

The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Secretary of State
Levelling Up, Housing and Communities

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The Rt Hon Priti Patel MP
Secretary of State
Home Department

APPROACH TO SAFE PASSAGE & ADEQUATE SUPPORT FOR REFUGEES

Dear Secretaries of State

We write as Leader of Brighton & Hove City Council in conjunction with local charity Sanctuary on Sea which, alongside other community groups, is committed to the welfare of refugees. Together, we are deeply concerned about the approach being taken to ensure safe passage to the UK and to provide adequate support upon arrival.

We are aware of the pressure that the government is rightly facing to take a greater number of refugees fleeing the current conflict in Ukraine. However, the war in Ukraine is another sharp reminder that the asylum system in this country is not fit for purpose. We desperately need a compassionate national response to people- Ukrainian, as much as Afghan, Iranian, Yemeni, Eritrean and Syrian- fleeing indescribable pain and suffering. This is especially the case as there will be an anticipated increase in dangerous boat crossings with more people being displaced through the effects of climate change.

Councils and communities, such as ours in Brighton & Hove, stand ready to play our part in supporting those fleeing war and devastation. We are one of many councils participating in the 'Cities of Sanctuary' network, that aims to offer compassion, understanding and provides support to those seeking refuge from devastating circumstances.

However, we want to again urge you and your colleagues to rapidly provide greater resource and support for local authorities such as our own which are experiencing greater demand for services in response to an increasing refugee crisis. In addition to the increasing numbers of dangerous boat crossings, with more people displaced from their homes by conflict, we are now acutely aware of United Nations analysis demonstrating that the number of war refugees from Ukraine already tops 2.3million and is likely to rise. Although we have listened with interest to the Home for Refugees announcement, we are concerned that it is councils in the south of the country, in coastal areas and at the border, that are likely to face unprecedented demand for help. We are keen to offer more support to all those fleeing war and persecution but stand without sufficient government funding and support to do so adequately.

This call for proper resources for councils seeking to play their part in supporting refugees is not

without precedent. Mere months ago, the Home Office placed unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in hotels in our city without warning and despite concerns about suitability of this type of accommodation. This only underlines our concerns that support for refugees is not well matched with available resources, and that the government has no clear plan to meet its moral obligations to support those fleeing devastating conflict nor to address the housing crisis that exacerbates this.

In response to the hotel placements, we were pleased to see that government responded to our calls to set up a form of mandatory transfer scheme, replacing the previous, failed 'voluntary' participation in schemes to help refugees. The mandatory scheme has temporarily helped to share and spread resources more widely across the country and alongside the winter weather, has meant that there are no longer child refugees in hotels in the city. However the Home Office expects numbers to increase when the weather gets warmer and in order for councils to support a greater number of refugees, and for the UK to truly respond to the current war in Europe, a clear outline of the resources you will offer to local authorities under an expanded mandatory scheme is now needed.

Unless clear plans for funding and resources are provided, we fear those seeking asylum will once again be housed by government in unacceptable conditions such as hotels due to lack of appropriate housing alternatives. The wider housing crisis and lack of affordable homes of course significantly play into this challenge.

Sponsorship scheme

We welcome the opening of the 'Homes for Ukraine,' sponsorship scheme that will allow Ukrainians with no family ties to the UK to be sponsored by individuals or organisations who can offer them a home, such as a spare room or self-contained unit. We are sure that the compassion of people in our own city will rise to this call as they have done many times in the past.

At present we are awaiting the detail promised on the support to local councils. While we are relieved to see there will be provision of funding, suggested to be at a rate of £10,500 per person to local authorities- half the tariff for Afghans or Syrians on the ACRS and VPRS programmes- we are concerned that this amount has been set centrally without consultation with local councils in areas where sponsors will be supported. Local councils are best placed to advise on the level of funding that would be appropriate to meet costs and need in their area and on the capacity of existing teams to offer such help.

We are already receiving questions from residents rightly concerned about the provision and duration of wraparound care, including availability of social workers, trauma informed specialists, interpreters and assistance with education and training. I draw your attention to the latest reports from the Local Government Association that show, for example, the shortage of available children's social workers has reached a five year high, with the number of vacancies increasing year on year. More than eight in every ten councils are now overspending in their children's social

care budgets to meet increasing demand. Such workforce and demand pressures are issues mirrored locally in Brighton & Hove, with the council recently forced to make significant budget cuts to accommodate demands on children's services costing upwards of £2.3 million. To be clear, residents deserve support in managing the complexities of sponsorship and councils will require additional capacity to deliver it to the scale and high standard we would wish to. Rather than setting the amount of support to local authorities centrally, we would welcome engagement with councils who are well placed to manage and cost schemes locally.

Therefore we would appreciate more detail on the following:

- How does the government intend to ensure the recruitment of sufficient numbers of staff to support highly vulnerable adults and children, given existing teams are already stretched on current caseloads? Will funds also be provided to voluntary and community sector groups well versed in the provision of suitable support to refugees?
- Sponsors will be subject to safeguarding checks. This is entirely appropriate as many have pointed out the risk of exploitation associated with the scheme, but who shall be asked to manage this and with what capacity?
- How will government ensure that local councils are adequately resourced to meet needs and will funding provided reflect the true costs of services in the area, particularly in cases where there are significant numbers of approved sponsorship applicants in the local community?
- How can local community organisations, charities and voluntary groups be enabled to meet additional costs arising from positive partnership working around these schemes?

We are also concerned to see that the limited and restricted scheme for Ukrainians also stands at odds with less favourable schemes applied to those fleeing conflict from elsewhere, such as in Afghanistan and Syria, for example. In addition, the continued push to secure the Nationality and Borders Bill in Parliament contradicts ministers' professed support for refugees, given the Bill will make it even harder for those seeking sanctuary to find safe passage to the UK. Councils are unable to offer more support to refugees fleeing conflict than government will allow, and at present there is a damaging lack of safe and legal routes to enter the UK, and a criminalisation of those who arrive by other means or who are without visas.

Summary requests

In summary we urge you to:

- Urgently establish coherent, compassionate policy toward refugees that is applied equally and shows solidarity and compassion to *all* refugees, regardless of country of origin; with routes for safe passage.
- Enable local councils and communities seeking to support refugees to better support the expected increased number of refugee arrivals through a clear funding mechanism, that will unlock access to housing, local support services, social workers and trauma specialists, as well as enabling community organisations to step in;

- Through the above, end the practice of placing refugees and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in unsuitable hotel accommodation;
- Continue the mandatory transfer scheme so that available resources are well matched to need and young refugees have the best possible start in the UK.
- Engage with local councils, and local community and voluntary sector partners on available resources, capacity, need and full cost recovery.

Without a clear plan to adequately resource and equip local councils and communities, it is likely this country will fall short of the commitments recently made by government and ministers to help those displaced, fleeing conflict and persecution. Councils cannot legally accept or support more refugees or offer more assistance than the government will allow.

We urge you to ensure safe passage and a compassionate, well-resourced response to refugees regardless of where they come from. The best time to act has already passed us by – the second-best time to act is now.

Yours sincerely



Councillor Phélim Mac Cafferty
Leader of Brighton and Hove City Council



Richard Williams
Chair, Sanctuary on Sea