



**Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council**

*Council Leader – Cllr Kerrie Carmichael*

Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP  
Minister for Immigration  
Home Office

*My Ref:* KC/JLP

*Please ask for:* Kerrie Carmichael

*Date:* 19<sup>th</sup> September 2023

Sent via email

Dear Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP

Sandwell is a place with both a strong sense of community and a rich history of migration and we are proud of our history of helping new arrivals. We are determined to give those who are seeking sanctuary in Sandwell the support they need to make their home in our borough. However, this has become increasingly difficult as a result of the current unfairness in the asylum seeker dispersal system.

As you will be aware, Sandwell participated in legal action alongside six other authorities in the West Midlands to fight for a fairer dispersal system. This legal action was ultimately dropped when the Home Office introduced a new Full Dispersal Policy but, more than a year since this was introduced, we remain concerned about the unfair impact on Sandwell.

Use of Contingency Hotels

A contingency hotel has been in operation in the borough for two years, and we have worked hard with the Home Office's contractor, Serco, and our local partners to provide appropriate support to asylum seekers at this hotel. Under current plans the Home Office plans to increase occupancy of this hotel by more than 75%, from 120 to 212 individuals, and in the last week we have seen occupancy at this hotel increase to more than 150 for the first time.

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We have also been notified that a second contingency hotel is opening this week that will accommodate a further 150 single asylum seekers. This is in a different location to the first contingency hotel, so will require a new support network to be rapidly established.

We are concerned about the health and wellbeing of the occupants of these hotels, with a large number having to share rooms. The use of contingency hotels is intended to be an emergency measure, but given the size of the asylum backlog we are seeing individuals remain in this accommodation for a significant length of time.

The overreliance on contingency hotels also puts significantly more strain on our already stretched resources. Without additional funding we are concerned about our ability to provide the necessary support for individuals accommodated in these hotels.

#### Full roll out of the asylum dispersal policy

Sandwell has the third largest population of asylum seekers out of 30 local authorities in the West Midlands region and along with many of our neighbours in urban areas we are concerned that the full roll out of the asylum dispersal policy to other previously non-participating areas is not moving at a quick enough pace. This means we continue to disproportionately shoulder the additional pressure on local resources at a time when doing so is more difficult with huge financial pressures on services resulting from the cost of living increases.

In response to the Home Office's new policy the West Midlands Strategic Migration Partnership calculated what a fair allocation would look like, but this was not accepted by the Home Office, with your policy instead formulated on the basis of where your contractor, Serco, believes they can source accommodation within the funding envelope provided.

This is exacerbated by the reliance on contingency hotels that are not counted towards our allocation despite the challenges this causes as I've already outlined. There are a number of areas within the West Midlands who have far less than their allocation, but we continue to see asylum seekers disproportionately accommodated in areas such as Sandwell that already host the highest numbers.

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### Impact on homelessness

The unfairness of the current asylum dispersal system has a number of impacts, but this is felt most acutely in our homeless service.

Following the lifting of the temporary ban on evictions and as a result of the high cost of living we are seeing increased numbers of residents requiring housing support, and higher numbers in temporary accommodation. As a result, the need for more affordable housing in Sandwell has never been more urgent.

We are proud of the support we put in place for asylum seekers who receive a positive determination, to help them integrate into the community. However, this has become significantly more challenging in recent months as we have seen a reduction in the notice period following a decision from 28 days to as little as 7 days in some cases. This means there is very little time to source accommodation for those required to leave their dispersed or contingency accommodation and increases the risk of homelessness and rough sleeping.

With the increased need for temporary accommodation we also find ourselves increasingly competing with Serco for scarce properties. We are seeing many landlords in the private rented sector choosing contracts with the Home Office over working with the council to house homeless families, simply because we cannot match the financial incentives to on-board the landlords. There is a risk this will increase rents across the whole private rented sector, a large proportion of which is already unaffordable for many because the rent exceeds the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rate.

We want Sandwell to be a welcoming place of safety for those arriving in the borough. We recognise that how individuals and families arriving in Sandwell are supported to settle and integrate into their communities is vitally important to enable them to feel welcome and part of their local communities. More than that, supporting new arrivals to settle and contribute to our community brings benefits to all of Sandwell's residents.

The significant challenges I've outlined are currently making this more difficult, and I am writing to ask you to:

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- 1) Pause further dispersal into Sandwell, including the acquisition of dispersal accommodation and contingency hotel placements until the pace of the full dispersal across other Local Authorities has caught up with our current position.
- 2) Make a new burden payment to Sandwell for the additional dispersal into contingency hotels since the start of this year and include contingency hotel number as part of the regional plan numbers for dispersal.
- 3) Ensure the council receives a minimum of 28-days' notice when responsibility for accommodation moves from the Home Office to the local authority and pay new burdens funding to cover the costs of additional temporary accommodation resulting from the overall increased number of discontinuations. Rather than a reduction in the notice period, we believe a 56 day notice period would be more appropriate, to bring this in line with Homeless Prevention legislation and give local authorities the time needed to prevent homelessness rather than simply shunting costs from central to local government.
- 4) Increase the Local Housing Allowance rate that covers the Sandwell private rented market to boost the number of affordable housing options to residents in Sandwell. This will help address the current situation in which Serco are effectively competing against the council for the scarce properties on the private rented market that are affordable to those reliant on LHA.

I look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely



**Cllr Kerrie Carmichael**  
**Council Leader**

Cc: James Morris MP for Halesowen and Rowley Regis  
John Spellar MP for Warley  
Nicola Richards MP for West Bromwich East  
Shaun Bailey MP for West Bromwich West

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