

Hi,

We hope this email finds you, colleagues and family well and in good health at this difficult and uncertain time.

We wanted to take this opportunity to keep you updated with our response amidst the outbreak of the Coronavirus. We are fielding a lot of questions and queries at this time and given that the situation is moving quickly it is difficult to respond individually. Therefore, we will look to provide a regular briefing on updates, progress and changes to service that may impact on our Service Users.

Please see below an overview of the key areas of operation and how this is being managed

### **Mears internal Processes**

- We have set up a Group wide response team, consisting of Procurement, IT, HR and Health and Safety. The Response Team is chaired by the Group's Head of Care - a nursing professional.
- Set up a Coronavirus Management Team made up of ASSC contract staff and chaired by the contract's Head of Safeguarding and Head of Performance. This team will review the latest NHS, Home Office and Public Health guidance daily to ensure we remain in line with best practice.
- Issued a detailed Strategy and set of procedures to staff and management. With specialised procedures being issued to the accommodation and transport teams. All guidance has been developed
- from Public Health and NHS information.
- PPE has been provided to all staff visiting properties for essential purposes i.e., deliver food provisions, top up of utilities etc.
- We have additional resource on standby from other parts of the Mears business who are appropriately screened and vetted should they be required to support front line operations.

### **SU Visits and Advice**

Due to the current lockdown throughout the UK, Mears Group made the decision to move to home based working, where possible, this will result in a condensed service to our service users, to this end we have provided and undertake to provide the following;

- Guidance for Service Users distributed (including COVID-19 Symptoms, understanding social distancing and possible lockdown), handwashing techniques which has been translated into 12 languages.
- Produced Coronavirus information posters, which has been put up in all of our offices and buildings.
- Housing Managers will be contacting every service user on a weekly basis (interpreters provided where required) to check on their well-being, address any concerns; raise any emergency repairs and to provide guidance on COVID-19 and the current lockdown.
- If any of our service users do not have access to a mobile phone, we will provide one to them ensuring they can remain in contact with Mears; Home Office and NHS.

- Any service user with an underlying medical condition, requiring 12 week self-isolation, will be contacted by our Housing Managers on a weekly basis (however, this contact will increase to daily should they show symptoms) to ensure all service users completely understand the Governments guidance, check o well-being and provide practical support as required.
- Any service user who is currently self-isolating as they are symptomatic will be contacted on a daily basis to check on their well-being and to ensure their health has not deteriorated, Housing Managers will advise on contact with NHS for additional guidance.
- We will be providing food and essential item provisions to any service users who are self-isolating on a weekly basis, taking all dietary requirement into account. Staff will be following NHS guidance when delivering these provisions, ensuring the safety of our staff and service users.
- During the weekly interactions we will also be looking to start an SU profiling exercise which will include capturing information on - Who can access WiFi, do they have enough data on their phones etc.
- Anyone that does appear more vulnerable, isolated or just generally struggling with the current situation will be linked into the community volunteering, support projects that are still running across the region as detailed on the attached tracker.
- We will continue to visit and top up any Gas and Electric Meters, issue ECPs, deal with any incidents and complaints.
- Mears maintenance staff will attend to address and Cat 1 and 2 defects.

**Initial Accommodation – specifically Urban House, Wakefield:**

- We are committed to and will ensure that only service users are allocated a room at Urban House, that are not showing any signs of the virus and that have been in the Country and known to Mears for more than 14 days.
- Mears are working closely with the staff at Urban House to ensure adequate supplies of PPE are available to all users of the building.
- We have written to all service users, in their native language as well as speaking with them regularly face to face to make them aware of the government’s advice to dealing with COVID-19. This includes: making them aware of the symptoms of the virus, the escalation process should they believe they have the early signs of the virus and basic hygiene requirements, including regularly washing their hands, Social distancing guidance, etc.
- We have worked with the Senior Management Team at Urban House to ensure that that any service user, displaying the early signs of the virus, are asked to remain in their room and Mears will ensure that they are collected, by the Mears Transport Team and moved to accommodation to allow them to self-isolate. Typically transport is arranged within 1-2 hours of the Urban House staff being made aware of the potential symptoms. To protect drivers during transportation of service users, we are adapting our vehicles, to include a protective screen between the driver and the passengers.
- Each room receives a ‘deep clean’, following the removal of any service users that are showing symptoms of the virus, prior to any new arrivals being allocated the room.

- Meal service times have been extended to minimise the number of people in the dining room at any one time to ensure social distance guidelines can be maintained.
- With the assistance of UKVI we have started to provide all new service users arriving at the IA building with access to a mobile phone, ensuring they can remain in contact with Mears, The Home Office and NHS.
- Additional Mears staff will be placed in the building to further support the Urban House staff. Our staff are fully briefed, understand the BCP and latest government guidance and have access to relevant PPE.

### **SU Support – VCS**

The attached tracker has been put together covering all Local authority areas and the current position with the VCS support services in the area. This will be updated regularly and will be shared with all front line teams and those in our Service Delivery Centre so we can support and sign post SUs appropriately.

### **Discontinuation of SUs support**

In light of the announcement by Chris Philp MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Immigration Compliance and the Courts on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 “the next three months, we will not be requiring people to leave our accommodation because their asylum claim or appeal has been finally decided. This decision will be reviewed ahead of the end of June 2020”. This will mean that from this point on, no-one ‘needs’ to leave their accommodation. However, if an individual or family group have been granted refugee status (a positive decision) and they want to move on as they have somewhere to move on to, they can choose to do so and just need to inform Mears via their Housing Manager. Mears will then notify the Home Office. This will ensure that Service Users have a choice and do not need to stay on support if they do not want to or no longer need to.

Where eligible, Service Users may also use the move on service from Migrant Help to get access to benefits while remaining in their Asylum Support accommodation.

For any Service User whose support has been ended in recent days, they will need to apply for Section 4 support. Mears staff will ensure that they make contact with Migrant Help as quickly as possible and will facilitate this if necessary to ensure the application for Section 4 support is made without delay. Whilst they are awaiting re-instatement of their support Mears will confirm with MH how long this process will take and provide provisions to these service users, until such time as their S4 support is actioned.

Mears Group have undertaken to source additional accommodation throughout the contract region to ensure we can manage the additional capacity required to provide a service to newly arrived asylum seekers. If any dispersals should be required during the next 3 months, a risk assessment will be completed on a case by case basis.

### **Hotels**

It is likely that this type of accommodation could increase whilst we manage this difficult situation. We have ceased using one small, independently run hotel in the last couple of weeks as they were not able to continue operating in his difficult climate. If we are looking to stand up a new hotel facility, there will be specific and detailed discussion with that Local Authority area.

- All Service Users have been moved into other appropriate accommodation. We are working closely with the remaining hotels to ensure their Business Continuity Plans are updated and robust and have been given the following reassurances;
  - BCP – Plans shared and reassurance provided on staffing levels and overall operational robustness.
  - Food supplies – There has been a drop in occupancy levels for general bookings across the hotels and their wider groups. They have engaged with suppliers, do not foresee any issues and remain confident there will be sufficient supplies.
  - Food service / times – It is essential that current guidance around social distancing is adhered to and therefore extra food service areas will be used and meal times / sittings extended.
  - Resident Welfare Manager Support – We will continue to have a dedicated Mears RWM in each hotel during office hours to support SUs and their needs. If anyone needs to self-isolate or starts with symptoms, the RWM will offer advice and guidance in line with NHS 111 information. Meals and essential items will be delivered to SUs bedrooms as required.

We hope the above provides a good snap shot of the activity we are under taking and how we are coordinating our response to support our Service Users as well as considering the safety and welfare of our dedicated workforce.

Kind Regards,

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**Juliet Halstead**  
Head of Partnerships