

Rt Hon Priti Patel MP
Secretary of State for the Home Department
Home Office
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

By email

28th April 2022

Dear Home Secretary

Asylum Accommodation Proposals – Linton-on-Ouse, North Yorkshire

You will no doubt be aware of the extent of local public concern in relation to the proposed use of the former RAF base at Linton-on-Ouse, as accommodation for those seeking asylum in the United Kingdom.

I am sure that you will share my wish to ensure that any proposals for asylum accommodation are developed with a view to achieving an appropriate balance between the protection and care of those who seek safety from persecution oppression and tyranny on the one hand, and the needs and safety of the communities in the locality on the other.

Candidly, I do not think that balance has been achieved so far in relation to this initiative and I have serious concerns which I will explain further below.

I was grateful to your Director of Asylum Accommodation for meeting with me, together with colleagues, to discuss the issues earlier this week. The following issues were uppermost amongst the matters I raised in that meeting, and I would ask for your considered response to them at this time.

Choice of Location

The village of Linton-on-Ouse is an isolated, rural location with a very small subsisting population of circa 600 adults and 100 children. It has limited local amenities, poor public transport infrastructure and is over ten miles to the nearest large conurbation of York. By way of illustration of its size and rurality, the streets are unlit during the hours of darkness, for example. Whilst I appreciate that the aim is to provide self-contained facilities for asylum seekers on the former base, this misapprehends the nature of the site. The former RAF Linton-on-Ouse is an inextricable part of the village footprint and there are too few local amenities to occupy or serve the needs of the additional residents – understood to be in excess of 500 - proposed to be housed at the site.

It follows that, as a matter of principle, I share the concerns expressed to you by other local democratic representatives, including Kevin Hollinrake MP, about the inherent unsuitability of the site.

My understanding is that the UK Government has no experience of establishing asylum accommodation in a rural location. This gives rise to significant risk of disproportionate impact upon the local community, signs of which I regret to say, are already clear from the absence of community engagement until after the proposals were announced. Consultation is a key tenet of good policy making and has been absent. It is difficult to understand how the site could have been chosen without adequate stakeholder and public engagement? The damage already done to public confidence by that omission makes it less likely that the project will succeed.

I have a particular focus, upon which I expand below, in relation to the lack of consideration of the community safety resourcing implications of the choice of site. No advance consultation has taken place with the emergency services, for whom there are demand implications of some considerable significance.

Community Consultation and Engagement

Community consultation upstream of 14 April 2022 seems to me to have been essentially non-existent.

I would invite you to agree with me that taking the local community by surprise in respect of these proposals, falls well short of what any community has a right to expect. The consequences in terms of public confidence are already being felt. I attended two separate community meetings on 21st and 23rd April 2022, both attended by more than 120 residents each and in the latter case, viewed by many others online. In a community of 600 adults, that turnout is an overwhelming indication of the extent of public concern.

I invite you to commit to a step change the approach to public engagement and to keep residents and all local stakeholders fully informed in future.

Amongst the concerns expressed by residents, the following themes are prominent:

- Anxiety in respect of the asylum seeker exclusively-male demographic – specifically, consideration of the concerns raised by women about such a significant change in the local population
- Lack of activities and local infrastructure
- Impact upon local public services
- Resourcing of emergency services
- Respect for the human rights of those on site and the fairness and viability of ‘curfew’ arrangements
- Uncertainty about possible future plans for detention at the site
- Future engagement and transparency
- Calls upon local agencies to support legal challenge to the proposals on multiple grounds
- Overall impact on the local economy
- Uncertainty about:
 - Current plans and timescales
 - Future plans and timescales
 - How long asylum seekers will be housed at the site

- How long the site will be used for this purpose
- The duty of Government to put the safety of its citizens first and assess the impact of the scheme on the local residents

As you would expect, I am particularly focussed on achieving the best possible outcomes for all involved, with a particular emphasis on ensuring that communities are safe and feel safe.

Meeting Additional Community Safety Demand

As I have mentioned above, I respectfully suggest that insufficient consideration has been given to the additional demand upon both policing and fire services. There has been no prior engagement with both services. The proposals for Linton-on-Ouse took both North Yorkshire Police and North Yorkshire Fire & Rescue Service by surprise. In neither case has there been any opportunity to factor these proposals into their operational strategies and plans. Nor does this initiative form part of the short or medium-term financial plans already in place for these vital public services.

It was a matter of immense concern and disappointment to me that as Elected Local Policing Body with responsibility for the totality of policing and as Fire & Rescue Authority, I received no prior indication of the plans for Linton-on-Ouse. For that omission to have been replicated in the case of the Chief Constable and Chief Fire Officer, compounds that concern.

In both cases, I would invite you to agree that as a matter of principle, the cost of meeting that demand should form part of the cost of implementation and be met from national rather than local funds.

North Yorkshire Police

Details of the additional demand to be met by North Yorkshire Police continue to be gathered, based on emerging details of the plans for the site as well as harvesting the experience of other Police Force areas in which asylum accommodation is located.

North Yorkshire Police is a small force in numbers of staff and officers but covers the largest geographical policing area in the country. Therefore, even if the cost of additional demand is recognised and met centrally as part of implementation of this initiative, the ability to meet additional demands on a consistent basis over a protracted period of time in the context of these proposals would be challenging.

The timing of the announcement means that I have been unable to make provision for such a significant feature of the North Yorkshire community safety demand landscape in my Police & Crime Plan. The additional demand does not form part of the short or medium-term financial plans for North Yorkshire Police, nor is it catered for in the Force Management Statement.

We are therefore very much on the back foot in terms of establishing and planning for the resourcing consequences of this initiative.

What we do already know is that demand will include, but not necessarily be limited to:

- Additional visibility and reassurance policing within the site and the local community
- Ensuring the safety and welfare of asylum seekers, including addressing the management of safeguarding calls for those who do not return promptly to the site at 10pm. If, as appears likely, such individuals are to be treated in the same manner and with the same priority as members of the public who go missing from home, the resourcing consequences for the Force could be immense
- Management of crime and incidents that take place on site – including resolving ongoing doubts about operational primacy between North Yorkshire Police, Border Force and the facility management provider
- Facilitation and management of lawful protest, where it transpires
- Establishing (or securing by mutual aid) operational tactics and resources suitable for detention environments, should proposals proceed for a detained element on site. North Yorkshire Police have no requirement for such resources at present and therefore no such additional capability and capacity within Force
- Ongoing police community engagement and the extension of our prevention and early intervention services into the on-site community

Your officials were clear with me that a funding source is in principle available to assist with meeting the costs of additional demand upon policing. It was not immediately clear whether that source of funding was particular to asylum accommodation, or whether you would expect me to pursue the conventional Special Grant process.

I invite you to agree with me that it is right in principle that the cost of additional policing should be met centrally rather than locally.

I would be grateful if you would clarify for me:

- That, as a matter of principle, additional policing costs will be met from central funds; and
- The specific procedure by which central funding can be sought

North Yorkshire Fire & Rescue

As was outlined in the meeting with your officials, as Fire and Rescue Authority I am required to put in place a Fire & Rescue Plan and an Integrated Risk Management Plan (IRMP). In both cases, these plans have been prepared with no knowledge of the proposals for Linton-on-Ouse.

In particular, North Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service has this week completed its multi-year process to establish a Community Risk Profile and a Risk and Resource Model, which in aggregate form the Integrated Risk Management

Plan. They are the centrepiece of a programme of service transformation for NYFRS. The IRMP came before me for approval yesterday (26 April 2022) and as explained to your officials, I was left with no choice but to approve it subject to the explicit caveat that it omitted the Linton-on-Ouse proposals.

It follows that public consultation on the fire cover elements of the IRMP will proceed this summer whilst we simultaneously grapple with the effect upon community risk, and fire cover, brought about by the proposals for the former RAF base. This is very far from satisfactory coming as it does at the end of what has been a lengthy, detailed and ambitious IRMP process.

You will no doubt be familiar with the resourcing pressures already faced by North Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service. We are particularly reliant on on-call firefighting resources, with an aging estate dispersed over the largest FRS area in the country. Our planning process aims to release limited scope to invest in reshaping our workforce model, but such change will take several years to be realised. In the meantime, our financial reserves are in large part earmarked to assist with balancing our budget – and in the most recent budget-setting cycle we were not afforded the option of precept flexibility, despite many better-resourced Services being provided with that option by Government.

The resourcing consequences for North Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service are, like those in respect of policing, continuing to emerge. They will include but not be limited to:

- Operational primacy for the site – if, as I understand to be the case, the former RAF base will cease to be Crown property for the purposes of fire and rescue law, operational responsibility will pass to NYFRS rather than being absorbed by the Ministry of Defence
- Accordingly, a need to invest in fire protection resource to ensure that the site operates fire precautions and risk assessment outcomes in line with the Regulatory Reform Fire Safety Order, including consultation for future associated planning applications
- A need to invest in fire prevention – the Service would look to work closely with North Yorkshire Police and partner agencies to extend our multi-service Public Safety Officer service to Linton-on-Ouse to ensure that asylum seekers and existing residents are able both to be safe and feel safe
- A need to make provision for improved levels of availability at those NYFRS stations who may be called upon to respond to Linton-on-Ouse. By way of illustration, response times to the site presently range between just over 19 minutes during the day to just under 22 minutes at night

I was grateful for the offer made by your officials to meet with my team and with NYFRS so that the consequences for fire safety and compliance with fire law, can be properly understood.

I ask for your assurance that in common with the approach for policing, the cost of meeting additional demand for North Yorkshire Fire & Rescue Service will be met from central funds.

Conclusion

I feel sure that you will agree with me that it is vital that any policy to implement asylum accommodation arrangements is properly considered and takes account of the need to work fully and constructively with local communities.

If, as a result of representations made by local democratic representatives and myself, you are minded to re-consider whether Linton-on-Ouse is the appropriate location, I would very much welcome that.

In any event, should these proposals proceed (whether in their current form or otherwise), I hope you will agree that it is vital that they proceed in a way which leaves all current and future residents safe and feeling safe, the later, I feel after listening to the community, will be extremely challenging to achieve.

I hope therefore you will feel able to give the assurance I have asked for in this letter that the resourcing of additional community safety demand will be met from national rather than local funds.

Needless to say, I would be delighted to meet with you to discuss these matters further.

In any event, I place my OPFCC team at the disposal of your officials to pursue any aspect of the matters I have set out, urgently and in more detail.

Copies of this letter go to the Prime Minister, Kevin Hollinrake MP, the Director of Asylum Accommodation as well as to the Chief Constable and the Chief Fire Officer.

I look forward to hearing from you.



Zoë Metcalfe

North Yorkshire Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner

cc Rt Hon Boris Johnson, Prime Minister

Kevin Hollinrake MP

Cheryl Avery, Director of Asylum Accommodation

Lisa Winward, Chief Constable, North Yorkshire Police

Jon Foster, Interim Chief Fire Officer, North Yorkshire Fire & Rescue Service

