

Rt. Hon Nicola Sturgeon MSP

First Minister

St. Andrew's House

Regent Road

Edinburgh

EH1 3DG

Date: 8 December 2021

Dear First Minister,

We are writing to you to highlight our call for migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and all those living under immigration control to be given a voice in Scotland's Covid-19 public inquiry.

In recent months we have met with the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government as well as officials within the Covid Inquiry set up team, seeking assurances that the scope of Scotland's inquiry will invite the voices of new Scots. We expressed that while we welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to taking a human right based and person-centred approach to scrutinising the handling of the pandemic - we believe that ensuring the voices and experiences of all of those living in Scotland are heard is vital to achieving that aim.

There is a wide range of evidence that people living under immigration control in Scotland during Covid suffered, and continue to suffer, grave breaches of their human rights - including tragically the right to life. During the first lockdown hundreds of people were evicted from safe residential flats into hotels, wholly contrary to UK-wide public health requirements against unnecessary travel and movements. Similar short notice moves were visited upon pregnant women and new mothers and their babies or toddlers in January this years, again moved from settled housing to institutional accommodation, this time a cramped "Mother and Baby" unit run by Mears Group on behalf of the Home office and involving the Glasgow Health and Social Care Partnership..

The £37 per week financial allowance was cut immediately for all 320 people affected by the en masse move to hotels during the first lockdown last year. Access to food was drastically curtailed, as was healthcare, and vulnerable people affected were effectively left in hotel room isolation for an indefinite period, with no money at all—not even able to access their own phone or communication needs nor even buy items such as hand sanitiser. It was and remains an unacceptable way to treat people especially in an escalating pandemic, where frontline services were necessarily reduced for public health imperatives. Devolved public services were affected by this and were involved in the lives of people in the asylum system in Glasgow, both the hundreds in hotel room isolation and the thousands across the city.

That is the real context for the tragic and serious incidents, injuries, and deaths that followed. This included the tragedy of Park Inn on 26 June 2020 as well as the death of Adnan Walid Elbi at McLays Guest House on 5 May 2020. This context is where these deaths and serious incidents occurred.

Critically, that context includes devolved public bodies, including but not limited to Scottish ministers, The Crown office, Police Scotland, Glasgow health and social care partnership and Glasgow city council. They, alongside the Home Office and its asylum support and advice contractors Mears Group and Migrant Help have important evidence to share about this hotels' situation, other institutional accommodation, and the wider experiences of persons in the asylum process in Glasgow.

Similar practices are being rolled out by the Home Office in similarly irresponsible ways in recent months, by moving asylum seekers into institutional hotel accommodation in Aberdeen, Perth, and Falkirk. We are deeply concerned that similar mental health distress and problems and worse may happen to vulnerable individuals being moved into these places across Scotland. This apparent lack of learning by the Home Office again creates harmful impacts on people and devolved public services as well as publicly funded third sector charities and institutions.

Furthermore, without setting the TOR of Scotland's inquiry to allow those under immigration control, and the organisations who provide them with support to give evidence - we will never capture the extent of the impact of UK government policies on Scottish public bodies in a likely significant area.

The Scotland in Lockdown studies - which included report evidence on the impact of COVID-19 and lockdowns and restrictions on refugees and asylum seekers across Scotland, also captured impacts on third and public sector bodies. As reflected throughout this letter, and to its credit, in Scottish government refugee and human rights strategies, people are not reserved or devolved.

It is essential for the dignity of people of refugee background and others subject to immigration control in Scotland, who were as affected by COVID-19 as others, to have a voice in this inquiry and for their evidence as well as from those public bodies, are all part of the inquiry. That way respect is shown to people, accountability is exercised over Scottish public bodies and UK authorities in respect of their functions in Scotland, lessons are learnt, and improvements recommended. That scope should be integral to the Terms of reference. Such is a truly human rights and person-centred scope approach.

Over the course of the pandemic, refugees and asylum seekers' calls for justice and accountability on what happened with their distress and tragedies in Glasgow, or just their experiences across Scotland of this pandemic generally have gone either unheard or with little attention paid. We urge the Scottish Government to rectify that by recognising people of refugee or other migrant background have a right to be heard and learned from. That can only be done by assuring us and evidencing that the inquiry's TORs will include in its scope all those living under immigration control in Scotland, and inviting them and lived experience groups and charities to give evidence to the inquiry.

Yours Sincerely,

Ako Zada, Chairperson, Community InfoSource

Alison Watson, Director, Shelter Scotland

Annika Joy, Chief Executive, Safe in Scotland

Dylan Fotoohi, Co-founder & Director, Refugees for Justice

Elaine Cameron, CEO, Refugee Survival Trust

Jen Ang, Director, JustRight Scotland

JustCitizens at JustRight Scotland

Naomi McAuliffe, Scotland Programme Director, Amnesty International

Pinar Aksu, Human Rights and Advocacy Coordinator, Maryhill Integration Network

Sabir Zazai, Chief Executive Officer, Scottish Refugee Council

Traci Kirkland, Head of Charity, Govan Community Project

