

Theatre Companies of Sanctuary Network  
c/o contact@culturecommons.uk

**Rt Hon Priti Patel MP**

Home Secretary  
Home Office  
2 Marsham Street  
London. SW1P 4DF

Letter sent by email

Copying: Shadow Home Secretary; Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport; Shadow Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport; Members of the Home Affairs Select Committee; Members of the APPG for Refugees; Members of the APPG for Immigration Detention

1st July 2021

Dear Home Secretary

**RE: The introduction of the ‘Nationality and Borders Bill’**

We are theatre makers and organisations that work with refugees and asylum seekers across the UK using arts and culture to create a welcoming environment for people seeking sanctuary from conflict, persecution, and violence. Collectively, we make up the Theatre Companies of Sanctuary network - a proud and pro-active wing of the City of Sanctuary UK movement that also includes schools, colleges and universities of sanctuary, libraries of sanctuary, gardens of sanctuary and many other positive community-orientated initiatives<sup>1</sup>.

Like many other sectors we are deeply concerned by reports that the government may be planning to transport people seeking sanctuary in the UK to offshore immigration detention centres<sup>2</sup>. We are disappointed that you have not yet categorically ruled out sending people seeking sanctuary to outsourced facilities in Africa, Ascension Island or to disused ferries out at sea<sup>3</sup>.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the UN Refugee Agency are ringing an early alarm bell regarding the likely humanitarian consequences that such policy proposals could provoke. We need only look to the widely criticised Australian model to see the appallingly high levels of self-harm and mental illness that occurs in those incarcerated in offshore facilities.

We echo Enver Solomon, chief executive of the Refugee Council: “For generations men, women and children seeking protection in the UK have been given a fair hearing on British soil...Offshore processing is an act of cruel and brutal hostility towards vulnerable people who through no fault of their own have had to flee war, oppression and terror.”<sup>4</sup> The UK can, and should, do better.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://cityofsanctuary.org>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/priti-patel-plans-migrants-held-offshore-africa-hub-processing-denmark-8kt9q36p>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/sep/30/priti-patel-looked-at-idea-of-sending-asylum-seekers-to-south-atlantic>

<sup>4</sup> <https://twitter.com/EnverSol/status/1409393288713547777>

We remind the government that the men, women and children who arrive by boat and subsequently make an asylum claim are subject to international refugee law as set out in the 1951 Refugee Convention<sup>5</sup> and the 1967 protocol<sup>6</sup>, to which the UK is still a signatory. This includes the right to claim asylum, which is in no way affected by the mode of entry or the route taken. Many of those who have successfully claimed asylum in the UK are now major contributors to British society, as business, civic and community leaders, as elected representatives and parliamentarians. They make our society wealthier economically, socially and culturally.

As Home Secretary, you will know that the number of people seeking sanctuary here in the UK is very small when compared to the overall total in Europe, especially given our country's size and wealth<sup>7</sup>. In fact many other European countries have demonstrated considerable leadership with regard to the issue of refugees and asylum seekers, taking more than their fair share and promoting a culture of welcome.

Yet the language you have adopted of a 'crisis' and 'invasion' perpetuates dangerous narratives that misrepresent the reality on the ground, confuses and conflates the variety of reasons that cause people to arrive in the UK in the first place, and places people at risk of abuse.<sup>8</sup> This is particularly true for people with specific vulnerabilities such as women and children who face physical and psychological violence at every stage of their journeys and make up more than 50% of refugee flows. As theatre makers, we are trained to interpret the underlying meaning of words, both spoken and written. We therefore understand the effect that your words can have on the national discourse. That is also why we support people seeking sanctuary to reconnect with their own voice and tell their own stories.

Over several years, the Theatre Companies of Sanctuary network has been working with sanctuary seekers here in the UK by:

- delivering English classes for newcomers on ESOL waiting lists
- running Creative Skills for Employment programmes to prepare refugees and people seeking asylum for interviews and identifying local employment and volunteer opportunities
- providing confidence building and wellbeing support programmes for victims of trauma and displacement
- designing employment curriculums to ensure better understanding of employment rights and navigation of the UK asylum, health, housing and benefit systems
- creating supportive community networks that promote social cohesion and integration with wider benefits accruing to the host communities through volunteering and active citizenship
- creating urgent, joyful and educational arts and performance projects
- partnering with larger organisations such as Coventry City of Culture Trust to promote, include and celebrate the sharing of every culture in national festivals

We are aware that the UK is the only member of the 47 strong Council of Europe that practices indefinite detention.<sup>9</sup> A COE Human Rights Committee report of 2018 sets out the rationale for a range of alternatives which would be more efficient and humane and cost the tax-payer considerably less money too.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/1951-refugee-convention.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/ProtocolStatusOfRefugees.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/19062/pdf/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/11036/pdf/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/oct/10/immigration-detention-how-the-uk-compares-with-other-countries>

<sup>10</sup> <https://rm.coe.int/steering-committee-for-human-rights-cdh-analysis-of-the-legal-and-pra/1680780997>

Based on our research and active engagement with this issue, we therefore ask you to urgently reconsider any plans you may have to introduce legislation that would see people seeking sanctuary taken from the UK and detained in overseas detention centres. Instead, we ask that you and your department officials to work with our UK wide network to give people seeking sanctuary the proper welcome they deserve.

Yours sincerely

**SBC Theatre Company**  
and the Theatre Companies of Sanctuary Network, including:



**COUNTERPOINTS.**

performingborders

phosphoros theatre  
*bringing the unseen to light*



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