



**Kent**  
COUNCIL LEADERS

The Rt Hon Suella Braverman KC MP  
Secretary of State for the Home Department  
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**Kent Council Leaders**  
c/o Partnerships Team  
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Dear Secretary of State,

**Concerns Relating to Adult Asylum Dispersal and Strategic Sites in Kent & Medway**

We write today on behalf of Kent & Medway's 14 Local Authorities to formally set out our significant concerns regarding the current situation within Home Office's strategic sites in the county and the Department's plans to secure further adult asylum dispersal accommodation.

As you know, Kent has taken a strategic role in working collaboratively with Government for some considerable time, most notably in looking after Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) and care leavers. Since 2015, Kent has borne the brunt of UASC arrivals (which should be a national issue), on two occasions having to cease admissions completely to prevent our local services becoming dangerously overstretched. Our role has been acknowledged by successive Secretaries of State and yet despite the National Transfer Scheme being mandated since December 2021, Kent remains the local authority with the greatest number of new arrivals coming into our care. As of today, we have 495 UASC under-18 in our care, of whom 346 will be permanently remaining with us under the 0.1% NTS and a further 120 who are awaiting transfer in our Reception and Safe care service or are missing. In addition, we are supporting 1,061 UASC care leavers, which make up more than half of all care leavers in Kent.

In November 2019, Home Office colleagues assured Kent's Leaders that they recognised the exceptional pressures we are facing and would exempt Kent from accommodating adults. Only 10 months later we were notified without consultation that Napier Barracks in the district of Folkestone & Hythe had been temporarily leased 'for only a year' to provide emergency capacity in the adult asylum system, but that this would have 'minimal impact' on local services. The site accommodates 308 single males and is now leased until at least 2026 and has been a significant draw on local resource including the management of large covid outbreaks, safeguarding, health services, public disorder, a riot and a fire.

In any other county, the burden of Napier would have been difficult enough. However, there are a further two hotels in the district of Folkestone & Hythe alone accommodating 139 UASC, and across Kent we are supporting thousands of service users over multiple sites. We have been an enthusiastic partner in the Syrian and Afghan resettlement schemes, Homes for Ukraine, we have

cooperated around our three large Afghan bridging hotels, Home Office's two directly run UASC hotels, a large strategic site at Manston (capacity 3,500 alone) intended for processing only but now accommodating service users, and as of this week, another adult asylum hotel in Ashford.

We were therefore astounded to learn that, through the forum of the collaborative South-East Strategic Partnership for Migration, Home Office colleagues feel Kent should be doing more. In 'allocating' Kent & Medway an additional 1,300 adults to accommodate by December 2023, the rationale being that Kent currently only has 326 adults in asylum dispersal accommodation and lower than regional and national averages per head of the population, Home Office have entirely disregarded the wider part we have played and additional burdens we face unique to Kent.

Kent & Medway's Leaders are clear. We reject that calculation in the strongest possible terms. We can only conclude that officers are either working in silos and unaware of the high profile and supportive role Kent has played over many years and the cumulative burden and impact on local services and residents this has had, or worse have misinterpreted the datasets to come to a pre-determined conclusion.

Put simply, Kent is at breaking point. Our public services including health social care and schools are already under extreme pressure from surging local demand and the cost-of-living crisis. We have approaching 20,000 households on the waiting list for social housing, soaring costs and limited availability of private-rented sector and temporary accommodation, all fuelled by being in the expensive south-east London periphery whilst having pockets of severe deprivation and low average earnings. Maidstone alone has seen Housing Register applications increase by 37% in one year and those seeking help from homeless service rising to 2,230 during 2021/22. Data so far for 2022/23 indicates a further inexorable increase. Maidstone's ability to access the private rented sector has been further severely curtailed by an increase in the number of placements from other local authority areas, and various services commissioned by Probation and Home Office to provide housing for asylum seekers and ex-offenders from out of area. Maidstone has over 400 Ukrainian households many of which will need rehousing soon. Maidstone's experience is not unusual, it is mirrored 13 times across Kent & Medway's Housing Authorities. Kent's housing sector cannot absorb further asylum placements on top of these existing burdens over and above local demand. Secondary Schools in Canterbury and Ashford currently have no year 7 and year 9 places for local children due to the unexpected and therefore unplanned for arrivals of refugee children disproportionately placed by the Home Office in these two local authority areas. Local children are having to travel to other towns to access their education, placing further financial burden on Kent County Council who have to fund their home to school transport as a result.

The strategic sites being procured are equally problematic, the unsuitability in many cases not only detrimental for the county, but also for the vulnerable children and adults resident here. There has been no consultation before sites are established. Home Office have failed at every turn to seek the expert insight of statutory partners around safeguarding, public health, Prevent, fire safety, NHS capacity, school places, appropriateness of the facility or its location (e.g. issues relating to deprivation, crime profile, rural isolation, risk of trafficking) before residents are in place, and if at all then only after a crisis occurs requiring local intervention. Every time we are then promised lessons are learnt, only for the same to happen again, most recently with the procurement of Holiday Inn Ashford Central this week.

On this occasion statutory partners were only notified after use of the hotel was secured, the Chief Executive of Ashford Council on two occasions wrote to the Director concerned and given the urgency received no reply for some time. When a response did arrive it contained errors and was

clearly copied and pasted. Our officers raised significant concerns around the appropriateness of the site and advised that service users should not be moved in until outbreak control plans, Prevent and safeguarding assessments were in place as well as arrangements for health provision, and access to schools. Despite officers being promised they would be notified before residents would be moved in, our officers had to learn from social media that service users had been decanted from another facility in London. This is an abject failure of duty, a complete disregard for partners' statutory duties. The associated risks to service users, staff on site, local community and public services is inexcusable. This culture of dismissing local partners is endemic within parts of the Home Office. It is only a matter of time before we have to manage another serious incident.

The situation at Manston is critical. We now have approaching 4,000 service users contained within segregated marquees as we approach the coldest months of the year, some having been on roll mats for over a month. Conditions were described as 'wretched', 'alarming' and 'a really dangerous situation' that is 'failing to address vulnerability' by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders & Immigration, David Neal at the Commons Home Affairs Committee on 26 October 2022. We have reports of tensions growing and concern about the potential for disorder similar to Napier Barracks in 2019, but on a site with a capacity ten times larger. We have had outbreaks of Shigella, Coronavirus, Diphtheria, Scabies and Hepatitis, some only detected after service users have been moved on, raising questions about screening and outbreak management. We have hundreds of mostly Albanian service users not claiming asylum and being bailed and dropped at mid-Kent train stations with no follow up where they go or if they leave Kent. This again on a site that we were assured would be a rapid processing centre with a capacity of 1,500, that would never accommodate service users for more than 48 hours, where no-one would be able to leave, in a rural village location with few amenities, and service users being easily identifiable. The growing number of children being housed with their families alongside single adult men at Manston increases the likelihood of safeguarding concerns arising which will need to be investigated and responded to by local Kent County Council and Kent police services.

Kent & Medway makes up just 3% of our country's geographic space, and yet we are a victim of our geographic position. We are continually called upon to meet national challenges and we do so willingly. It is time to utilise the remaining 97% of the country to relieve the burden on Kent. We implore Government colleagues to look at the burdens we are facing holistically and not consider service by service, silo by silo. Adult dispersal figures cannot be viewed in isolation. Government's actions and decisions are materially and detrimentally impacting Kent's residents, communities and taxpayers. The current situation is entirely unsustainable and unacceptable.

As Leaders we have made great efforts to take our residents with us, to engage them in the importance of schemes such as the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, and to contain and mitigate community tensions. As the number of facilities increase and become more high profile, incidents of Far-Right Activity continue to grow as these sites become a focus for local, regional and national attention. Last weekend, an incident occurred where three incendiary devices were thrown at the Border Force facility in Dover requiring a large multi-agency emergency response and the evacuation of the site. We are deeply concerned about the potential for a further outbreak of disorder and the risk this could pose to both service users and the local community.

Kent & Medway's Leaders demand that Home Office and associated Government Departments stop using the county as an easy fix for what is a national, strategic issue. We urge that Home Office recognises the enormous contribution that Kent & Medway has made and refrain from continuing to allocate further adult asylum quotas to the county and cease procurement of further hotel accommodation. Where sites have already been procured, and indeed for new sites elsewhere

nationally, we implore Home Office to consult statutory partners on a site's suitability before it is secured, ensure partners are involved and engaged in a constructive and collaborative dialogue regarding the safety of service users and the local community before they are moved in, and that we do not need to rely on social media for updates.

We recognise the significant pressures facing the Home Office, but equally we request that, as Secretary of State, you consider the sizeable, disproportionate and unique pressures facing your partners in Kent & Medway. Should you find it useful, as Kent & Medway Leaders we would welcome further engagement, either virtually at a future meeting, or face-to-face in Westminster.

Yours sincerely,

### **Kent & Medway Council Leaders**

**Gerry Clarkson CBE**  
*Leader, Ashford Borough Council*

**Ben Fitter-Harding**  
*Leader, Canterbury City Council*

**Jeremy Kite MBE**  
*Leader, Dartford Borough Council*

**Trevor Bartlett**  
*Leader, Dover District Council*

**David Monk**  
*Leader, Folkestone & Hythe District Council*

**John Burden**  
*Leader, Gravesham Borough Council*

**Roger Gough**  
*Leader, Kent County Council*

**David Burton**  
*Leader, Maidstone Borough Council*

**Alan Jarrett**  
*Leader, Medway Council*

**Peter Fleming OBE**  
*Leader, Sevenoaks District Council*

**Mike Baldock**  
*Leader, Swale Borough Council*

**Ash Ashbee**  
*Leader, Thanet District Council*

**Matt Boughton**  
*Leader, Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council*

**Ben Chapelard**  
*Leader, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council*