. They can come from different faiths, countries and cultures; have different ages and music tastes. G4S & Jomast refuse to make attempts at moving people so they share with another person more in tune with them. There are similar issues around shared houses.

We do know that the new contract will be allowing forced sharing to continue, except where the individual is deemed to be "vulnerable". However the contract does not define vulnerable.

Sheffield currently has a policy of not allowing any forced sharing of rooms at all. We want all local authorities to work towards having a similar policy as soon as possible.

Newcastle Council has recently lost a tribunal case on forced shared bedrooms for asylum seekers to landlord Jomast, so there, and everywhere else in the North East where Jomast is the landlord (subcontracted from G4S, who have the Home Office contract), room sharing can continue. We are unclear where else in the country this is happening and welcome feedback.

OTHER CHANGES NEEDED. Tees Valley of Sanctuary worked on housing problems in Stockton on Tees, including doing a survey of many asylum seekers about their housing issues and writing a report on the results. They put the findings forward to the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration. LD4SOS strongly support the recommendations of this report which is not only about the ending of shared rooms, but many other important housing issues too.

***Note** This briefing outlines experience mainly in the NE on the provision or non- provision of housing for refused asylum seekers, but is applicable nationally, as are the issues with contractors.*

If you have experience of housing for asylum seekers issues in your area, please get in touch with Suzanne Fletcher, ld4sos1@gmail.com or info@ld4sos.org.uk .