

Extracts from “An inspection of the Home Office’s management of asylum accommodation provision” ¹

February – June 2018 – published 20/11/18

***Introduction:** The inspection was intended to see how well or badly the Home Office manages the COMPASS contracts that are given to various large companies such as G4S who are paid by the Government to provide accommodation for asylum seekers across UK regions.*

Of course unlike most UK residents, asylum seekers have no choice about their accommodation and cannot move out. They also have very little practical recourse to sorting out their housing problems.

*The extracts in blue are direct quotes from the report published on 20/11/18 by ICIBI (the Home Office’s independent inspectors) following research done in early 2018. The **emphases** are my own highlights where from a first reading I’ve tried to pick out the most illustrative points and serious issues. For reference the paragraph numbers are those from the report.*

The Home Office employs Contract Compliance Officers who try to monitor the large companies’ performance by inspecting the accommodation they offer to asylum seekers. This is what they found:

3.14 In the 22 months to 31 January 2018, **Contract Compliance Officers inspected 8,313 properties. Of these, just 1,988 (24%) were found to be “compliant” with the requirements of the COMPASS contracts. The majority of the remainder (3,567 or 43% overall) were assessed as “not fit for purpose” or “urgent”,** meaning that the Provider was contractually bound to make the defect(s) safe within 1 working day of notification and effect a permanent repair within 7 days.

When complaints are made about defective properties does anything happen?

3.19 Of more concern, **the data the Home Office provided for complaints about property standards received by Providers during 2017 was incapable of analysis** because of the significant differences in the way each Provider categorised and reported complaints. Meanwhile, the Home Office had made no attempt to analyse complaints received directly into UKVI’s Central Complaints Team, and responded that a breakdown of complaints about Home Office or Provider staff was not readily available and could be provided only by examining individual complaint reports. This picture of inconsistent recording was the same for “incident” reports. Different regions used different terms for the same level of defect.

3.20 Given the inconsistencies in data capture and reporting by the Providers, and lack of any analysis by the Home Office, **it was difficult to see the justification for the Home Office’s confidence in the inspection and monitoring regime,** especially as its auditing (“compliance reviews”) of Provider IT and paper records was erratic.

1

Some of the problems appear to be systemic

8.26 Some Contract Compliance Officers said they felt at a disadvantage when engaging with their Provider counterparts due to not having comparable equipment: **“The Home Office don’t have a damp meter – we were told that we couldn’t use them as we didn’t have the right training and weren’t trained in damp. This could leave the Home Office open to dispute.”**

8.30 The Contract Compliance Team (CCT) had a target to inspect 33% of the properties in the asylum accommodation estate per year. The 33% target was applied to each area where there was a “cluster” of properties, but the particular properties in that area to be inspected were selected at random by the Contract Compliance Officer, who was also able to conduct “intelligence-led” inspections, where complaints had been raised, including by MPs. However, inspectors were told that the latter did not happen routinely. **Of the 100 sample inspection reports examined by inspectors, only 1 was “intelligence-led”.**

8.31 Some Contract Compliance Officers commented that information about complaints relating to their region was not routinely shared with them or fed into their inspection regime.

8.36 The different ways of categorising complaints made it hard to compare the Provider performance or to identify trends or patterns, but **the Home Office did not provide any evidence to the inspection team to suggest that it had tried to analyse or use the complaints data it receives.**

The independent inspectors then took a random sample of 100 out of some 3,000 existing property records.

Figure 6: Breakdown of outcomes for sample 100 property records

Compliant	Not correctly equipped/ Routine	Not fit for purpose/ Urgent	Un-Inhabitable/ Emergency	Unsafe/ Immediate	Not known
31	16	39	9	0	5

8.73 Inspectors also found:

Figure 7: Breakdown of findings from sample 100 property records

	Number
No evidence of a risk assessment having been conducted	15
Re-inspection (following up a previous “non-compliant” inspection)	11
Provider made repair(s) within the contractually required timeframe	3
‘Intelligence-led’ inspection (resulting from a complaint)	1
Evidence that defects had been escalated to a senior manager	0
Evidence of quality assurance checks or senior manager reviews	0
Evidence that the service user had been moved to alternative accommodation where their property was deemed “uninhabitable” or had an “emergency” defect.	0
Evidence that any defect had resulted in a KPI service credit	0

What did this mean in practice?

8.75 Inspectors identified a number of common issues: evidence of damp, mould and water damage; blocked drains; holes in floors, walls or doors; damaged fixtures and fittings, such as wardrobes or window locks; broken or faulty equipment, such as extractor fans or smoke alarms; poorly maintained gardens, with waste such as unwanted furniture; low standards of cleanliness; infestations of vermin.

This case study could have been written about the accommodation of an asylum seeker I used to know

Case study 4: Example of reported defects and Provider response

The property

In April 2018, ICIBI inspectors visited a 4-bedroom terraced property with an NGO. The property is classified as a HMO.[House of Multiple Occupation]

The occupants

At the time of the visit it was used to house 4 single males. One of the service users suffered from mental health issues and had been prescribed medication. The NGO was concerned that the living conditions were affecting the service user's mental health.

Defects

A service user explained that a number of issues with the house had been reported to the Provider, including regular leaking water and missing stair carpet (which had caused him to fall). In the 6 months he had lived in the house, little had been done to rectify any of the reported defects.

Inspectors observed water cascading into the kitchen from the upstairs bathroom. Part of the kitchen ceiling was missing and a large pool of water had formed on the kitchen floor. There were signs of water damage to the kitchen and living room walls. The Provider had placed a sign in the bathroom requesting service users to mop up water to prevent leaks.

There was also a broken fire door, damp and mould in the bedrooms, and the missing stair carpet. There were holes in the wall and inspectors were told that some had been covered with a wire pad to try to stop rodents entering the house. The carpets and communal areas of the house were dirty. The property visitation log indicated that they had last been cleaned 3 months ago. Various items (a bed frame, chair, mattress, mops, bits of wood) had been left in the back garden. A service user said they had been there when he arrived 6 months before.

The contracts which the Home Office issues to G4S, SERCO etc are meant to have claw-back clauses if the companies do not meet required standards known as KPI's. Clearly this has happened on occasion. In Home Office jargon the claw-backs are called 'Service credits' – some people might think that 'Service discredits' would be more appropriate...

Service credits in 2017

- 9.8 Home Office senior management pointed to the service credits applied during 2017 as evidence that the process was working effectively – see Figure 9.

Figure 9: Service credits 1 January – 31 December 2017, broken down by Region and Provider. ⁵⁷

Region	Provider	Service credit applied
Midlands & East of England	G4S	£206,828.42
North East & Yorkshire and the Humber	G4S	£115,845.10
North West	Serco	£72,576.99
Scotland & Northern Ireland	Serco	£216,763.54
Total		£496,168.95

Assessing mitigations

- 9.9 Home Office managers told inspectors that there was no written guidance on how to manage KPI compliance, including when to accept what a Provider had presented as mitigation. Some managers felt that this was “more about common sense”. Meanwhile, Home Office managers involved in the pre-CMG and CMG meetings said they felt “confident” they could use these meetings to “robustly hold the Provider to account”.

Many people have felt that the government relies on the big companies to do the work and does not want to upset them. Home Office employees seem to be suggesting this too. There's clearly a lot of public money involved.

9.11 Although it was rejected by senior management, **the Contract Compliance Team suggested that the sustainability of the contract was an influencing factor, and that if service credits were applied for everything the Providers “would be paying a fortune”**. To keep the contracts going, managers would “tend to waive” some service credits, as “we are not there to crack the whip, but rather to optimise what they are doing through the contract”.

At the end of the day asylum seekers are vulnerable people who have fled their homes, often don't speak the language well, have no local friends or family, and may have been tortured and be traumatised on top of all the other conditions of everyday life that enforced poverty imposes.

10.31 Pregnant asylum seekers are another group for whom the asylum accommodation system can pose particular challenges, not least the health risks to mother and baby. According to one expert stakeholder:

“Asylum seeking, pregnant women are seven times more likely to develop complications during childbirth and three times more likely to die than the general population.”

