



Asylum seeker to sue Home Office after falling ill with Covid-19

Man was assured he was not at risk at Wakefield centre where he says distancing was difficult

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An asylum seeker who became infected with Covid-19 after an outbreak in his accommodation - despite assurances from the Home Office that he would not be at risk from the virus there - is taking legal action against the government.

Public health officials have confirmed an outbreak of Covid-19 at Urban House in Wakefield, where more than 20 people are known to have contracted the virus.

The man, from Eritrea, whose claim for asylum is based on his account that he fled persecution in his home country and survived torture and trafficking on his journey through Sudan and Libya trying to reach the UK, is bringing the legal action against the Home Office for failing to protect him from the coronavirus.

His lawyers wrote to the Home Office on 15 April expressing fears that he and others were at risk of contracting Covid-19 in Urban House due to overcrowded conditions including room sharing, a lack of social distancing and meals being eaten in a communal dining room.

A Home Office official responded: “While I can understand your client may feel concerned about his health, it is not accepted that the current practices in Urban House, guided as they are by up-to-date expert medical advice, are placing him or any other resident at risk of contracting Covid.”

The asylum seeker spoke to the Guardian from a hotel he had been moved to by the Home Office to isolate him after he began to experience symptoms.

“I was so scared in Urban House and believed I was at risk of catching Covid-19 because of the bad and overcrowded conditions there. I have been very ill with Covid but now I’m starting to feel better,” he said.

He added that although asylum seekers are supposed to be placed in Urban House for only a few weeks, he had been there for approximately four months.

“Many of us in Urban House have been asking for transfers. It is too crowded there. Covid has really weakened us and we fear we could pick up another infection if we are sent back there,” he said.

The legal action against the Home Office argues that officials’ failure to house him in suitable accommodation was unlawful and resulted in him contracting Covid-19.

The Home Office contractor for Urban House is Mears. New asylum seeker accommodation contracts came into force in September last year. A National Audit Office report revealed that in the first four months of the contract, Mears was fined £3.1m by the government for various failures.

An academy of Medical Sciences report published last week warned that further Covid-19 outbreaks were likely in places such as asylum seeker accommodation.

Isabella Kirwan, of Duncan Lewis solicitors, representing the man bringing the action, said: “Residents of Urban House are at grave risk of contracting Covid-19. It is clear that they are unable to properly protect themselves in conditions that are manifestly unsafe. The Home Office has yet again failed an extremely vulnerable group of individuals.”

Graham O’Neill, of the Scottish Refugee Council, who is monitoring asylum seeker accommodation across the UK, expressed concern that safeguarding vulnerable people was not one of the key performance indicators for Home Office contractors in asylum accommodation. “Any public service is judged by how it treats its most vulnerable,” he said.

A Home Office spokesperson said: “The safety and wellbeing of asylum seekers and the local communities in which they live is of utmost importance. We have put in place a range of measures to specifically support asylum seekers affected by the pandemic.”

A Mears spokesperson said steps had been taken to reduce the number of asylum seekers in Urban House, which was now operating at half capacity to end room sharing and allow social distancing.

The spokesperson added that cleaning was maintained for all areas and the company could not