

23 February 2023

The Rt.Hon. Suella Braverman KC MP  
Secretary of State for the Home Department



**Sent by email only**

Portland House  
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Glasgow  
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Dear Home Secretary,

### **Far-right extremist threat to people in asylum accommodation and the need for responsible policy**

I write with a sense of deep concern, foreboding and urgency about the escalating high risk and lack of safety, in particular from far-right extremism, to those under your responsibility within the asylum accommodation system. The dreadful scenes in Kirkby on Friday 10 February were no aberration. Rather they stemmed from a chronic lack of responsible leadership and maladministration within the asylum system. This must change for the safety of refugees, frontline workers and the local communities around them.

#### **Setting the context**

##### *Right to asylum*

For too long, successive UK governments have devalued and eroded the right to seek asylum. I remind you that this is a life-saving right. It rose from the ashes of the Holocaust and the ugly fascism that induced it. It was a Conservative government, led by Sir Winston Churchill in 1954, that ratified the Refugee Convention. Your recent Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and threatened imminent legislation, gravely undermine the right to asylum and demean the country's reputation.

##### *Growth and normalisation of institutional accommodation*

What your department misleadingly describe as "contingency" accommodation is no such thing. Rather, it is now the norm for those who seek protection. The procurement and use of hotels or military barracks, has grown exponentially in the past three years, from 1,500 people in such places in October 2019 to 45,000 today – a 1400% increase. Your department consigns people to these institutional places for months and years. Asylum decisions are rarely served to those in this accommodation, despite around two-thirds being from refugee-producing countries, such as Iran, Afghanistan, Syria, Sudan and Eritrea.

#### **Building a better future with refugees in Scotland**

**website** [www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk](http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk)

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### *Unacceptable “fait accompli” practice*

This practice operates through a “fait accompli” of institutional accommodation appearing in local areas. That is to say, your department and contractors reach agreements with private hoteliers and only then engage with local authorities and communities. Consent is neither sought nor gained. Nor is any funding provided to councils to support refugees nor local communities. This “fait accompli” practice may be unlawful under the Public Sector Equality Duty, particularly as from which now stems community tensions and prejudice.

All the while, those in your care in this institutional accommodation receive £1.30 a day to subsist on and are not allowed to seek employment. In another potential unlawful omission, there is no Home Office policy guidance specific to “contingency” accommodation. Neither councils nor communities receive any investment to provide essential support. This runs counter to your Government’s levelling up agenda. The sole beneficiaries are your private contractors and hotels, amassing record profits.

This “fait accompli” practice and the resultant estate of ex-hotels is maintained by a dysfunctional distribution of huge public funds, some £2.5billion per year, all flowing into the private sector, not local communities or refugees. Asylum accommodation contracts were budgeted in 2019 to cost £4 to £5.6billion over a decade. Due to your department’s mismanagement of this contract and the underlying and persistently low rate of asylum decisions and resultant bulging decisions backlog, it is on course to cost around £35billion by 2029.

We now understand that your department is procuring yet more hotels in Scotland under this “fait accompli” practice.

*Current asylum policy and hotel accommodation has given the far-right an opportunity to exploit*  
Among many adverse impacts, your policy has given the far-right an opportunity to mobilise and manipulate often legitimate local community concerns about the impact of these moves on the provision of services in some of the most deprived and left behind communities in the country. We are now aware of a burgeoning far-right mobilisation across the UK, including in Scotland, most recently in Erskine. It is incumbent on you and your ministerial colleagues to start acting responsibly to stop this.

### **Five-point plan for responsible leadership on asylum, community cohesion and against the Far-right**

I urge you to adopt the following five-point plan to demonstrate requisite and overdue leadership, and prevent tragedy that otherwise I fear may be imminent.

#### *Language*

1. Desist from using irresponsible and inflammatory language when discussing refugees, including words such as “invasion”. Instead please use factual and responsible language,

befitting the origins of the right to asylum and recognising the suffering and trauma those seeking safety have endured.

#### *Asylum system*

2. Use the powers that are uniquely in your gift, and use them responsibly to weaken the underlying conditions for far-right extremism and manipulation. Such a responsible policy will (a) accelerate fair and quality asylum decisions to reduce the backlog, including by serving decisions to those stuck in “contingency” accommodation and ending the senseless and cruel inadmissibility rules; (b) in so doing, drastically reduce the need for institutional accommodation, hotels and barracks, which will prevent mental health harm to refugees and exorbitant costs to the Exchequer; and (c) institute a community cohesion basis for asylum policy that comprises (i) investment in communities not private company revenues and profits and (ii) let people seeking asylum work and contribute to local economies.

#### *Far-right extremism*

3. Apply a zero-tolerance policy towards far-right extremism. If you reject fascism, respect the rule of law and wish to protect refugees and local communities, then you must act now to stamp out far-right extremists, including those neo-Nazis who espouse anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and other forms of racism. These extremist groups are dangerous, may become violent and are manipulating local communities.

#### *Rule of law*

4. Apply the rule of law. And, in particular, make proactive, well-evidenced and responsible representations to the police and prosecuting authorities in terms of far-right groups. You should also urgently institute sustained community tension monitoring systems. We remind you again that you have a Public Sector Equality Duty, which we are concerned may be being systemically breached through this endemic “fait accompli” practice, especially in terms of its impact on community relations, and the prevalence of racial prejudice. You have a legal responsibility to consider applying the law in the ways described.

#### *Community investment and cohesion*

5. We urge you to immediately adopt a community investment and cohesion policy on asylum. For far too long and, in particular, since late 2019, your department has presided over a parallel public service of asylum accommodation that is imposed upon local areas rather than delivered in partnership with them. We and many others have for years warned your department that this approach is short-sighted and presents significant risk to refugees, local communities and the Exchequer.

Given the importance of the matters covered in this letter, I am copying it to the parties listed below, all of whom have an active interest in the treatment of people in the asylum system as well as in local communities. I have also decided to publish the letter as it relates to issues of considerable public interest. I hope to receive your response soon, and I will publish that also.

Most of all, I hope we can meet to discuss the matters raised in this letter, and work towards a safer asylum system for all.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Sabir Zazai', written on a light-colored background.

**Sabir Zazai OBE**

Chief Executive

Scottish Refugee Council

*Copied to:*

**Dame Diana Johnson MP**, Chair of the Home Affairs Committee;

**David Neal**, Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration

**Shona Robison MSP**, Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government

**Councillor Maureen Chalmers**, Community and Wellbeing spokesperson, COSLA

**Sir Iain Livingstone QPM**, Chief Constable, Police Scotland

**Rt. Hon Michael Gove MP**, Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations