

Councillor Cammy Day
City of Edinburgh

Mr Andrew Kerr OBE
Chief Executive, City of Edinburgh

Councillor Shona Morrison
President of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities

21 June 2023

Dear Cammy, Andrew and Shona,

Thank you for your letter of 1 June regarding the VS Victoria 1 – the vessel that has been used to house Ukrainian refugees, and which the Home Office now wishes to use to accommodate asylum seekers temporarily. This letter provides additional detail to you following my correspondence on the 9th June.

I am writing to outline the consideration and planning that has been undertaken by the Home Office to establish the appropriate mitigations which will ensure that asylum seekers can be accommodated successfully. We have listened carefully to all your comments in the MAF, and at the Asylum Partnership Board, and believe we can address each of the concerns you raise.

First, I thought it useful to provide you with the latest update on the recent reforms the UK Government is making to our asylum system. We have already made considerable progress to reduce the backlog of asylum claimants, and we have put in place transformative measures to simplify the asylum system whilst protecting its integrity. This includes significantly increasing the number of caseworkers to 2,500, introducing a streamlined process for particularly high-grant nationalities and targeted interviews to reach decisions more swiftly. As a result, we are on track to clear the legacy backlog of asylum claimants by the end of the year. Additionally, we have introduced new financial incentives for local authorities to encourage the uptake of dispersal accommodation and are delivering large accommodation sites that will provide safe and secure accommodation for thousands of asylum seekers. Among a wide range of interventions to stop the dangerous and unnecessary small boat crossings, we have elevated cooperation with France to unprecedented levels through two landmark deals.

Despite this considerable progress, we continue to require additional accommodation in the short-term. Unless we deliver new accommodation at pace, there is a considerable risk of a repeat of the unacceptable scenes at Manston last summer, where a dramatic increase in crossings, coupled with shortage of accommodation, led to a delay in individuals being moved through the system.

Against this backdrop, it would be irresponsible to ignore the good-quality and significantly cheaper accommodation the MS Victoria 1 in Leith Port provides, and which will become available imminently. Edinburgh has demonstrated how well this type of accommodation can be safely and successfully used in an emergency to house Ukrainian refugees whilst finding more permanent accommodation, and we firmly believe that with some adjustments this can be replicated for asylum seekers to help alleviate similar pressures. Indeed, in the Netherlands and Belgium the authorities have delivered accommodation for asylum seekers on vessels in a safe and secure manner – and we are confident that we can reproduce this temporary solution to the same accommodation challenge facing us here in the UK.

We do not propose to make changes to the planning arrangements currently in place. We intend to use the same berth, the same quayside infrastructure and the same principal contractor that was put in place by your officials. Nevertheless, we recognise that the change in cohort require mitigations, so I attach a slide deck at Annex 1 that outlines in more detail the measures we are taking to mitigate the risks you raised. These are grounded in our extensive experience in providing accommodation to asylum seekers and the discussions we have had with our international counterparts and expert stakeholders. To summarise the principal mitigations:

- We will accommodate the cohort of asylum seekers on the vessel with the smallest impact on the local community, so only single adult males currently in contingency hotels will be housed. This will mean that no additional pressures will be placed on local schooling. This cohort is already in the asylum system and so the key statutory bodies have the most information about them. Additionally, arrivals will be screened against a suitability criteria to ensure the smooth running of the vessel. For instance, this will limit prospect of an individual with an age-dispute case arriving on the vessel. Whilst on board they will continue to be monitored to ensure the vessel remains suitable accommodation for them.
- We will reduce the time that individuals are accommodated on the vessel to a maximum of between 6-9 months. After this point, if their claims have not already been concluded, they will be progressed through the asylum accommodation system. We intend to lease the vessel for 18 months only.
- On board medical facilities already exist on the vessel. The Home Office will ensure that basic primary care is provided on the vessel to limit the impact on local health services. Additionally, an experienced Home Office contractor will provide 24/7 security on the vessel to minimise the impact on the local police. These will come at no cost to Edinburgh Council.



- On top of this, we will provide a substantial funding package, as per the model we are using for the vessel being deployed in Dorset, so that we minimise the pressures on local services. This comprises of: a one-off payment of £3,500 per bed space to Edinburgh Council; a police funding package - the details of which for England are available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/large-sites-for-asylum-accommodation-support-for-police-force> - and would form the basis of discussion in the Scottish context; and, health funding for the local NHS in recognition of the fact that on board healthcare alone will need to be supplemented. The exact funding mechanism would be the subject of further discussion. We do not anticipate that the entirety of these funding packages will be required, nevertheless we are prepared to provide it as a precautionary measure. I can give you the assurance that we will review this funding package if the circumstances on the ground change materially.

All relevant local partners need to be engaged in the delivery process. That is why the Home Office established the Multi-Agency Forum (MAF), involving the Council, Health, Police and other public agencies, as a structured forum for discussion with statutory bodies and key stakeholders. Close collaboration with the Asylum Partnership Board will enable us to deliver the most workable solutions.

It is worth noting that we will not be seeking to extend the visas of the current crew, and they must leave the UK by 11th July. Workers to service the vessel will be hired from the resident workforce and, if needed, any foreign nationals needed to crew the vessel will require the correct permission to work in the UK, in line with Immigration Rules.

We firmly believe that with the extensive mitigations outlined above, and our commitment to continue working with you on the finer details, none of the issues you raise are insurmountable. Given the immense pressure the asylum accommodation system in the UK is under, and the consequences if we do not deliver sufficient accommodation in the near-term, the government has no choice but to proceed with this proposal at pace. My officials are ready to step up our delivery cooperation to make this possible.

The Scottish people have warmly welcomed asylum seekers, and Edinburgh Council and Scottish Government have made clear your commitment to help those we are required to support. Through constructive cooperation we can deliver a solution that provides asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute with the accommodation they need, whilst making every effort to reduce the impact on the local community to the absolute minimum. This is in the interests of both the Scottish people, who are eager to play their part in supporting asylum seekers, and the asylum seekers themselves who require temporary accommodation.

We look forward to working with you.



Home Office

In the interest of full transparency, I can confirm that the Secretary of State for the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities raised this matter with the First Minister in a discussion on Thursday evening.

I am also copying this correspondence to Minister Emma Roddick, Scottish Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees.

Yours,

Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP
Minister of State for Immigration