

BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION

RADIO 4

TRANSCRIPT OF “FILE ON 4” – “*ASYLUM SEEKERS*”

CURRENT AFFAIRS GROUP

TRANSMISSION:	Tuesday 10 th February 2015	2000 - 2040
REPEAT:	Sunday 15 th February 2015	1700 – 1740

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PRODUCER:	Matt Precey
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PROGRAMME NUMBER:	PMR506/15VQ5541
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“FILE ON 4”

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Producer: Matt Precey

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URRY: More conflict around the world means more people are fleeing to Britain to seek asylum.

WOMAN: I left my country, Iraq, because ISIS entered and decreed.

MOHAMMED: I am Mohammed, I am from Darfur, Western Sudan.

URRY: But after they've arrived in the UK, where they end up has become a hotly contested issue. Towns and cities in the North of England are complaining they're being forced to accept too many, overstretching local services at a time when cuts are biting. In Liverpool they've even taken the Government to court over it.

ANDERSON: There seems to be a sort of asylum apartheid operating, where certain cities are the ones that are taking their unfair share of asylum seekers. This country is rightly saying that, you know, as a country we should help asylum seekers. Everybody's got to play their part and everybody's got to get involved in doing that and not just left for a few.

URRY: Government sets limits on the overall proportion of asylum seekers in any city or borough, but File on 4's discovered in some inner city wards numbers far exceed the recommended figure. As accommodation fills up, hotels are being used to bridge the gap. All this comes after the Government changed the way asylum seekers are dispersed around the country. In a radical move, it sidelined councils and instead signed up private companies to provide housing and other entitlements. The aim was to save money, yet also raise accommodation standards. But is that what's being delivered?

DANCZUK: The dispersal policy of asylum seekers is completely failing. It's unsustainable and it can't go on.

SIGNATURE TUNE

ACTUALITY AT CHURCH

DUNN: This is Saint Bride's Church in Liverpool. We operate a drop in one day a week on a Friday here for asylum seekers and refugees in the city.

URRY: Let's go in and have a look. It's actually a big space, this, isn't it?

DUNN: Yes, it's really large, it's a really old building.

URRY: Antonia Dunn is a senior manager with the British Red Cross. St Bride's is a grade 2 listed neoclassical church building, bordering Toxteth and Liverpool city centre. Many coming here have fled war and persecution. Some have travelled half way round the world. They have little means to support themselves.

DUNN: Quite often, we're seeing people that are arriving in very inappropriate clothes, very thin cotton t-shirts and flip-flops ...

URRY: Flip-flops? In the winter?

DUNN: And it's really quite cold, so we've got quite a lot of shoes at the moment that people are needing and sort of winter coats.

URRY: Can we go through here and have a look what's going on?

DUNN: Yes.

URRY: Past the kitchen. This is a place for families too, isn't it? There's a lot of children around today.

DUNN: Yes, so today we've got a few children around and we're able to provide some toys for them to play with, and as I say, a particular need recently has been for shoes and for winter coats, because quite often people just don't have those items.

URRY: It's not just warm clothing in short supply. Antonia Dunn says the support system provided by charities and the authorities is struggling to keep pace with demand here.

DUNN: Access to food, access to healthcare aren't always being actioned as quickly as perhaps people need them to, people are having to wait longer for those appointments to be made for them. The environment's quite tough now at the moment, I think, for lots of organisations and for lots of people.

URRY: Part of the difficulty is the sheer numbers being placed in Liverpool. When people come to the UK seeking asylum, the Home Office agrees to make available somewhere to live, for those who have an eligible claim and a small amount of money to live on. Currently that's little more than £5 a day for a single person. Liverpool is one of half a dozen cities that receive people into short-term accommodation while they are being assessed. There are health checks and screening for diseases. A place for them to live can then be found thereafter, while the authorities decide the merits of their claim. The responsibility for this has passed from local authorities and their partners to private providers.

URRY cont: In the North West, that's a company called Serco. They run three initial accommodation centres in Liverpool, one of which is just round the corner from the church.

ACTUALITY AT BIRLEY COURT

URRY: This is Birley Court, which is just adjacent to the city centre, in a road which has clearly seen better days. Behind me is a row of Georgian terraces, which clearly were once pretty splendid homes, but which now are all boarded up with broken windows, and opposite the court itself, which has been renovated at the cost of £1.5 million. It was officially opened in the summer of 2013. There are asylum seekers coming and going and there is a guy playing tennis, knocking a tennis ball against the wall outside here. It's a road with a dead end, so he's able to just amuse himself. People are generally hanging around here. This is the place that we're told is full up – so full, in fact, that people are having to be put into hotels in order to meet their basic needs. That's been going on since last autumn, and it's proved controversial. Newspaper headlines have been critical, reporting on one case in nearby Warrington, only last month.

READER IN STUDIO: Our four-star hotel was turned into a soup kitchen: Anger of guests whose luxury stay was ruined when they found dozens of asylum seekers booked in as well.

URRY: Other hotel stories elsewhere have also made national headlines. And guests have been none too pleased either, at least according to the website TripAdvisor.

READER 2 IN STUDIO: Visited here for a lunchtime meeting and coffee in the lounge. There are asylum seekers staying there. They were evident in the grounds, smoking, and they were also hanging around the smelly, damp corridor leading to the leisure complex.

READER 3 IN STUDIO: I had to tell two to stop staring. They were in the bar and restaurant in tracksuits and trainers - not nice when you're going for dinner. It totally spoiled our anniversary.

URRY: The initial accommodation centres which should be taking these people are purpose-built or converted, with other facilities on hand, in locations which should make it possible for asylum seekers to get easy access, to the many services they need to support them. But as they fill up, it's hotels which bridge the gap. The Red Cross is having to go in to deliver humanitarian supplies.

DUNN: The hotels clearly aren't set up to meet the needs of people – they're hotels. And so we've been going in and we've been providing that really practical assistance in terms of access to clothing, to nappies, to toiletries - you know, people literally not having a bar of soap to wash their face with. You know, we're talking about very, very basic needs that perhaps aren't always being met.

URRY: We wanted to interview the private provider, Serco, about their use of hotels. No one would appear on the programme, but in a statement we were told it was a temporary measure at no cost to the taxpayer.

READER IN STUDIO: We are currently using budget hotels on a short term basis to house asylum seekers, until we can find alternative accommodation for them. We move them out of the hotels into other accommodation as quickly as possible. We ensure that the asylum seekers always have full access to healthcare services during this time.

URRY: This prolonged use of hotels wasn't envisaged under changes introduced by the Government, which awarded six regional contracts, worth a total of £700 million to private firms. Dr Jonathan Darling from Manchester University, has been studying changes to asylum accommodation across the country. He says these new delivery models, which are called compass contracts, became fully operational in early 2013.

DARLING: Compass effectively meant that you moved from a system in which accommodation was provided by consortiums of local authorities and some private housing bodies and social housing associations, to a system whereby those contracts were given to only three private providers. That's G4S, Serco and Clearel. And only one of those, in this case, Clearel: had experience of working in the sector prior to gaining that contract with Compass.

URRY: What was the Government's intention?

DARLING: So the stated intention was to save money, to cut back on particularly the UK Border Agency budget as part of deficit reduction, but also to try and raise standards across the dispersal kind of portfolio. That was the stated intention at the time at least.

URRY: Has that been achieved?

DARLING: Some of the cost saving has been achieved because the Compass contracts are much reduced in terms of the actual money that's allocated within the contract. Although that is potentially debatable in terms of the way it's changing over time, because of particular pressures and the cost of adapting to a new system has been higher, I think, than Government and others had expected.

URRY: But the really big change is that local authorities are no longer at the heart of the process. So they get less say about who goes where. The most up to date figures given to Parliament are revealing. They show that last year almost 28,000 asylum seekers were in the UK. Almost a quarter, 6,015, of those were dispersed in the North West alone. The figure for Liverpool was just less than 1,400, but the city council argues it's higher at around 1,900. In contrast, the South East of England only had 287. The Mayor of Liverpool, Labour's Joe Anderson, says that's not a fair distribution.

ANDERSON: My case is here and my arguments is here is that there seems to be a sort of asylum apartheid operating where, you know, certain cities are the ones that are taking the unfair share of asylum seekers. For instance, you know, only six weeks ago we had 125 asylum seekers in hotels in Liverpool, and officers from this council went and said to Government, look, this has got to be addressed, this has got to be looked at, how we've arrived at that situation. You know, the local authorities lost control, they brought in the private sector to run it, and I don't think it's working as effectively or in a joined up way as it could be and there's no joined up thinking about this.

URRY: Haven't you created a bit of a rod for your own back because you've set yourself up as a city of sanctuary, so people are looking to Liverpool, in some senses, to take a lead?

ANDERSON: And we'll always be a city of sanctuary, because that's what we're proud of, and we'll always offer a hand of friendship to people, especially people fleeing countries where they're being persecuted for whatever reason, so we'll always do that. That's the point I make about this asylum apartheid. Everybody has to take a fair share. If this country is rightly saying that, you know, as a country we should help asylum seekers, then everybody's got to play their part, and everybody's got to get involved in doing that and not just left for a few. And then, of course, it's not just left to a few of the poorest wards or areas in the city where Serco can afford, for instance, to buy houses.

URRY: And it's concern about the numbers of asylum seekers in some of those wards which is troubling the city council.

ACTUALITY OF TRAFFIC NOISE

URRY: Anfield is home to Liverpool Football Club, but much of the rest of the area, is far less glamorous. This is where Safraz lives - we've changed his name. He's a middle class, middle aged Pakistani who, along with his wife and daughter is appealing the rejection of the family's initial asylum claim. They continue to be entitled to a level of state support until that is concluded. So they've been put in a little terraced house in a tightly packed street. Safraz explained that the reason they left Pakistan was because he's a Sunni Muslim and his wife's a Shia. When they got married they faced sectarian death threats back home.

SAFRAZ: I received many calls that, why you did this, why you got married with my friend see, and that. And at night time, three or four am in the morning, there were many time the people came with the guns and there was guns in hiding in their shawls and like that. They just banged the doors, banged the doors, but we never opened it.

URRY: Are you still getting threats?

SAFRAZ: Now, we no here obviously, because the situation is the same and the village the same you know. They can't come here, thank God.

URRY: What he and his family didn't expect is that they'd also be threatened where they live now.

ACTUALITY ON STREET

URRY: As we walked along the run down streets of red bricked terraced houses in Anfield, I listened to his grim story of racial abuse and attacks since he was moved here by Serco, the contractor hired by the Home Office to provide accommodation.

SAFRAZ: Me and my family, my daughter and my wife, we are really not comfortable in this area, because we have some racism here. In the evening time especially we can't get out of the house. They hit my daughter, even my wife.

URRY: Your daughter is young, isn't she?

SAFRAZ: Yes, she is nine years old.

URRY: And they are throwing things at the family?

SAFRAZ: They throw stones and empty bottles on the back of her and she just screams and she's just afraid and she's just ... If I tell her would you like to go outside ... she says no, I will not go, they will hit me.

URRY: But it has scared your family, obviously, because you won't go out at night.

SAFRAZ: Exactly, exactly, it's very much scary.

URRY: What do police tell you about your safety and the safety of your family right here?

SAFRAZ: The police yes, they gave us some piece of alarms.
One for me, one for my wife - if anything happens just pull the pin.

URRY: A panic alarm?

SAFRAZ: The panic alarm.

URRY: So you have to live with panic alarms?

SAFRAZ: Yes. I told my wife, I told my daughter, and me
myself, if you are on the road and somebody says something to you, some bad things, are you
a Pakistani, you? Just keep quiet, don't say anything.

URRY: Serco has around 450 properties in the city, according
to a council report, so Safraz says the family asked to be moved. He says they were told the
attacks were a police matter, and their request was declined. We wanted to interview Serco
about this but they refused. We asked them to tell us why they didn't move the family. We
were told:

READER IN STUDIO: There have been no complaints raised with Serco by
this service user. We fully understand both the challenges that local communities face and
how vulnerable these people can be. We work closely with local authorities, charities, the
NHS and other local bodies, as well as the Home Office to see how people can best be looked
after in line with our contract and the Government's statutory duties. Our priority is at all
times to make sure that they are safe and secure and are treated with dignity and respect.

URRY: We've discovered that Anfield is one of half a dozen
wards in which the city council has concerns about the numbers of asylum seekers. There is
an official definition, called a cluster limit. The ratio is set at one accommodated asylum
seeker per 200 residents. It's supposed to ensure what's called community cohesion, the
acceptance of diversity within a given area. However the interpretation of cluster limits is a
matter of contention. Government says it applies borough-wide, but local authorities argue
ward level is the more meaningful way to judge pressure on communities. Looked at in this

URRY cont: way, Anfield has more than double the official maximum, and in another ward, Kensington and Fairfield, it's three times the limit. We found this data buried in an official city council report assessing public health implications. The report warns:

READER IN STUDIO: The concentration of dispersed people seeking asylum in a small number of relatively poor areas of the city, has potential to increase community tensions.

URRY: Liverpool's Mayor, Labour's Joe Anderson, accuses the Home Office and their contractor of bringing in more and more asylum seekers, with little regard to the wider impact.

ANDERSON: We know, because of figures that we've got ourselves, we've collected and collated ourselves, plus questions that we've asked that, that is the case, that we've gone over the amount of asylum seekers in particular wards, where we've put a cap or a limitation on them. But it's difficult for us to manage the process because it's taken out of our hands, and so that's where the real difficulty is created. And of course it causes problems for community cohesion. I'm not talking about, you know, where people make asylum seekers not welcome, but if you look at the services that we provide, the school places that we provide, the social services that we need to provide, the language support that we need to provide, all of those things cost the local authority money, and you know the difficult thing again for us as a city is that, you know, Liverpool is one of the worst hit by government funding.

URRY: Do you have any control over numbers then?

ANDERSON: We provide information to Government and say, we don't believe a particular area can cope with any more than that because of the infrastructure that we've got in place to deal with that, whether it's local support services, support services across the city, schools, health, all of those things, so we provide that information to them. So I just don't believe that they're listening.

URRY: We wanted to interview a minister about this, but the Home Office said no-one was available. So we asked them why Liverpool is so full that cluster limits in some wards had been breached. In a statement they insisted:

READER IN STUDIO: No area of the North West is above the agreed convention of one accommodated asylum claimant for every 200 of the resident local authority population.

URRY: But that doesn't address the ward level problem. The city council data on that relates to 2013, but when we checked, we discovered the situation's got even worse in some of these wards since then. On broader concerns, the Home Office went on to emphasise a partnership approach between national and local government.

READER IN STUDIO: Asylum seekers are housed according to their individual needs and where there is available and appropriate accommodation. Agreements between national government and local authorities are voluntary and have been in place since 2000. We review this regularly, working closely with local authorities to ensure the system is fair for asylum seekers and for taxpayers across the country.

URRY: Which is news to Liverpool Mayor, Joe Anderson, who says there was no consultation on the latest government decision which will see yet more asylum seekers coming to the city. The Home Office has decided that those from around the country who are due a final appeal will have to come to Liverpool to get that heard. The Mayor says he's been told to expect about a hundred a week extra and is worried about what will happen to those who are refused permission to stay.

ANDERSON: My view is that they probably won't return to their last address, they'll probably want to stay in Liverpool. If they've lost that, they're not going to go back to the old address whether they've got the means and the resources to do that anyway, and we could end up with more pressure on Liverpool as their end destination, if you like. And so we've raised that as a major concern. So I've asked a series of questions, you know, whether they've done a cumulative impact statement and assessment to see how much an impact on Liverpool. They haven't done that, so we've asked them to see what information they've got and what data. I've asked them questions around, you know, how

ANDERSON cont... many failed asylum seekers return to their original abode or country of origin, how many of them are there, how many have failed, where they are, who has tracked them? All of those things and they can't give us any information on that, which I find ...

URRY: You mean they haven't got it or ...?

ANDERSON: They haven't got it, they simply haven't got it. You know, we've asked for it, and I find that absolutely incredible, that, you know, we have a managed chaos around this particular issue. It's just incredible that we are in this situation where nobody can give us any information.

URRY: The city's taking legal action against the Government, seeking a judicial review of the decision to make it the only final port of call for appeals. Talks have been taking place to try to find a resolution. Although no minister would be interviewed, we asked the Home Office to respond to the Mayor's concern that the impact hadn't properly been thought through. We were told:

READER IN STUDIO: These changes will apply only to failed asylum seekers whose claims have already been refused. They will significantly speed up decision-making, enabling us to grant protection more quickly to those who genuinely need it. Attendance at the Home Office centre in Liverpool will be strictly by appointment only and there will be no requirement for anyone to stay in the area overnight.

URRY: The broader worries in Liverpool about the way the national dispersal policy is playing out has a familiar resonance, according to Dr Jonathan Darling of the University of Manchester, who's been researching changes to asylum accommodation.

DARLING: One of the interesting, kind of aspects of this whole situation, that we currently have, is that one of the starting points for dispersal and the thinking about dispersal in the late 1990s was actually a series of issues, where asylum seekers were being housed in hotels on the south coast and that that led, highlighted to some

DARLING cont... extent issues around the concentration of asylum seekers in London boroughs and that then led to dispersal. So in a way, the current kind of situation that we see today around hotels highlights the tensions and problematic nature of the system to some extent.

URRY: It's come full circle?

DARLING: Yes in a way, yes.

URRY: I mean, the whole point about dispersal to start with was to shift the burden from the south, you know, in a more even spread across the country, wasn't it? But now the north is complaining that it's got an unfair share of that burden. Are they right to complain about that?

DARLING: Local authorities were asked to be involved in this system and did initially sign up to take part in dispersal. Whether they signed up to be part of the current system is a different question, I think. They're certainly not essential to decision making and I think that is a really significant difference, because it does potentially reduce their ability to speak back to the Home Office on some of these issues.

URRY: It's that pressure on services which is causing alarm in other parts of the North West as well.

ACTUALITY IN ENGLISH CLASS

TEACHER: Okay, folks, so we wrote some great pieces before and the challenge was to take sentences 'I was, I am, I can, I will' and hopefully we're going to be sharing these in Rochdale Town Hall soon, so this is a really

URRY: English classes for Rochdale's asylum community.

TEACHER: We've got people here from Iran, from Egypt, from Sri Lanka, from Albania, from Iraq

URRY: This town in Greater Manchester has a population of less than 100,000. It's not the most prosperous area, but these people are relieved to be here.

WOMAN: I left Iraq because there's many problems in my country and I really missed my family and I'm afraid about my family because they left our house, because ISIS entered and decreed.

WOMAN 2: First thing important for me, I live in a safe place, for my kids and for me. No one speak with us like you are not a human, all of us, all of people here respect us and they are very kind. I take my kids and came to UK exactly because I know in UK I can live in a safe place.

URRY: Their sense of relief is obvious, but Rochdale's struggling to cope with the sheer numbers who've been dispersed to the town, according to its MP, Labour's Simon Danczuk.

DANCZUK: I completely accept and agree that the United Kingdom should take its fair share of people who are, you know, trying to get away from war torn areas, but it's the burden that Rochdale is carrying, it's disproportionate to other areas. You can't have it where Rochdale takes more asylum seekers than the whole of the South East of England. I think it's about 680 asylum seekers currently placed in Rochdale and that is a burden on services, so on schools, on the health service, even in terms of housing. We have three thousand people on the waiting list for a house, for accommodation and many of these people will see asylum seekers being placed in some of the properties that they might want to move into.

URRY: And that has the potential to increase community tension then, doesn't it?

DANCZUK: Well yes, that's my probably my biggest concern. Rochdale is fantastic at community cohesion, people live together very well and rub along together really well. And, you know, we've had problems in Oldham and Burnley and other areas around about, but Rochdale, it's always been very cohesive. And I am concerned that

DANCZUK cont... with more asylum seekers being placed in Rochdale, it's getting to the point where tensions might arise and that gives me cause for concern.

ACTUALITY AT HEALTH CENTRE

URRY: High up on a hill in Rochdale, in an area called Spotland, the skyline is dominated by high rise blocks of flats, there are least half a dozen just looking in one direction alone; more as you start to swivel around. It's obviously an area of high density, low cost housing – exactly the sort of place where asylum seekers are currently being placed. And in the middle of all this, cheek by jowl and just behind me are two local health centres that are taking, between them, almost half of the total number of asylum seekers in this town.

SWANN: Access to services is getting a lot harder, as everybody keeps saying, all the services are filled to capacity and our GPs spend a lot of time, of their own time on paperwork, just trying to keep their head above water.

URRY: Margaret Swann is the practice manager at one of those two hard-pressed health centres. Asylum seekers often come here with multiple and complex problems.

SWANN: The service starts at 8.30 every morning, the phones go off. A patient walks through the door, most of the time they don't ring us because they can't communicate. They walk through the door, so a member of staff has to spend some time talking to them, trying to establish what they want, trying to establish what language they're speaking. Then we've got to contact the interpreter service, who will communicate between us all three, a three way conversation.

URRY: And that's just to get an understanding of why they've come in?

SWANN: Correct.

URRY: So what happens after that?

SWANN: Then basically they are given an appointment. When they come in to the doctor, then the doctor has to ring the interpreter line and then they start the process again, so it's a three way conversation. Appointments are doubled in the initial and sometimes they take a lot longer.

URRY: So this is eating into a lot of front line consultation time, isn't it?

SWANN: Total patient access is being eroded because of it. All this extra being brought in, on top of just running on a day to day basis, we've not got the capacity to expand.

URRY: The Local Medical Committee has taken up the case for those GP surgeries that argue they've got disproportionate numbers to deal with. Dr Richard Verity is chair of the LMC. He's says since the Compass contract took over, it's been a free for all.

VERITY: Previously asylum seekers were allocated to surgeries, so each surgery got their fair share. Now that system of allocation has been stopped and patients just turn up at whichever surgery is nearest to where they've been housed. These asylum seekers are totally unevenly distributed, many of them are damaged people, they've got mental health problems, they've got unmet physical needs. They also don't understand our health system, they often want hospital referrals. It's the inequity of these patients, since the allocation stopped, gravitating towards two or three practices, which is totally inequitable.

URRY: So what can be done about that then?

VERITY: Well, either we enhance the payment or we go back to an allocation system. That would seem fairer.

URRY: All this is putting pressure on the primary care system, which faces other stern challenges relating to cuts and the retention of GPs. And it's the same story for schools in the area.

ACTUALITY IN PLAYGROUND

MARTIN: This year we had a considerable number arrive in the autumn term and that was difficult to manage, but we did.

URRY: Donna Martin is the Cabinet Member for Children, Schools and Families on Rochdale Borough Council. She says the town had to deal with an extra 150 children from families seeking asylum, at short notice, from the beginning of this academic year. And that's affecting all parents, because some might not get their school of choice.

MARTIN: We do have pinch points in certain years in the schools. The fact is, we can't actually promise families coming in, to place all their children from that family in the same school, and that is going to be difficult for us. I think what will happen is that we cannot just say we will have the places that people want, that's the difficulty. And also, the prediction is that we will not be able to offer families the same school for all their siblings.

URRY: The concern is that will breed resentment. For the MP Simon Danzduk, the area's been overloaded by Serco and left to cope with the strain on services.

DANZCUK: There's no obligation on the contractor who is placing the asylum seekers in Rochdale, there's no real compulsion on them to liaise with the council or coordinate services, or make sure everything's working in a particular way. It is becoming a massive concern. And what appears to be the case is that the only measure that they're interested in is the price that they pay for accommodation. What do they pay to the rented sector in terms of placing asylum seekers? Now the dispersal policy surely can't be based just on the cost of accommodation, it must surely take into account the number; the concentration of asylum seekers; do they have any ties to other communities within that locality; are there adequate public services in terms of health and schools; why aren't all those factors being taken into account in terms of the dispersal policy? It can't just be based on the price of housing.

URRY: We asked Serco whether it was cheap accommodation, which led them to put large numbers of asylum seekers in places like Rochdale and Liverpool. They wouldn't be interviewed but told us:

READER IN STUDIO: We work in partnership with Local Authorities to house asylum seekers and our approach is based on the availability of suitable accommodation.

URRY: Nothing there addressing the issue of housing costs. We would have liked to have explored this with a Minister but no-one was available. In their statement, the Home Office distanced themselves from the questions raised by Simon Danczuk.

READER 2 IN STUDIO: Decisions about the use of particular accommodation are made by individual contractors. They must do so by meeting housing standards as laid out in the contract which covers relevant housing law. The full cost is covered by the accommodation provider under the terms of their contract.

URRY: At a time when money's tight, it seems inevitable that the availability of cheap housing has become a major determinant in the dispersal programme. But there's a further problem. There's not a lot of it about. Dr Jonathan Darling, who's been researching changes in asylum accommodation around the UK, says one of the difficulties for the Compass providers is shortages.

DARLING: In many parts of the country, social housing has long been the case has been under significant pressure. We're seeing falling numbers of availability of social housing through different population pressures and that means that the ability of someone like G4S, Serco or Clearel to actually procure property in areas, to buy up that property and use it to house asylum seekers is reduced, because there simply isn't the property to be procured in some ways and they're often facing competition from other housing associations, from local authorities, from others who will also want to buy that property.

URRY: Couldn't that have been predicted?

DARLING: It probably could have been, yeah, but I think that combined with the issue of asylum applications, which is much harder to predict in the longer term, I think, leads to these kind of bottlenecks and points of pressure.

URRY: When you publish your research, what is it likely to be saying, in broad terms?

DARLING: At the moment, the Home Office tends to look at this very much as a national system. And actually we need to think about the way in which individual cities have the capacity to say different things on these issues to some extent. I think there's a need to be mindful of the local context here and the fact that you need to consider the support services and the wider kind of social impact of dispersal beyond purely the financial aspects of it.

URRY: But the finances aren't looking that good. Last year, Serco were reported to have been making a loss of £15 million on their Compass deal. They've also had to shell out their share of £6 million in fines levied by the Home Office for underperformance by contracted providers. What drove the big switch to Compass was the need for the Department to save money - an estimated £140 million over seven years. However, the Public Accounts Committee found that figure was unlikely to be achieved. In a report last year, it said the changeover was poorly planned and badly managed by the Home Office. Conservative MP Richard Bacon, who's a member of that Committee, says the bidders also made errors which proved costly.

BACON: The central problem with this is that the contractors, who didn't have experience in this area, at least some of them didn't have any experience in this area, because they didn't have enough experience, sufficiently challenged the assumptions which the Department was making about how quickly new accommodation could be brought on stream. In other words, how they wrote the tender documents. And most of the information that the contractors needed in order to put together a sensible bid wasn't available. There wasn't enough of the right data at the right time, so I don't want to say the blind leading the blind, but this was very far from an ideal contracting process.

URRY: Now we're hearing from local authorities in the North that some areas are just overwhelmed. Disproportionate numbers are being placed in some parts.

BACON: If that's what local authorities are reporting, then it's a matter of some concern and the Government nationally does need to take a view, I think, on how to spread out the burden of this, because if it's concentrated in one area, then it does lead to a range of different problems. Not only extra pressure on the local services like the NHS and schools and so on, but then extra pressure, if you like, on social cohesion. So it's quite important that when we're fulfilling our obligations to look after people who have fled, in some cases from dreadful situations in countries where they genuinely did have a well-founded fear of persecution, that the Government takes a national view on where the distribution of this population occurs to, so that it's not too much pressure in any one place. No one pretends that's easy, but I think somebody has to be making those decisions.

URRY: But, ultimately, Richard Bacon questions whether the Compass contracts themselves are the right way to deal with the dispersal of asylum seekers.

BACON: One of the problems we've found in recent years is there have grown up enormous service provider companies, such as Serco and G4S and various others, who have become good at bidding for contracts, which is a separate skill from implementing them and delivering the work and hiring the people that you need in order to perform the contract, should you win it. So I'm afraid that too often Government is seduced by the rhetoric of very large companies with big balance sheets who can afford to take a loss. Certainly for a year or two on a contract, saying, you don't worry about that, we've got the people to put on this contract, and then things don't always work out as smoothly as they should and the savings don't always materialise. So I don't think it's always the case that we should be going for great big contractors on the assumption that will save money. Very often actually the local knowledge that local suppliers offer is much more valuable and much more value for money as well in many cases.

URRY: The local councils tell us they're simply picking up the pieces at the moment.

BACON: Well, I think that may be the case, that may very well be the case and plainly more work is needed, including on these contracts, to start sorting it out.

URRY: We wanted to interview a Minister about this, but the Home Office said no one was available. But with little sign of an easing of international conflict, which is driving people to these shores, this isn't a problem that will go away any time soon.

SIGNATURE TUNE