



Home Office

Home Secretary
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Rt Hon Dame Diana Johnson MP
Chair, Home Affairs Select Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1P 4DF

3 August 2023

Dear Dame Diana,

Thank you for opportunity to provide evidence to the Home Affairs Committee on Wednesday 14 June and your letter of 23 June. Please find responses to your questions.

1. You asked about the number of case workers dealing with the legacy backlog.

We have committed to publishing data on asylum decision makers at regular intervals in order to move away from providing information through ad-hoc requests. We published a figure for March, a provisional figure for May, and we will update the transparency data again no later than August 2023.

However, I am happy to confirm we have already increased our headcount since May. As my officials set out at the Public Accounts Committee on 10 July, the current number of asylum decision makers employed by the Home Office, caveated as internal management information, is 1,594 (headcount).

We expect a significant amount of decision makers to begin in July, this will bring the expected headcount to 1,800 by the end of the month, and we remain on track to have 2,500 decision makers by September 2023.

2. You asked for views of the Nordic model in relation to tackling demand for sex as a result of human trafficking.

Prostitution and sex work is an extremely complex issue and there are a wide range of potential legislative approaches, including the Nordic model, which criminalises

the buying of sex but not the selling of it. We are committed to tackling the harm and exploitation, including human trafficking, that can be associated with prostitution. We have considered the Nordic model and other legislative approaches, but we are yet to see unequivocal evidence that any one approach is better at tackling harm and exploitation. That is why we have focused our efforts, together with law enforcement and NGOs, to identify and support victims of sexual exploitation and to prosecute those behind these crimes.

We will also ensure that people who want to leave prostitution are given every opportunity to find routes out. Protecting those involved in prostitution and sex work from harm is part of our wider work to tackle violence against women and girls, which we are delivering through the cross-Government Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy, which we published in July 2021.

3. You asked how many of the approximate 12,000 Albanians that came to the UK in small boats in 2022 were returned to Albania?

Between the signing of the UK-Albania Joint Communiqué on 13 December 2022 and 1 June, 1,788 Albanian nationals have been returned to Albania.

We will begin publishing statistics relating to returns of those arriving in small boats in the next quarterly statistics release in August.

4. You asked how many hotels are currently being used to house asylum seekers coming to the UK, how many hotels have opened in the last six months and how many more is the Home Office planning to open?

As of 27 July, there were a total of 387 hotel premises being temporarily used as contingency accommodation for asylum seekers and their dependents who are supported under the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act. This represents a net increase of seven premises since the start of 2023.

Seven hotels remain under contract as contingency accommodation for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASCs) in the absence of Local Authority (LA) care on arrival. In light of the High Court judgment of 27 July relating to ECPAT UK, R (On the Application Of) v Kent County Council & Anor [2023] EWHC 1953 (Admin) (27 July 2023), we will continue to work with Kent County Council and local authorities across the UK to ensure suitable local authority placements are provided for unaccompanied children, in line with their duties.

Hotels provide one form of contingency by which the Home Office seeks to secure the urgent accommodation that we require. We are committed to making every effort to reduce reliance on hotel use and are collaborating across government to deliver a suite of measures which will support this aim. This includes initiatives to secure alternative accommodation in sites such as those at Scampton, Wethersfield and Portland.

However, asylum intake and demand for accommodation, by its nature, remains inherently uncertain and we need to ensure that we maintain a sufficient supply of contingency accommodation should we need it. Whilst we are not planning on a specific number of new hotels, consultation and engagement with local authorities around the use of sites in their relevant areas will remain paramount to the work we do, and we will always aim to provide as much notice as possible of our intention to use any future hotel sites.

5. You asked when the Home Office will bring forward provisions in the Public Order Act in relation to buffer zones?

As you will be aware, the Public Order Act 2023 received Royal Assent on 2 May. Implementation of the Public Order Act measures is staggered, and no firm timescales have yet been set for the commencement of Section 9.

The Government respects the will of Parliament and is working to commence Safe Access Zones as soon as is practicably possible. We have been considering what needs to be done to ensure Safe Access Zones can be implemented as effectively as possible, with law enforcement agencies having a clear and consistent understanding around enforcement, and abortion service providers and protestors being clear as to what is expected under the new law.

We will confirm the expected timescales for commencement in due course.

6. In relation to unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) you asked:

a) how many UASC are in Home Office hotels and a breakdown by age

As we set out at the session, the Home Office had driven down the number of UASC in hotels to zero; however, the numbers accommodated in hotels continue to fluctuate depending on arrival numbers and the speed and volume at which local authorities are able to take them into their care.

We have always been clear that we expect local authorities to meet their statutory obligations to children from the date of arrival; however, we have had no option but to provide temporary accommodation for some of these young people..

In light of the High Court's judgment of 27 July relating to ECPAT UK, we will continue to work with Kent County Council and local authorities across the UK to ensure suitable local authority placements are provided for unaccompanied children, in line with their duties.

As of 2 July, there were 218 UASC in Home Office hotels and their claimed ages were as follows:

Claimed Age	Number of UASC
13	2
14	12
15	58
16	87
17	59
Total	218

b) how many UASC have been placed in foster care and a breakdown by age

The National Transfer Scheme (NTS) has seen 4,875 children transferred to local authorities with children’s services between 1 July 2021 and 31 March 2023, which is over six times the number of transfers in the same time frame in previous years. (October 2019 – June 2021 there were 793 transfers).

The ages of the children when they transfer broadly mirror the ages of the children who are currently in Home Office UASC hotels (in the table above). However, as we set out in the answer above, the ages of those we transfer is also dependant on the nature of arrivals via small boat and local authority capacity. Occasionally we are required to accommodate younger children for a short period of time, before transfer via the NTS.

c) for us to provide more detail on what is meant by “appropriate foster care” and how is appropriate foster care found for unaccompanied children

The local authority will make a determination about the most appropriate placement for a child, which may be with a foster family, or may be in supported accommodation. The decision on suitability of accommodation will be based on the age and specific needs of the young person. The type of placement the children are accommodated in once they have transferred to local authority care is not information collated or published by the Home Office.

d) how we are working with the Police to help find the 154 UASC?

As of 27 July, only 52 of the 154 young people missing from Home Office hotels were still aged under 18 (based on their claimed age).

If a young person does go missing, the local police force will take responsibility for investigating and locating the child, as they would for any child going missing in the UK. Although their efforts may be hampered by a lack of footprint in the UK

When a young person goes missing, a missing child multi agency strategy meeting is convened and chaired by children’s services from the relevant LA. The Police attend these meetings along with staff from the hotel; health and representatives from the Home Office.

The purpose of the strategy meeting is to ensure that all agencies involved can share the information they hold regarding the young person and the circumstances of the missing episode. As part of this process, checks will be conducted on Home Office systems on any known family members or associates and any relevant details shared with the Police. This has led to a number of missing young people being located with family members in the UK.

The LA will either arrange follow-up strategy meetings or request updates from the attendees, however if additional information is identified as being relevant then this will be shared with the Police and they will also request assistance with any lines of enquiry if required.

7. You asked whether the Committee could accompany the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration on an upcoming inspection of one of the facilities for which he is responsible.

The role of the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI) is set out in the UK Borders Act [2007]. The Act states that the ICIBI can conduct investigations and issue reports to the Home Secretary. In practice the department is given an opportunity to check reports for factual accuracy. The Act also provides for the department to make redactions if publication is undesirable for reasons of national security or if it might jeopardise an individual's safety. Once these checks have been made, the Home Secretary will lay reports before Parliament, and they are subsequently published.

The role of the ICIBI is independent, and the legislation clearly envisages that scrutiny by Parliament of the inspections, including by the Committee, is carried out once the Home Secretary has laid the reports before Parliament.

Whilst the Committee can, subject to agreement, visit parts of the Home Office independently; I do not feel it would be right for members to be potentially sighted on matters yet to be reported by the ICIBI to the Home Secretary. The presence of Committee members during an inspection, could even potentially put the independence of that inspection in question and be seen as influencing the inspection.

In respect of Minister Murray's evidence session that you reference, I am aware that the Committee was sent my response to the questions on 20 April 2023. I understand that oral evidence sessions can sometimes result in strong debate on important subject matters but having reviewed the specific session, I do not agree with the assessment set out in your initial letter that the Minister's contribution *compounded the impression that the Home Office struggles to engage effectively and meaningfully with external scrutiny.*

I hope the Committee appreciates that since I have been in post I have been very receptive and accommodating to invites by the Committee. I understand the

Permanent Secretary will be appearing before the Committee in September and hope this will give the Committee a further opportunity for an update on some of the matters we were unable to discuss during my session.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Suella Braverman". The signature is written in a cursive style and is enclosed in a thin blue rectangular border.

Rt Hon Suella Braverman KC MP