

Operational Proof of Evidence

Lisa Dysch - Property Director

Serco Limited

Appeal PINS ref. APP/Y3425/W/24/2215258

CHANGE OF USE FROM STUDENT ACCOMODATION  
TO ASYLUM ACCOMODATION

Former University Halls of Residence

Stafford Education and Enterprise Park

Weston Road, Stafford, Staffordshire ST180AB

Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended)

## 1. Witness Name and Qualifications

- 1.1 My name is Lisa Dysch and I am employed by Serco Limited (the "Appellant") as a Property Director. I have worked within the private rental sector for over twenty years, with experience in leading teams to manage large residential portfolios. I have a Post Graduate certificate in Management Studies; and Leasehold Management training.
- 1.2 In my role as Property Director, I am part of the Contract Leadership Team which drives the delivery of the Asylum Accommodation and Support Services Contracts ("AASC") Contract (further detail regarding the AASC is given at section 4.2 of my evidence). As Property Director I am responsible for the strategic and day-to-day operation of all aspects relating to property acquisition and management across the contract regions, including liaising with landlords, housing associations and local authorities; procuring and handing back property across the portfolio, ensuring all properties brought into the portfolio meet the required standards and are handed back according to the terms of the lease; ensuring all properties meet the required licensing and certification requirements; and managing the rent payments and charging to landlords.
- 1.3 There are many different functions within the role, but the main ones are:
- 1.3.1 To lead a team of property specialists to ensure sufficient property is acquired to meet the demand in intake of asylum seekers across the UK;
  - 1.3.2 To ensure all accommodation is procured to standards required by the AASC Contract, all legislation and the relevant local authority; and
  - 1.3.3 To develop strong relationships with landlords, housing associations and local authorities to ensure a strong pipeline of properties.
- 1.4 The evidence which I have prepared and provide for this Appeal (in this proof of evidence) is true and I confirm that the opinions expressed are my true opinions.

## 2. Experience in relation to the Appeal

- 2.1 The Appellant has submitted the Appeal in respect of Stafford Borough Council's (the "Council") refusal of planning permission in respect of application reference 22/35765/FUL for 'Change of use from student accommodation to asylum seeker accommodation' (the "Application") (**CD/A25**) at Stafford Court, New Beacons Campus Stafford (the "Appeal Site"). Further background regarding the history of the Application is set out in the proof of evidence of Mr Mark Jackson and I do not repeat it here (**CD/E1**).
- 2.2 I attended and spoke at the planning committee meeting held on 27 July 2022 in support of the application for planning permission. I have been involved with the Appellant's proposals at the Appeal Site from the stage of early shortlisting of properties intended to meet the AASC Contract requirements which took place in January 2020 (as further detailed in the Application Planning Statement (**CD/A2**) and I have been actively involved through the Application stage and the Appeal.

2.3 I am a member of the Appellant's Contract Leadership Team who lead and drive the contract in delivering asylum accommodation and support for asylum seekers with the aims of:

- 2.3.1 acquiring sufficient accommodation volumes to match demands which is compliant within legal and regulatory frameworks;
- 2.3.2 working with key stakeholders and agencies to provide a safe and secure environment for asylum seekers and local communities;
- 2.3.3 ensuring the delivery of front-line services to ensure the safety and welfare of the asylum seekers; and
- 2.3.4 ensuring that the accommodation is maintained, licenced and certificated in line with government and local authority legislative frameworks.

### 3. Scope of Evidence and Executive Summary

3.1 My proof of evidence will focus on the following matters which address both the Council's original reasons for refusal, points raised in the Council's Statement of Case (CD/C10) and matters in the Inspector's Post Case Management Conference note (CD/C12), as well as to set out the Appellant's involvement with asylum seeker accommodation generally. The proof is structured as follows:

- 3.1.1 The Appellant's history of involvement in Asylum Seeker Accommodation;
- 3.1.2 The mix of Asylum Seekers to be accommodated at the Appeal Site;
- 3.1.3 Other Asylum Seeker Accommodation sites run by Appellant;
- 3.1.4 The Proposed Day-to-Day operation of the Appeal Site; and
- 3.1.5 Conclusions.

3.2 In summary, my evidence will show that the Appellant has a history of involvement in asylum seeker accommodation and was well placed to bring forward the Application. The Appellant has a robust strategy in dealing with the growing need for this kind of accommodation and is experienced in its delivery and ongoing management. I have given specific examples of other asylum seeker accommodation sites managed by the Appellant which have been delivered successfully and have assisted with social inclusivity and the integration of asylum seekers into their local communities.

3.3 I also provide an overview of the day-to-day operational management of the Appeal Site and I have provided further detail of the indicative mix of asylum seekers which will be accommodated at the Appeal Site.

3.4 My evidence, along with that of my colleague Katy Wood (CD/E2), will therefore demonstrate that Appeal Site will be properly managed and will create an inclusive environment with links to the surrounding community.

### 4. The Appellant's history of involvement in Asylum Seeker Accommodation

4.1 The Appellant is a FTSE 250 company managing over 500 contracts worldwide. Employing over 50,000 people, the company operates internationally across four geographies: UK & Europe, North America, Asia Pacific and the Middle East and across five sectors: Defence, Justice & Immigration, Transport, Health and Citizen Services.

4.2 In 2012, the Appellant was awarded the COMPASS contract by the Home Office to provide accommodation and transport services for asylum seekers in the North West of

England and Scotland and Northern Ireland. In 2019, COMPASS became the AASC. At that stage, the Appellant was re-appointed to deliver services in the North West and was additionally awarded the contract for the Midlands and East of England regions. The AASC contracts were commissioned by the Home Office for the delivery of accommodation and support requirements to the supported asylum population. It is the Appellant's responsibility to provide properties to meet the requirements for both Initial Accommodation (referred to as "IA") and Dispersed Accommodation (referred to as "DA") for asylum seekers, for transportation to and from properties, and for a range of other services to support the welfare of asylum seekers.

4.3 To explain these terms, the majority of asylum seekers fall within Section 98 or Section 95 of the Immigration Act (1999). Section 98 relates to asylum seekers in Initial Accommodation, and provides that the Secretary of State may provide or arrange for the provision of support for asylum seekers or dependants of asylum seekers who appear to be destitute or likely to become destitute pending the consideration of their support application under Section 95.

4.4 Once that formal claim is created, asylum seekers usually move into Dispersed Accommodation, which is longer-term accommodation available until their asylum claim has been fully determined.

4.5 IA is a block-based provision to accommodate asylum seekers who need accommodation urgently before their support applications have been fully assessed for longer-term accommodation to be arranged. The length of time people stay in IA can vary, but around three to four weeks is normal, before moving into DA throughout the North West, Midlands, and East of England. During their stay in IA, the Home Office undertakes initial interviews and processes their application. During this part of their claim, the asylum seekers have to attend a number of appointments which enables the Home Office to create a formal claim. IA is deemed to be temporary so asylum seekers will not access education, nor will they register with the local GP.

4.6 Once that formal claim is created, asylum seekers usually move into Dispersed Accommodation. DA is longer-term temporary accommodation. Asylum seekers will normally be able to stay in DA until their asylum claim has been fully determined, and DA users are able to access the local GP and education.

4.7 Asylum seekers under both Section 95 and Section 98 will be accommodated at the Appeal Site, which will provide both Initial and Dispersed Accommodation.

4.8 The Appellant is fully experienced in delivering asylum support and accommodation and since the company was awarded the COMPASS contract in 2012, we have seen unprecedented growth in the number of residents we are responsible for, as follows:

4.8.1 In December 2012, the Appellant was responsible for circa 4000 asylum seekers and 1300 properties;

4.8.2 By July 2019, this had increased to circa 16000 asylum seekers and 5000 properties; and

4.8.3 The Appellant now looks after nearly 40,000 asylum seekers and 7000 properties (as of March 2023). This includes hotel contingency accommodation, and will continue to grow in the coming months and years.

5. The mix of Asylum Seekers to be accommodated at the Appeal Site

5.1 The layout of Stafford Court, which consists of 12 separate blocks, allows for a mix of asylum seekers who are at different stages in their claim. The proposal is to reduce the capacity of the building from 556 to 482 bedspaces which will consist of 160 bed spaces for IA and 322 bedspaces for DA.

5.2 The Appeal Site will accommodate a mix of single people and families in a number of blocks within the part of Stafford Court identified to be used for IA and a mix of singles only within the DA part of the Appeal Site. Each floor has secure entry mechanisms so that only asylum seekers who are allocated a room on a particular floor can gain access. In addition, there will be support staff on site, who are fully aware of the safeguarding requirements.

5.3 The number of occupants on the Appeal Site will vary as the Appellant will always match demand for accommodation to availability. The number of single people and families that arrive in the UK varies throughout the year, so the Appeal Site will be used on the same basis as other IA and DA facilities. However, the number of occupants will not exceed the maximum set out in the Application.

6. Other Asylum Accommodation sites run by the Appellant

6.1 As indicated above, the Appellant is responsible for looking after nearly 40,000 asylum seekers across nearly 7000 properties.

6.2 Most of our IA sites are former student accommodation sites which have proven to be ideal for accommodating asylum seekers. The cluster flats, the shared lounge and kitchen amenities all lend themselves to asylum seekers benefitting from mutual support and integration into local communities through buying food and taking local transport.

6.3 As at the time of writing, the Appellant manages IA centres in Liverpool (420 asylum seekers); Coventry; Derby and Nottingham (together, totally 567 asylum seekers). The Appellant also manages over 100 hotel contingency sites, accommodating over 14,000 asylum seekers.

6.4 All IA centres and hotel contingency sites are fully managed and staffed 24 hours a day. Staff undertake full clearance including DBS and CTC checks, and are fully trained on all relevant matters ranging from (for example) induction training; safeguarding; health and safety; fire prevention; ethical training (anti-bribery, code of conduct); counterterrorism; vicarious trauma; modern day slavery and various other topics linked to roles and personal development.

6.5 Every time an asylum seeker moves into one of the Appellant's accommodation sites of any size or type, a housing officer is assigned, and an induction is carried out. This induction comprises of a video and spoken word session, and both formats are

translated into the appropriate language. The induction covers the location and surrounding area; what to do in the event of an emergency; what is considered acceptable and unacceptable behaviour; local places of worship; local shops; public transport; how to contact your housing officer; how to make a complaint; how to request assistance; and how to lodge a maintenance issue.

6.6 As part of its contractual obligations with the Home Office, the Appellant is required to ensure that appropriate space is made for on-site healthcare and for Migrant Help to undertake its support activities. Migrant Help's role on-site is covered further at paragraph 7 below.

## 7. The Proposed Day-to-Day Operation of the Appeal Site

7.1 The Appeal Site will be managed in line with the Appellant's current operational procedures, systems and structures, which have been and continue to be successful in managing its significant current asylum seeker portfolio.

7.2 The management team (of which I am part) is responsible for the delivery of the following objectives, which will apply equally to the Appeal Site:

- 7.2.1 Management and leadership of a team of housing officers and maintenance officers to ensure that all asylum seekers are supported with care, dignity and respect;
- 7.2.2 Ensuring all accommodation is maintained to standards required by the AASC Contract, legislation and the relevant Local Authority, including working with relevant Senior Managers to ensure best use of trade specialists, suppliers and sub-contractors;
- 7.2.3 Ensuring that there are efficient and effective cash handling processes in place to manage and reconcile monies issued to asylum seekers, when required;
- 7.2.4 Developing strong relationships with partner organisations (e.g. NHS, Migrant Help) to ensure asylum seekers are assisted in their first stage of support;
- 7.2.5 Operational delivery of all health and safety standards to deliver a safe working environment for all users of the IA estate; and
- 7.2.6 Repairs and Maintenance.

7.3 In managing the Appeal Site, the Appellant will engage with the local police authority; fire services; community and faith groups to establish a good working relationship between these key stakeholders, staff and service users. The Appellant's experience is that information-sharing significantly benefits and helps in the event of an incident or emergency. Further information on safety, security and incident response are covered in the proof of evidence of my colleague Katy Wood.

7.4 The Appeal Site will be staffed 24 hours a day. There will be approximately 30 members of staff employed at the Appeal Site.

7.5 As indicated above, space will be provided at the Appeal Site for Migrant Help to provide its services. As such, in delivering support to asylum seekers at the Appeal Site and elsewhere, the Appellant is supported by Migrant Help, which is a charitable organisation, appointed by the Home Office under the AASC Contract, operating a national service called Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility (AIRE). Migrant Help can

provide asylum seekers with independent advice and guidance on the asylum process and also direct them to other services available in the UK. The Appellant also has a contract for 24-hour access to a telephone-based interpreter service.

- 7.6 Migrant Help also supports asylum seekers to access financial support, accommodation, legal advice and other services which they are entitled to under UK law. They help asylum seekers to understand the asylum process, their support entitlements and how to access other essential services (including health care and legal services) before their asylum interview. Migrant Help's free helpline also advises asylum seekers in their own language. This support will therefore be both available on the Appeal Site and via offsite telephone and online support.
- 7.7 The occupants of the Appeal Site will have no restrictions placed upon their day-to-day whereabouts but there are a number of appointments they are required to attend with the Home Office. The Appellant does however, and will at the Appeal Site, advise asylum seekers not to congregate in groups, as they are mindful that some members of the local community could perceive this as unsettling.
- 7.8 If any residents do not obtain prior notification before leaving the Appeal Site for more than 24 hours, the Appellant will report any absences to the Home Office for further action.
- 7.9 Asylum seekers are not allowed to work whilst their claim for asylum is being assessed. Nor do they have access to any benefits that would be afforded to a UK citizen. They do however receive a small daily payment.
- 7.10 The Appellant will facilitate on site activities for all of the occupants, as well as 'wrap around' care services on-site, along with additional transport provision in order that the Appeal Site functions sustainably and does not adversely impact existing services in the local area.
- 7.11 By way of example, at other sites that the Appellant operates, the Appellant has found that the asylum seekers have joined local football leagues and have been involved in volunteer work in their local communities.
- 7.12 The Appellant notes that the Council has requested that an operational management plan for the Appeal Site be reserved by way of condition. As indicated in the draft conditions accompanying the Statement of Common Ground (**CD/C7**), the Appellant is willing to provide such a plan, although the Appellant would point out that it is in any event required to manage its properties in accordance with the AASC Contract and is required to be mindful of the relevant asylum seeker legislative framework.
- 7.13 Following the initial risk assessment of the Appeal Site the below recommendations regarding site security have been made. From a security perspective the site needs minimal additional security measures to make the site secure and I am told by Alison Green, the Appellant's Head of Compliance Risk & Safety, that it is in her opinion one of the best IA sites to manage from a security perspective.

7.14 Recommendations for security provision at the Appeal Site:

- 7.14.1 Full review of any existing CCTV provision to ensure full site coverage (central access point to be located on the main staff office);
- 7.14.2 Access control reviewed to ensure accurate asylum seeker numbers can be obtained in the event of incident (fire, protest etc);
- 7.14.3 The entrance of the site to be gated to ensure controlled entry and exit to the site - the gated entrance will need to allow for access for emergency vehicles In the event of incident (consideration also given to pedestrian access to the site); and
- 7.14.4 Harris Fencing to be constructed/installed at any area of the perimeter which requires additional security measure (initial site assessment indicates this would be at the perimeter where the adjacent residential housing estate is located).

8. Conclusion

- 8.1 My evidence, along with that of my colleague Katy Wood (**CD/E2**), demonstrates that Appeal Site will be properly managed in accordance with the Appellant's proven operating procedures, systems and structures, and will create an inclusive environment with links to the surrounding community, such that there will not be a lack of social inclusivity in the community.