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Dear Convener,

I have been following your inquiry on provision for asylum seekers closely and was pleased to have the opportunity to contribute recently at the Committee. Given the sequence of evidence sessions, and that I have already been called, I hope you will allow me a right of response to the subsequent session with Baroness Helena Kennedy. Taking points in turn through the transcript of the session:

- Remarks on training of Mears Welfare Officers and provision of mental health support: Mears Welfare Support Officers are given a training package, I have already supplied to the Committee a full listing of all mandatory courses attended by WSOs, to help them identify asylum seekers with mental health issues which includes skills on de-escalating situations. It is important to differentiate the role of dedicated WSOs in hotels from the roles undertaken by Housing Managers in the Dispersed Accommodation estate. Hotel staff receive specialised training, including on mental health, for working with asylum seekers. The safety and welfare of our service users is of the utmost importance to Mears and we have in place a team of Welfare Support Officers who are on site at hotels daily and on call 24 hours a day. We coordinate closely with the NHS, who are responsible for healthcare provision for asylum seekers, including mental health support. As part of Mears' Safeguarding responsibilities, Mears Welfare Officers make regular checks on service users, record any mental health concerns and raise with the NHS for appropriate support.

- Remarks that "Mears made a lot of money over the Covid crisis": This is not accurate. Profits on the provision of asylum accommodation and support are capped by the Home Office and subject to contractual limitations and thoroughly audited Gainshare mechanisms. Further to this, in our Scottish Responsible Business charter, we commit to a margin of 5% on our contracts with Scottish Councils and RSLs to ensure that we remain value for money to the Scottish taxpayer

- Remarks on mental health support following the Park Inn incident and suggestion that "none of that was forthcoming": This is not accurate. Following the Park Inn incident in June 2020, Mears offered all service users 1-1 counselling sessions with a clinical psychologist, who then made referrals as appropriate. Mears also worked closely with the NHS to arrange initial trauma counselling and ongoing support. Mears moved service users out of the hotel on the same day, initially into alternative hotel accommodation and following individual mediated discussions with support from Scottish Refugee Council, all were moved into suitable dispersed accommodation. Mears welfare officers continued to check in regularly with service users and work with the NHS Asylum Health Bridging Team to arrange any further support needed.



- Remarks on the quality of food provision in hotels:

Three meals a day are provided to all services users, menus meet NHS Eat Well standards and are nutritionally balanced, and menus are reviewed and changed regularly. Overall service user feedback on food has been good and we take on board any comments and requests when we design our menus and meal options. We make special provision for dietary or religious needs, medical needs, and food intolerances. All service users have a healthcare assessment and any food or dietary considerations are supported, including allergies or food intolerance. Culturally/religion appropriate food is available and special arrangements are made to support observance of religious festivals and holidays such as EID and Ramadan. In addition to meals, we also provide snacks (yogurt, fruit, crisps, etc) and drinks such as juice, tea, coffee, and milk, available 24-hours a day, which is self-service.

- Remarks on accommodation arrangements made in the early months of the Covid 19 pandemic:

The accommodation arrangements Mears made during the pandemic followed public health advice and Scottish Government guidelines to minimise contacts between people and journeys around the city to support those in IA. Nevertheless Mears staff were designated Keyworkers and continued to work throughout the lockdowns to support all our residents. Similar arrangements were in place across the UK for asylum seekers and by local authorities for accommodating other vulnerable groups during the pandemic. Mears used a good standard of accommodation, provided three nutritious meals a day, and onsite health and welfare support. The arrangements protected service users and our staff from Covid 19, as evidenced by the very low number of cases compared to the general population.

Yours sincerely,

John Taylor

Managing Director of Mears Group