Councillor Damian White Leader of the Council

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Our Ref: DW/GG
Date: Friday 19th June 2020

The Rt Hon Priti Patel MP
Home Secretary
2 Marsham Street
Westminster
London, SW1P 4DF

Dear Priti,

200 Asylum Seekers in the Palms Hotel, Hornchurch, Havering

I am extremely concerned to learn of the Home Office's plans to use the Palms Hotel in Hornchurch to accommodate over 200 asylum seekers. I am told that the first occupants are due to arrive this week.

Neither Havering Council nor the local Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) has been consulted on the placement of these people in our area despite the use of local services that it will entail. I assume the same is the case for engagement with asylum seeker support groups and other third sector bodies. Havering Council officers were informed about this via an email earlier this week, to a relatively junior member of staff. There has been no senior-level engagement and certainly no political engagement on this issue.

Your department's contractor, Clearsprings Ready Homes, has advised us that they expect local services to provide GP and mental health service. Neither the Council nor health partners have been able to obtain information about the likely occupants of the hotel and the needs they may present with, at a time when services are already stretched.

The location of the Palms Hotel also presents risks for those placed there, which I do not believe have been properly assessed and addressed. The building has been unoccupied for some time, is a "roadhouse" style building on a busy dual carriageway with no local facilities such as shops and pharmacies nearby. It has no facilities for children and is not designed for stays of more than a couple of days.

I have instructed officers to carry out all reasonable checks to ensure that the building is fit for the purpose advised by Clearsprings, including fire safety checks.

Havering Council has been on the front line of the fight against COVID-19. We have the oldest population in London and have one of the highest volumes of care homes in the capital. The

resources essential to that fight, added to the significant lost income to the Council as a result of the lockdown, already far outweighs the financial support provided by Government thus far. We are already working at pace under extreme circumstances.

As far as I am aware no additional resources have been allocated to local public services to take into account the demands on services 200 people being taken to the Palms Hotel may bring. Should those needs present to the Council then it would certainly result in the possibility that local people suffer reduced or denied access to services.

The impact of asylum dispersal has grown substantially in boroughs like Havering. When London Councils last gathered data on this issue Havering was in the top five of London boroughs for asylum seekers placed in dispersed accommodation, along with our two neighbouring boroughs receiving nearly as many placements as the rest of London put together. We have done our bit, with hundreds of asylum seekers placed in the borough whereas some much more affluent London boroughs have seen virtually none.

While I sympathise with the government's aim to disperse asylum seekers to areas of the country with surplus housing, it does not seem appropriate to place so many more people in an area of acute housing shortage such as Havering. This is even more the case when this is being done without any consultation with local partners and with an expectation that local services working to keep residents safe will simply add the combined complex needs of 200 more people with no extra funding.

I ask therefore, that you revisit this decision as a matter of urgency and I would welcome the opportunity to meet so we can fully set out why this placement is inappropriate for Havering.

Yours sincerely,

Councillor Damian White
Leader of the Council

Cc: Julia Lopez M.P.
        Andrew Rosindell M.P.

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