



F/T: 0300 244 4000  
E: [scottish.ministers@gov.scot](mailto:scottish.ministers@gov.scot)

The Rt Hon Priti Patel MP  
Home Secretary  
Home Office  
2 Marsham Street  
LONDON  
SW1P 4DF

[POCorrespondence@homeoffice.gov.uk](mailto:POCorrespondence@homeoffice.gov.uk)

21<sup>st</sup> October 2021

Dear Home Secretary,

I understand that the Home Office plans to procure hotels to accommodate asylum seekers in Scotland in locations outside Glasgow, the current asylum dispersal area.

I am concerned that action has been taken to fundamentally change asylum dispersal in Scotland without consultation or adequate planning to ensure service and support access. I also have significant concerns about the suitability of hotels to accommodate people seeking asylum, the timescales for their use, availability of wider support and whether lessons have been learned from the Park Inn incident. I also want to draw your attention to the role Scotland is already playing in asylum dispersal and our openness to meaningful discussion on widening dispersal.

### **Lack of consultation and engagement.**

I note that you did not inform Scottish Ministers of these new plans to widen dispersal in Scotland. Instead, Ministers have been made aware due to the concerns of local authorities. This approach is not acceptable. I request that where any plans are being considered which impact in devolved areas, you ensure that there is consultation with relevant devolved administrations.

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I am fully supportive of the strong position local authorities have taken in response to these plans. It is not acceptable to progress such a significant change to asylum dispersal, and I am clear that this is dispersal, without consultation or agreement with the councils concerned. Furthermore, the Scottish Government, COSLA and local authorities have been extremely clear about how unsuitable hotels are for the long term accommodation of people seeking asylum.

### **Suitability of hotels.**

While I acknowledge that hotels have enabled people to be accommodated during the Covid-19 pandemic, we have seen first-hand the impact which this type of accommodation can have for people seeking asylum. Concerns were being raised about the suitability of hotels and the support being provided long before the tragic incident at the Park Inn on 26 June 2020. The repercussions of that incident are still keenly felt. There has been no public inquiry, or publication of the outcome of any internal investigation. I would urge you to share the outcomes of any Home Office investigation to ensure that lessons are learned.

Hotel use for asylum seekers is not comparable to its use for other groups supported in temporary accommodation because there are fundamental differences in terms of agency, support options and long term outcomes. The length of time people may be accommodated in unsuitable hotel settings is also a significant concern. I accept the continuing need for suitable quarantine space, but extended and unknown periods of time spent in a hotel with restricted support is dangerous and entirely counter to integration principles.

### **Widening dispersal requires meaningful discussion with local authorities.**

Scottish Ministers have been clear that we support widening dispersal in principle, but that it must remain voluntary for local authorities. Procuring hotels or any other accommodation outside Glasgow for asylum seekers to be routed to from elsewhere is widening dispersal.

Local authorities across the UK have been very clear on what they need to be able to actively consider accepting dispersal. They have provided evidence of the costs of accepting dispersal. Home Office provision of per capita funding for local authorities, similar to that provided to support unaccompanied children and resettled refugees, and based on a shared understanding of the costs and funding gap would enable more areas to participate in dispersal.

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Local authorities have also repeatedly raised concerns about transparency, data sharing and partnership working. I understand that significant improvements have been made in Glasgow recently and that effective partnership working at official level has been taking place. That is now in jeopardy as a result of the lack of consultation with local partners. Furthermore, other local authorities which may have considered participating in dispersal have seen the lack of respect afforded to local authorities by the Home Office.

It is important to reflect on the practicalities of widening dispersal to local authorities with no previous experience of asylum dispersal. It appears that little thought was given to access to essential services like healthcare. Access to expert advice, advocacy and support services for people accommodated also needs to be considered. Glasgow City Council is unique in Scotland in having been a dispersal area since 2000 and having previously held the accommodation contract. Over two decades, not only has the council continued to invest in services, but a wider community and third sector support base has developed. Other local authorities across Scotland have demonstrated that they are more than capable of supporting refugees, including by adapting services and working with third sector partners. They cannot and should not be expected to adapt effectively to accepting asylum seekers without the time to prepare to ensure people are properly supported.

### **Scotland's role in asylum dispersal.**

Scotland already accepts slightly more than our proportionate share of asylum seekers through dispersal. According to the Home Office's published data, at the end of June 2021 there were 41,633 asylum seekers living in dispersal accommodation provided under section 95, of which 3,461 were living in Glasgow. That's 8.3% of the total number of asylum seekers across the UK. Scotland's proportionate share by population would be 8.15% or 3,330 people.

Section 95 does not account for all asylum seekers accommodated by the Home Office in dispersal areas. The Home Office does not publish regional or local authority data for people accommodated under Section 98 or Section 4. The published data shows that at the end of June 2021 there were 5,935 people supported under section 4 and 10,682 people supported under section 98 across the UK. In Glasgow it is widely accepted that there are around 5,000 asylum seekers accommodated in total. It is reasonable to conclude that Glasgow is

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accommodating 8.4% of total asylum seekers across the UK (5,000 of the 58,250 people accommodated under section 95, section 98 and section 4); more than Scotland's proportionate 8.15% share. This should be recognised properly by Home Office Ministers who have repeatedly criticised Scotland's role in supporting people seeking asylum.

### **Asylum system reform.**

I recognise that there are significant challenges in the asylum estate, some of which are associated with measures which were rightly taken to protect people during Covid-19. However, I remain concerned that the backlog in asylum decisions and the quality of initial decisions continues to be the biggest issue and that Home Office reform of asylum proposed through the New Plan for Immigration and set out in the Nationality and Borders Bill will fail to address this.

The Scottish Government is happy to work with COSLA, the Home Office and local authorities to have meaningful discussion about asylum dispersal in Scotland.

Yours sincerely,



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