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Caroline Lucas MP  
House of Commons  
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7 December 2023

Dear Caroline Lucas MP,

Thank you for your email of 14 September to the Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP, former Minister of State for Immigration, about the use of large sites as asylum accommodation. You are receiving a response from a policy official, and I am sorry for the delay in responding to your email.

The Home Office is committed to making every effort to reduce hotel use and limit the burden on the taxpayer. This is why we are delivering a range of alternative accommodation sites, maximising hotel space and operationalising the Illegal Migration Act. We remain on track to clear the asylum backlog by the end of the year. We have met our promise to reach 2,500 decision makers by the end of August and have simplified processes, cut unnecessary interview length and introduced greater performance accountability. From our financial projections, hotel maximisation will provide £241 million in annual cost avoidance at current occupancy levels and £171 million in cost avoidance for the Financial Year 23-24.

Aside from the huge cost to the British taxpayer and every crossing attempt being a potential tragedy, the immense pressure these arrivals place on our system diverts our finite resources away from those in genuine need.

The welfare of those in our care is of the utmost priority. In the Netherlands and Belgium, the authorities have delivered accommodation for asylum seekers on vessels in a safe and secure manner.

Facilities onboard the vessel will be designed to provide for the essential needs of those accommodated in order to minimise the impact on local communities and local services. This includes the provision of primary healthcare, catering facilities and 24/7 security. The Bibby Stockholm vessel has been used for decades to provide safe and decent accommodation to oil rig workers and was used between 1995 to 1998 to accommodate refugees in Germany. Those accommodated on the vessel will be non-detained. All occupants of the barge will be provided with basic and functional accommodation, catering, and laundry. There will be exercise, recreational and multi-faith facilities on board to minimise their need to leave the site, alongside transport to and from the Port.

All cabins have windows, air conditioning, heating units, storage and the vessel is Wi-Fi enabled. All rooms will have ensuite bathroom facilities. We are ensuring that accommodation provided is adequate and meets regulatory standards where required.

Similarly, the ex-military sites under consideration will be assessed to ensure they are safe and fit for purpose. The Home Office is working closely with stakeholders, including local authorities and representatives from police, health and our service providers to ensure that accommodation provided for those seeking asylum is suitable. Asylum seekers at these sites will not be detained. The sites are self-contained, and we are providing essential services on site to minimise their need to leave the site.

Regarding legionella concerns, the Bibby Stockholm successfully completed all required fire and safety checks ahead of the first individuals boarding. The vessel completed a statutory inspection and refurbishment before undergoing final preparations to accommodate asylum seekers.

Nobody was transferred onto the Bibby Stockholm on 11 August. In fact, the opposite – everyone was disembarked. The Home Office's decision to disembark went above and beyond the advice from the UK Health Safety Agency to not bring more people on board.

It is not unusual to identify legionella bacteria in warm water systems, which is exactly why they are subject to regular testing procedures.

We are following all protocol and advice from Dorset Council's Environmental Health team, UK Health Security Agency and Dorset NHS, with whom we continue to work closely to prioritise the wellbeing of all asylum seekers. The decision to re-embark asylum seekers will only be taken when the Home Office has all the necessary relevant information. The safety of those onboard remains the priority.

The Home Office has been working closely with all local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales announced a Full Dispersal asylum model in April 2022 to increase the availability of safe asylum accommodation in flats and houses within local communities.

Full Dispersal assists in reducing our reliance on expensive hotels, increases capacity in the asylum system to ensure a fairer approach for local authorities who were already participating in asylum dispersal for many years. We are committed to working collaboratively with local authorities to drive regional full dispersal plans. Partnership meetings with local authorities are happening regularly. The Home Office has seen a positive trajectory of growth since the start of 2023.

In relation to funding for local authorities, we understand that these pressures, alongside the challenges of domestic homelessness, have further stretched local council services. In recognition of these pressures, we have increased our funding package for local authorities. As of 1 April 2023, councils receive a payment of £750 per person for each and every existing asylum bed and £3,500 for each new dispersal bed that comes online. This funding is not ringfenced and it is intended that these payments will ease pressures on local services; however, payments will be subject to the conditions of a grant agreement.

As for permission to work for asylum seekers, those who are admissible to the UK asylum system and have had their asylum claim outstanding for 12 months or more, through no fault of their own, are allowed to work. Those permitted to work are restricted to jobs on the Shortage Occupation List (SOL), which is based on expert advice from the independent Migration Advisory Committee. The list comprises of skilled jobs where there

is an identified national shortage which is sensible to fill, at least in part, through immigration. Medically qualified asylum seekers who have been waiting 12 months or more for a decision on their claim can already apply to work for the NHS in the many important medical roles included on the SOL.

It is important that our policy approach distinguishes between those who need protection and those seeking to work here who can apply for a work visa under the Immigration Rules. Asylum seekers do not need to make perilous journeys in order to seek employment in the UK. There are various routes for those seeking to work in the UK under the Points Based System.

We encourage asylum seekers to undertake volunteering activities, so long as it does not amount to unpaid work or job substitution. This means there are no contractual obligations, the individual is helping a registered voluntary or charitable organisation and the volunteering undertaken is not a substitute for employment. Volunteering provides a valuable contribution to their local community and may help them to integrate into society if they ultimately qualify for protection.

I should emphasise that we have simultaneously made one of the largest commitments of any country to resettle at-risk Afghan citizens and we are stepping up our efforts to tackle the humanitarian crisis resulting from the war in Ukraine. We have extended our Ukraine Family Scheme to allow British Nationals and those settled in the UK to bring family members here, as well as establishing a Ukraine Humanitarian Sponsor Scheme to facilitate sponsorship of those without family ties.

We are using all practical means to stop these dangerous, illegal and unnecessary Channel crossings, to bring to justice the criminals that profit from them, and to keep our borders secure.

Yours sincerely,

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