

Scotland: Protests force Serco to halt asylum seeker evictions

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Days of protests and public outrage against services giant Serco's plans to evict 328 asylum seekers in Glasgow have forced a retreat by the company.

Serco have agreed to delay the first six eviction notices by 21 days and to "pause all further lock-change notices ... whilst the law is being tested and clarified.

Under a multi-million-pound contract with the Home Office, Serco operates the UK government's COMPASS asylum seeker dispersal across the North West of England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The company is responsible for housing 17,000 asylum seekers, including 5,000 in Glasgow, while their claims are processed.

On July 27, Serco wrote to Glasgow City Council and local charities stating its intention to evict "former Asylum Seekers who do not wish to engage in voluntary return, and who the Home Office have determined have no legal right to remain in the UK." The letter caused alarm among asylum seekers and refugees, whether or not they were immediately targeted.

The company issued eviction notices, warning, "You must now make urgent arrangements to vacate the property no later than August 6, 2018.... if you fail to leave the property by the above date, action will be taken to repossess the property without further notice to you. That may involve immediate removal of yourself and your property."

Opposition to Serco's actions has been wide ranging.

The first protest, attended at short notice by hundreds of people in Glasgow city centre, was followed by protests outside the British government's Home Office buildings in Brand Street. The Home Office building's gates were briefly chained shut while two Afghan men, Rahman Shah, 32, and Mirwais Ahmadzai, 27, took

part in a hunger strike. Other asylum seekers burnt their eviction notices.

Housing and rights organisations mounted a series of legal challenges. Housing charity Shelter Scotland and the Glasgow-based Legal Services Agency presented papers last Monday to Glasgow's Sheriff Court, requesting interim orders barring the threatened lock changes in three cases.

Shelter Scotland's director Graeme Brown told *Scottish Housing News*, "This opportunity to potentially secure a delay to the lock changes has arisen following a welcome and encouraging community effort."

The cases will be held August 24 at Glasgow's Sherriff Court.

Govan Law Centre's (GLC) solicitor advocate, Mike Dailly, confirmed to *Scottish Housing News* that one of their clients and her partner had been informed by Serco that they would now not face any immediate eviction proceedings, as they had made a new application for asylum.

But Dailly also noted that the 21-day grace period conceded to the six asylum seekers was inadequate. He said, "GLC's point is that there is no possibility that this complex legal dispute can be settled authoritatively within 21 days."

A campaign has also been organised by housing rights group Positive Action in Housing (PAIH), which arranges practical support and accommodation for destitute asylum seekers. A recently formed "Living Rent" tenants union organised protests outside the houses of some of those threatened with eviction and says it has a database of people willing to participate in protests at short notice.

Serco's vindictive action could only be carried out with approval from the Home Office.

Home Office support for living and accommodation ceases 21 days after an asylum application is concluded. But once an asylum claim is rejected, claimants still have the right to appeal and, in some circumstances, can lodge a fresh claim for asylum. Some 47 percent of rejected claims are won on appeal.

What Serco attempted was illegal, as is demonstrated by it now facing court cases. By seeking to evict asylum claimants during their appeal and at the point of their greatest vulnerability, where a stable postal address is essential, Serco and the government are disrupting the appeals process—another example of the “hostile” environment for migrants sought by the British government.

Serco, which also runs the notorious Yarl’s Wood Immigration Removal Centre, has been hounding asylum seekers for months. The *Herald* reported that Lana Rashid and her husband, Rabar Razaie, who fled Iraq 18 months ago, were threatened with eviction by Serco in April after their asylum claim was rejected. Under the stress of eviction and potential deportation, Lana had a miscarriage in May. The Home Office subsequently agreed to consider a new application for asylum.

Other reports suggested that, despite an agreement last year not to do so, Serco housing officers have been entering asylum seekers’ property and putting alarming hand written eviction notes through their doors.

Serco is a global operation, with fingers in a large number of pies—many of them rich in human misery. The company employs 50,000 staff worldwide and won 30 contracts worth £3.4 billion in the year to December 31, 2017. As well as asylum services in Britain, the company runs six prisons and young offender institutes, including operations in Kilmarnock and Doncaster, and currently incarcerates around 5,400 people.

Three Australian prisons are Serco controlled. One of the 2017 contract wins was for £1.5 billion to run Australia’s biggest prison, the Grafton Correctional Centre in New South Wales. Serco also runs the notorious and remote Christmas Island detention centre in the Indian Ocean and Kohuora Auckland prison in New Zealand.

Company revenues are falling, however. Although Serco picked up £70 million worth of National Health Service facilities management contracts from collapsed rival Carillion earlier this year, and in 2016 won a £600

million NHS contract at St. Barts hospital in London, new contracts are expected to be impacted by geopolitical instability and Brexit. Serco lost out to rival Capita on a contract for the British military’s fire and rescue services. Group profit was down last year to £22 million on a turnover of £2.9 billion.

Shelter Scotland and the Legal Services Agency have written to social housing landlords, whose flats have been sublet to Serco, calling for them to bar Serco from changing the locks on their property. A number have responded, including the Wheatley Group, which owns or runs 80,000 properties, of which 74 are leased to Serco. The group’s chief executive, Martin Armstrong, advised Serco CEO Rupert Soames of the group’s intention to alter the leases of “refugees living in our homes, who have a legal right to be in Scotland and the UK, into secure Scottish tenancies.” This means that tenants cannot be evicted without a court order.

Housing associations also criticised the speed of Serco’s sudden decision and reminded them that locks cannot be changed without housing association approval.

Scottish National Party (SNP)-controlled Glasgow City Council restricted their remarks largely to complaints over the protocols of the asylum process, with which they have collaborated for years. This is in line with the governing SNP’s pitch for more powers, including over migration, to be devolved to Edinburgh from London. The SNP favours a policy of increased migration to offset Scotland’s labour shortages. First Minister Nicola Sturgeon told a recent conference, “Westminster’s hostile environment to migration is not just a slogan. It has a real impact on our public services and our economy.”

However, the SNP’s priorities were summed up in the contrast between the derisory £100,000 it handed over to the Destitute Asylum Service the day after Sturgeon and Prime Minister Theresa May signed off on a £1.2 billion city investment deal for Edinburgh and South East Scotland.



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