1st August 2018

Letter concerning asylum seeker accommodation in Glasgow sent to Councillor Susan Aitken and other Scottish politicians from Rupert Soames

I write following the letter you sent to the Home Secretary on 30th July, counter-signed by 11 other politicians. There has also been a great deal of media coverage over the past few days about the provision of accommodation for asylum seekers in Glasgow, much of which is untrue. I therefore thought it might be helpful if I provided you with some of the facts that we see.

In your letter you say that Serco is planning to make 300 people immediately homeless, which, in the words of your letter “will trigger a humanitarian crisis in Glasgow” – this is simply not true. As we told stakeholders last week, our intention was to give notice to no more than six single adult males this week and twelve next week.

The letter further claims that “there was no meaningful engagement” between Serco and the local authorities in regards to this matter. Again, this is simply not true. We have engaged extensively with stakeholders, and over many months, about the issue of over-stayers. Indeed, we have developed a very precise set of protocols and procedures to cover lock-changes, called a 'Move On Protocol' which has been agreed in recent weeks with Glasgow City Council.

The letter also completely fails to acknowledge that, for humanitarian and welfare reasons, Serco is paying for accommodation, including rent, rates, heating and lighting and insurance for some 330 people who are no longer receiving support from the Home Office. We are giving financial and welfare support to vulnerable people for many months, and in some cases more than a year, after their asylum claims have been refused. This is currently costing Serco over a million pounds a year, which costs would have to be borne by the Council if we were not doing it. We would be delighted to discuss with the Council arrangements for them taking on the cost of these services.

The one positive outcome of the events of recent days is that it has put very firmly on people’s agenda the nature of the crisis. This is that the local arrangements once Home Office support has ceased are inadequate, and we are put into the impossible position of having to make the choice of paying for people’s accommodation ourselves, or making them homeless and destitute. Serco’s reluctance to evict people, which I hope you would applaud, has resulted in the number of people whose housing we are paying for increasing from 167 to 330 in the last twelve months; many of these people are single males who no longer have the right to remain in the UK. At the same time, we are having to find housing for around 180 new asylum seekers, including families with children, who arrive in Glasgow each month. Many of these people are distressed and vulnerable, and they may have to be housed in hostels or other unsatisfactory accommodation because others whose appeal process has come to an end are unwilling or unable to move on.
We hope recent events will precipitate urgent and effective action by stakeholders to find a solution to this problem, which has so far been hidden from public sight by Serco’s willingness to provide unlimited free accommodation to over-stayers. We are no longer prepared to do this.

Whilst a longer-term solution is put in place, we undertake that, for the next four weeks:

- We will restrict the number of people to whom we give lock-change notices to no more than 10 people a week;
- None of these people will be families with children;
- All of these people will be those who the Home Office have told us have exhausted their appeal process and no longer have the right to remain in the country.

By tightly limiting the number of people subject to these measures, we believe Local Government will have enough time to manage the step up in capacity which it needs to have in place as we move to a policy of reducing the number of over-stayers we are supporting at our expense.

My colleagues and I stand ready to meet to discuss these issues with you. In the meantime, I attach a series of questions and answers which may enable people to understand better the challenges we all face in this difficult and complicated issue, in which we are all trying our best to support people who are often desperate and vulnerable.

Yours sincerely,

*Rupert Soames OBE*  
Chief Executive  
Serco Group Plc
Questions and Answers

- **What is Serco’s role in looking after Asylum seekers**
  - When an asylum seeker arrives in the UK, their request for asylum is managed by the Home Office; whilst this process is in train, the Home Office pays companies such as Serco to provide housing and welfare support. In the UK, Serco currently care for around 17,000 asylum seekers, of whom 5,000 are in Glasgow.

- **Why would you want to evict anyone?**
  - We don't want to evict anyone, but at the end of someone’s journey through the asylum system, they get either a positive decision – the right to remain – or a negative decision, which means they must leave the country. In either case, the Home Office stops supporting them and paying for their accommodation once it has made a determination, and they should leave the housing Serco have been providing for them whilst their asylum case is being decided, to make room for asylum seekers who are newly arrived in the country. There are about 180 new asylum seekers arriving each month in Glasgow.

  The fact is, however, that a proportion of the people who complete their journey through the asylum system chose not to leave their properties. This is unfair on others, and puts Serco in the impossible position of having to choose between making people homeless or continuing to provide them with free accommodation indefinitely. At the moment we are caring for, and providing free housing to, about 330 people who the Home Office have stopped supporting, but are continuing to stay on in their accommodation. This figure has doubled in the last 12 months.

  Of the 330 overstayers, about 230 have received negative decisions – ie been refused asylum – and 100 have been granted asylum; about 210 of the 330 people are singles, and the rest are in family groups.

- **Is it true you are evicting hundreds of people this week?**
  - Absolutely not. As we have told stakeholders, we are intending to serve Lock Change notices on no more than six adult males this week with a seven day notice to leave. All of these are people whose claim for asylum in the UK has been unsuccessful. No one will be evicted until that seven day Lock Change notice expires. We would emphasise that this notice is in addition to the 21 days’ notice they have previously received. We have also committed that for the next four weeks only a maximum of ten adults without dependent children per week will be served notice.

- **Why have you chosen to take this action now?**
  - We made the decision to act now as the total numbers involved have almost doubled over the past 12 months from 169 people to the point where today Serco is paying all the costs for around 330 former asylum seekers. It is unreasonable to expect Serco to continue to pay for these people’s housing indefinitely. Our decision has followed lengthy discussion and consultation with Glasgow City Council, Glasgow City Health and Social Care Partnership, UK Immigration Authorities and the Third Sector.

- **Do the 330 over-stayers include people from Afghanistan and Syria?**
  - Very few: there are one couple and three single people from Afghanistan and five single people from Syria.

- **Have you consulted Glasgow City Council about this?**
  - Yes. We have regular meetings with Glasgow City Council, and recently developed with them a ‘Move On’ protocol which is an agreed process for managing lock-changes. Recent meetings with the Council were held on:
• **Have you consulted the Third Sector about this?**
  
  Yes. We have established a Third Sector Engagement Forum which met in:
  
  - February 2017
  - October 2017
  - February 2018
  - 20 June 2018.

  There has been detailed discussion of the issues of over-stayers and Lock Changes at this forum. The minutes of each meeting has also been sent to Chris Stephen MP for information. The meeting is chaired by Serco and attended by a Home Office representative.

• **Is Serco acting legally?**
  
  Yes. The Rent Scotland Act 1984 generally requires a Court Order to evict a tenant, but there is a specific exemption to the Act which means that such an order is not required for people in the asylum system.